

How Will I Give, Next Time?

by Bill Moller

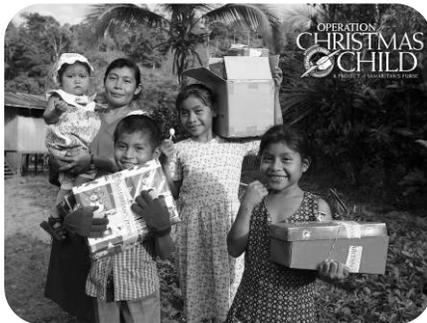
The chatter on Sports radio has shifted from the fever-pitched hype that accompanies the Super Bowl to the hopeful imaginings that surround the start of spring training. All the boxes of Christmas decorations have been carefully packed away in closets and attics and won't be seen again for nearly a year. The Turkey Day celebration of just three months ago has faded into the past like those of years gone by. But fresh in my mind's eye - as if it were yesterday - are the memories of my trip to Boone, North Carolina this past November.

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It is just past 6:00 PM on the Sunday evening less than a week before Thanksgiving 2006. The last blush of daylight has slipped behind the Appalachian mountain peaks. Snowflakes are beginning to fall, festively swirling around the streetlights near Wilkesboro, North Carolina. The sight of these sparkling harbingers of winter catch me off guard - a bit like discovering unexpected guests arriving early for the holiday.

"It can't be long now - less than a thumb-length from Wilkesboro to Blowing Rock on my map." Suddenly I realize that I am talking to myself - there's no one in the car to hear my astute conclusion. I smile and think how fortunate I've been. My twelve hour drive is nearly complete, a comfortable room awaits me, and tomorrow I begin my brief stint as a volunteer at the Operation Christmas Child (OCC) processing center in Boone, NC.

The last twenty miles of rolling twists and turns have been particularly challenging since the snow has started sticking to the road surface. My thoughts begin to weigh the cost of this journey, not the dollars and cents, but the time and energy. Most people are home preparing for the coming holiday. "Why am I doing this?" I ask myself. I am answered immediately as an image of the children's faces - the picture in the OCC brochure - flashes through my mind. They look so happy and yet they have so little.



"There it is!" I shout as I spot the brightly lighted welcome sign of the Cliff Dwellers Inn. The frosty evergreen branches that picturesquely frame the entrance glisten as they sway in the stormy breezes. Just a short distance up the hill and into my parking space and my journey will be complete.

Ed Burke, the innkeeper, greets me and calls to his wife to acknowledge my arrival. The lobby is warm and inviting and the unusual weather outside paints images of the Alpine villages I've only seen in movies and magazines. The Burkes are friendly and encouraging as they note my involvement with the shoebox ministry of OCC. Nikki, Ed's wife, worked for Samaritan's Purse for many years and has just recently retired. Ed helps me get my bearings, and hands me a book by Franklin Graham saying, "This is part of our ministry - caring for weary travelers." He suggests where I can find the best breakfast in town and wishes me a pleasant evening. I take my room key and a few mental snapshots of the smiles on the Burkes' faces and head for my room and a much welcome rest.

"What good is there that I can do? How can I please you? How can I please you?" are the opening lyrics of a Phil Keaggy song. He is paraphrasing the prophet Micah's rhetorical question to the Lord - a shout of praise and cry of woe mingled inexorably together. Micah knew too well that there was nothing he could give to the Lord, materially. God, the Creator, made everything we know and see. It's all His and not really ours. We're just the blessed ones who get to play with this wonderful creation during our short visit to this big blue marble. Micah contemplates what riches he can offer - yearling calves, thousands of rams, barrels of oil, his firstborn son, but none of these will do.

We in the U.S. make up about 6% of the world's population but use about 40% of the world's resources, according to Rob Bell in his NOOMA video entitled *Rich*. He goes on to tell us that 92% of people on this planet don't have a car; that approximately one billion people don't have access to clean water; that near 800 million people won't eat today and every couple of seconds someone dies from hunger; that a billion people live on less than \$1 a day; and that experts say it would cost around \$20 billion to provide acceptable water, basic health and nutrition to the world - which ironically is about the same amount Americans spend on ice cream in one year. The absurdity of this troubles my thoughts, but does it really reach my heart? I'm not sure if I can grasp it all.

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The alarm clock pokes its incessant tone at my ear drum as it stirs me back to consciousness early Monday morning. I toss back the blanket and quilt as I roll out of my warm bed, fumble my way in and out of a hot shower, and don my Levis jeans, Ralph Lauren Polo shirt, LL Bean thermal vest and comfy Hush Puppies shoes. Breakfast is just a short drive down the road in my comfortably heated 2005 Pontiac Vibe. At the local family restaurant a three inch thick ham and cheese omelet, bowl of grits, two slices of toast, orange juice and a large pot of coffee is brought to my table, where I sit alone eating and drinking to my heart's content while checking my email on my Hewlett Packard iPaq cell phone PDA. The brochure with the children's pictures seems distant.

"Today will be a good day!" I tell myself. "I will serve the Lord." My family has been diligent all year collecting goodies, and we carefully and lovingly packed each of the 28 shoeboxes nestled in the back of my car. In each little parcel there are toothpaste and toothbrushes and combs and soap and toys and candy and face cloths and crayons and coloring books and pencils and t-shirts and lots of other delightful surprises for the boys and girls to whom they will be distributed. I am filled with pride as I ponder the gifts I bear.

The first time I volunteered with OCC - during the tsunami relief effort - I spent two days folding and taping shipping cartons. I taped until my hands were blistered and my back was sore. I don't think I touched a single shoebox until the third day. Tired and a bit disappointed by the lack of glory in the work, I was emotionally overwhelmed when I finally had the privilege of unpacking my first shipment of shoeboxes. I think it was a delivery from a small church or maybe a Girl Scout troupe or possibly a family that heard about the ministry and wanted to participate. I don't recall the sender precisely, but I remember the shoeboxes. They were hand-wrapped in plain white paper, with colorful crayon drawings on all sides. Slightly distorted renderings of Christmas trees, crosses and stars in bright green, red and yellow covered every inch. It is clear that the youngsters who drew these images didn't want to leave any spot unadorned. Each shoebox was filled with little stuffed animals and baseball caps and delicate lace dolls and photographs of the people who packed them and handwritten greetings on note cards and scraps of paper. Such love! I could see that tremendous care had gone into every detail. Tears filled my eyes and my heart pounded until I felt the muscle straining under the emotional pressure. I pulled one uniquely prepared shoebox after another out of the shipping bins and placed them on the sorting pallets. It was overwhelming, at times. The cost of being here was beginning to seem small.

As I approach the big Five "O", with no wife and no children, I often wonder why I am here - what is it I'm supposed to do - what purpose is there to my life? What does a single guy do to make a difference? These thoughts are major motivators in my volunteer work with OCC - it is how I can contribute. I help pack, sort, stack, containerize and pay for the shipping of these little shoebox gifts headed to children in need all over the world. I can work hard and do a good job. I can do my best to see that each shoebox is lovingly handled at whatever point in the process God sees fit to use me.



One of my favorite characters in the Bible is Tychicus. He is only mentioned five times in the Scriptures (Acts 20:4, Eph 6:21, Col 4:7, 2 Tim 4:12 and Titus 3:12). We don't know much about this "beloved brother in the Lord" but he seems to be intimately involved in the Apostle Paul's ministry. Apparently he served as Paul's herald one might say, bringing news and information to the various "churches" Paul had planted or visited during his journeys. I find it interesting that God saw fit to make mention of this man - a sort of first century bicycle messenger for God. I often wonder what thoughts went through Tychicus' mind as he navigated the treacherous roads and inclement weather delivering little parcels. We don't know if he was married, if he had a family, or what he did to make a living, but we do know that he helped. It may have been in a seemingly small capacity, but his efforts made a difference, though he may not have realized the significance of his actions at the time. God seems to favor this form of dedication. He makes note of many seemingly small contributors throughout the Bible.

Most of us have heard the well known story about the little girl on the beach after a storm. In the story thousands of starfish are washed up on the shore and a little girl is discovered tossing them back into the ocean one at a time. A passerby watches her diligently picking up each creature and returning it to the sea. But as the onlooker observes the effort, he notices how many starfish there are and how little impact the girl's effort was going to make on the vast collection gathered on the sand. He stops and points out all the starfish to the diligent little rescuer and explains that she isn't going to be able to save all of them before they die. He tries to show her how insignificant her labor is. The little girl isn't fazed - she keeps right on tossing each starfish back into the water and then moving on to the next. In frustration the

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passerby shouts to the girl and asks, “Why bother? What difference will it make?” And, as we all know, the little girl looks at the starfish in her hand, tosses it into the ocean and shouts to the man, “It made a difference to that one!”

As I remove our gift-filled shoeboxes from the back of my car on Tuesday morning, and place them on the pallet in the loading dock I notice how small the number 28 can seem. During this short week before Thanksgiving, OCC will process about 50,000 shoeboxes at the Boone, NC processing center. There are six processing centers in the U.S. and Boone is the smallest, but it is estimated that approximately 500,000 shoeboxes move through this location between thanksgiving and New Years. About 7.5 million shoeboxes will be delivered world-wide by Samaritan’s Purse and OCC in 2007. Somewhere in that massive number will be my family’s 28 shoeboxes.

I suspect I will handle several hundreds of shoeboxes while I’m in Boone and the group of volunteers I work beside will handle the rest. I’m just one of many people doing a variety of tasks. There is John the chicken farmer from Tennessee, and Jim the retired forklift operator from Florida, and Shelly the teacher from Indiana, and Josh the high school student who came with a youth group from Maine, and Mary, and Jared, and Tom, and so many others whose names I don’t recall - each of us with sore fingers and aching backs and smiles on our faces and love in our hearts.

I noticed one woman earlier in the day, but she didn’t register as particularly special. She was quiet and had a bit of a serious look on her face. And at one point I saw her walking around the warehouse placing her hands on shoeboxes, pausing a moment and then moving on. She was going from pallet to pallet steadily working her way around the facility. Curiosity got the best of me. I wandered over to her while she was in the process of petting another tower of shoeboxes. I asked “Is there a problem with the stacking?” She slowly looked up, smiled, and said, “No, I’m praying.” I hadn’t thought of doing that – I was too caught up in the “work” and had forgotten that there were other ways to serve the Lord.

Why would people do this – why labor without pay? Why contribute to a ministry like Samaritan’s Purse? Why did my family spend their hard earned wages and valuable time shopping for all the goodies they packed in the shoeboxes? Why?

In his song, Phil Keaggy restates his question, “Tell me what



sacrifice can I give for you?” and the answer comes from the passage in the book of Micah, “He has told you ... the LORD requires of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?”

Sacrificial giving is certainly a way to honor God and provide for others. But God doesn’t really ask for things. God wants you. He wants you to give of yourself – to give what is dear to you in an effort to show your love for Him and for others. For some the sacrifice of finances that could otherwise be used for personal pleasure carries a high cost. For others the sacrifice is wrapped in the blood, sweat and tears of labor, or the ethereal value of prayer.

Sacrificial giving takes many forms. My family gave in one way. The Burkes at the Cliff Dwellers Inn gave in another way. The volunteers in the Boone Processing Center and the woman who was deep in prayer all gave in ways that worked for them.

The concept of giving is not foreign to God. His personal sacrifice was dramatically portrayed in the gift He gave to us – his one and only son - Jesus the Christ. This gift can be seen in the labor of a young woman in child birth at Christmas time and in the tears and suffering of an innocent man on a cross at Easter.

Wednesday afternoon has come along much too quickly. I feel both exhilarated and deeply moved at the same time. I’m sore, but happy. A good night’s rest is ahead of me and the long drive home seems too far away to contemplate. But, traveling the Blue Ridge Parkway can be rather awe inspiring. There is something to be said for taking a little time to absorb an experience. The majesty of the mountains, the beauty of the landscape and the marvel of how it all fits together so well will only serve to frame the images of the smiling children and the volunteers, and the shoeboxes.

And as I settle into my cozy room, I ask myself, “How will I give, next time?” □

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www.calvarysc.org

Steve Brown

March 23 - 24

Dangerous Freedom

Men's Conference
University Presb. Church
Orlando, FL
http://upc-orlando.com

Jack Hayford

April 16 - 18

The Cove

(Billy Graham Training Center)
Asheville, NC
(800) 950-2092
www.thecove.org

R. C. Sproul / Ravi Zacharias

March 15 - 17

Contending for the Truth

2007 National Conference
First Baptist Church
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(800) 435-4343
www.contendingforthetruth.info

Marva Dawn

March 23 - 25

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www.middletoncenter.org

Donald Miller

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(703) 790-5590
www.leadnowconferences.com

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March 16 - 18

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www.gleneyrie.org

Dr. Richard Mouw

March 29

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www.ptsem.edu

John Ortberg

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www.montreat.org

Richard Foster

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Henry Blackaby

July 29 - August 3

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www.sandycove.org