



MANNA matters

Newsletter of MANNA GUM.

News from Manna Gum

This edition of Manna Matters is a collection of pieces loosely gathered around the themes of how we give to and assist the poor. The next edition will continue this theme with a special focus on the Australian aid program.

In April Jonathan & Kim were privileged to take part in the first Queensland School of Discipleship, along with many good friends there. Some of the things we discussed included discipleship and everyday economics, the church as alternative community and ethical shopping.

The dramas with the campaign to halt the Xayaburi Dam in Laos have continued with victories, setbacks and much confusion, all in the space of a few months. The current situation is as clear as the muddy waters of the Mekong - officially the dam has been suspended, however the Lao Government is continuing with pre-construction preparation work. Jonathan has just returned from a last minute trip to Cambodia where the Save the Mekong (STM) Coalition met to chart a way forward in tricky times. *(more news on back page)*

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BIBLE & ECONOMY:

Why I gave up serving the poor.

Claudio Oliver (p.3)

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Claudio Oliver and friend Rene of the Casa de Videira community in Brazil, re-thinking ideas about serving the poor (see p.3).

A DIFFERENT WAY

A week-long exploration of Christ's call to a new way of living

Come and spend a week exploring Christian alternatives in areas of money, employment, consumption, sustainability, family, community, care for creation and serving the poor. The week will be split between time in regional Victoria and Inner City Melbourne, hanging out with a couple of Christian communities exploring a new way of living.



WHAT WILL YOU DO?	THINGS YOU WILL DISCUSS	THINGS YOU WILL LEARN ABOUT
Study the Bible together	Vocation & employment	Growing food and making compost
Reflection and discussion	Family & parenting	Ethical shopping
Get your hands dirty	Hospitality & the poor	Stewarding energy and water
Meet interesting people	Shared living	Waste
Cook and eat together	Community	Land care and restoration
Sing & pray	Money & budgeting	Global connections. ... and more

WHERE?

Cudgee (near Warrnambool) & Footscray
(Inner-west Melbourne)

WHEN?

4 - 10 December 2011

WHO?

TEAR Australia and Manna Gum. Over the week you will be guided by Greg & Elvira Hewson and Jonathan & Kim Cornford.

COST

\$70 plus some money to contribute to transport costs (approx. \$20) and to cover a meal at a restaurant in Footscray (approx. \$20).

Registrations close on 11th November 2011. Places are limited, so hurry.

For a registration form or more information email jonathan@manna.org.au, call 0468 967 131.



Why I Have Given Up Serving the Poor

by Claudio Oliver

Those who know me may find the above title curious, to say the least. Being with the poor is part of my history: my grandfather and grandmother were founders of the Salvation Army here in Brazil, and their ministry is a central reference for my family. Their life was dedicated to the homeless, prostitutes, and in a special way to the orphans, the hurt and the renegades. My teenage passion was consumed by the idea of fighting against poverty, hunger and injustice. Since I got married, 25 years ago, I have been involved in serving in slums, serving poor students, needy populations, beggars, peripheral neighbourhoods, the unemployed and other moneyless people. I have helped generate income, facilitated the organization of families, made bridges between rich and poor, fed people, and given others the opportunity to discover professions, find a vocation and transform their future. To “empower” people was once a key point in my practice of not creating dependency. After all of this, or even because of all this, today I have given up serving the poor.

Throughout my life I have kept a habit of always asking myself whether what I am doing makes sense, whether my heart is aligned with God’s will, whether I am not missing the point. I follow the three “whys” rule - for every thing I do, I ask ‘Why?’ Whatever the answer might be, again I ask ‘Why?’ I feel I am in the right path when what I am doing has passed the third “why”.

Some time ago I started reflecting on the principle of *kenosis*, or ‘emptying’, as demonstrated in Jesus’ life. This idea is central to the text of Philippians 2:5-8:

In your relationships with one another, have the same mindset as Christ Jesus:
Who, being in very nature God,
did not consider equality with God something to be used to his own advantage;
rather, he made himself nothing
by taking the very nature of a servant,
being made in human likeness.
And being found in appearance as a man,
he humbled himself
by becoming obedient to death -
even death on a cross!

This ‘emptying’ is clearly visible in Jesus’ incarnation in the flesh and in his numerous contacts and conversations with the miserable (the lepers and beggars) and the rich (the publicans, synagogue chiefs and princes). I have reflected on what he saw and how he acted. And all of this started to grow in me and made me think about the text in Matthew 5:3, with Jesus telling the poor to march on with their lives and rejoice for being poor, because theirs was the possibility of having their lives guided by God.

Little by little, in these last few years, along with biblical reflection, I have observed how much several extremely sincere friends come and go, get excited with serving, but soon get busy with their errands and preoccupations. Frequently I also see how others pay for someone else to fulfill God’s service, and they do that during certain periods of time, moved by real sincerity, even if from a distance and without personal involvement.

Since I got married, 25 years ago, I have been involved in serving in slums, serving poor students, needy populations, beggars, peripheral neighbourhoods, the unemployed and other moneyless people ... After all of this, or even because of all this, today I have given up serving the poor.



FOOD, FAITH & COMMUNITY AT CASA DA VIDEIRA

Eating is connected with our treatment of the dejected and rejected - the leftovers. Our major concern, as Christians living in the city, is how the relationship with food in the city reveals our neglect of creation. Every day, tons of nutrients arrive, are delivered, cooked in the city, and more than 30% of it is wasted. Everyday we collect organic waste in a 3 kilometre radius from our homes: (gardening clips, grocery stores greens, left overs, wood chips and ground coffee). We collect three to four tons of organic garbage a month - the refuse of roughly 150 households - and compost it all in our 0.08 acre backyard, turning it into beautiful soil. From this we produce around three tons of organic veggies per year and feed 25 chicken, 4 goats, 30 rabbits, giving us protein in the form of meat, eggs and milk. All this provides food for ourselves and our neighbours, shared everyday in a communal meal.

Photos: (top) Claudio and Rene (a PhD in management turned baker), on the weekly Friday bread bake for the community; (bottom left) Claudio on the daily activity of collecting greens from producer's markets; (bottom right) the animals are an important part of the community's "biological refinery" - "The chickens eat like they did in grandma's time: food scrap, greens, corn, and worms provided by our composting program. Feeding them worms for protein means that we don't have to feed them soybeans, which is one of Brazil's most destructive monocrops."

From another perspective I see how much poverty takes over the life of those who are poor, and how much it reveals their unfulfilled desire to own, to have access to consumption – the destroyer of everything – and I see how their situation is re-inforced by the seduction of the same things that seduce and destroy the rich: the same individualism, the same selfishness, the same tendency to gratification and to want to own things.

Without exception, rich, poor, and remediated have the same conviction that what they need is something that the market, money, the government or some other agency can offer them. That they will be happy with ownership, with a full stomach (some with bread, others with croissants) and with the constant flow of money that solves everything. And among these, there are a few well-intentioned people who extend their hand to “include” others into the lifestyle or the platform they achieved.

The stretched-out hand from top down, that’s what we call service. Along the years I’ve discovered that the very position of serving the poor, from a commitment to “liberate” them, has been filled with a sense of superiority, the kind of superiority translated into giving others what I have, assuming through my actions that what I have is what they need; a translation noticed in the subtle arrogance of the so-called politics of “inclusion”, always trying to put the other inside the box where I live, included in my lifestyle.

All of this led me to give up serving the poor. But I am not taking sides with the wealthy and the comfortable; I do not want to join those whose lives are separated from contact with the poor, with the sick, the hungry, the naked, the ugly and the smelly. What these wealthy and comfortable call security, Jesus calls madness.

I have given up serving the poor for another reason. In the early 1990s I used to go into the streets with a bunch of kids seeking out the homeless. The motto we used at that time was “to meet Jesus in the poorest poor”. Serving, feeding and clothing Jesus was our motivation. But we discovered each time we went out, that in each of these encounters with a camouflaged Jesus, the so-called miserable would be transformed into masters, and we suddenly saw ourselves mirrored in them, using the same excuses and lies to get what we wanted. We discovered that we were them.

Confronted by Jesus and taught by him through the contact with his poverty and misery, many of us discovered what good news meant. Those days many of us were transformed by Jesus’ touch and by the good news that he transmitted as we discovered ourselves as poor. We rediscovered a hard truth: Jesus doesn’t have any good news for those who serve the poor. Jesus didn’t come to bring good news to those who serve the poor, he brought good news to the poor. He has nothing to say to other saviors who compete with him for the position of Messiah. Jesus’ agenda only brings a message for those who recognize themselves as poor, naked, hurt, tired, overburdened, needy and hopeless. As for the rest, his agenda has little or nothing to offer.

The only way to remain with the poor is if we discover that we too are the miserable ones; if we recognize ourselves, even if well disguised, in him who is right before our eyes. When we find our misery in them, when we realize our neediness and our desperate need to be saved, then we meet Jesus’ agenda. God is not manifest in our ability to heal, but in our need to be healed.

Finding out this weakness of ours leaves us in a position of having nothing to offer, serve, donate, but reveals our need to be loved, healed and restored. Here lies the meaning that the power within us is not the power of our capacities and richness, but the power that is present in our personal misery, so well-hidden and disguised in our possessions and stability. As Jean Vanier says, “We are called to discover that God can bring peace, compassion, and love through

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our wounds.” How much more sense does Isaiah’s text about the Messiah make now: by his wounds we are healed. The remaining messiahs tend to escape Jesus’ example of emptying himself to the point of becoming one of us, of dying with us and thus opening the

door of resurrection for us. The power that Jesus used to heal us and keep on healing does not reside in his access to universal power, but in his identification with us in the cross. In opening himself in wounds, in becoming one of us, in living our life.

I have given up serving the poor. I’m going back to encountering the poor and finding myself in them. Again I have discovered the misery that hides in the well structured lives of our false security. And this way I can understand this Jesus who talks to lepers and with rich businessmen, with tax collectors in their parties and with the sick and miserable. In his identification with each and everyone, he saw what perhaps no one else did: the extreme misery and poverty of the human condition, apart from any status or social gown. I came to reencounter my poverty, to see myself in each situation of misery, and to get in touch with my inner pain. From there, I pray for healing, freedom, community and love. I ask for mercy and to be restored. Whoever serves out of the sense of having something to offer, serves from the top. Jesus calls us to incarnate and to see ourselves in the other and to place ourselves under him as powerless dependent. To give up trusting our own capacity and change the direction in order to meet our wounds and pain. From there discover the power in being less and not more. I have given up serving the poor. I have rediscovered my poverty. And with it I can cry out again: “Son of David, have mercy on me.”

Claudio Oliver (48) is married to Katia and is father of Giovana. He is the pastor of “Casa da Videira (Vine’s House)”, a multi-centric, multi-parish community of faith in Curitiba, Southern Brazil. He has been working with urban poor, young people and communities for the last 25 years and in 2011, Claudio and a bunch of scholars and crazy practitioners, are going to be launching an International Learning Community based on spirituality, organic farming, dialog and mentoring on a small homestead.

Burma and the Aid Industry

by Tamas Wells

For almost twenty years Burma has experienced one of the most intense Western led sanctions of any country in the world. North Korea and Antarctica seem to be the only places left with less Western engagement.

That is not to say that Burma has been economically isolated. Especially in recent years, Chinese, Indian, Thai and Singaporean companies have enjoyed the lack of competition and poured billions into getting their hands around the country's rich natural resources- especially timber, oil and gas and gems.

Nor has Burma been isolated from Western cultural influence. Walk past a teashop in a small rural town on a Friday night and it will likely be packed with young men watching Chelsea versus Manchester United. And in the Karaoke bar next door a young girl will be singing Mariah Carey hits from the 1990s.

So, while sanctions haven't hindered the selling off of Burmese resources or the march of Western cultural influence, they have meant that the vast majority of the country has not felt the impact of international aid in the way some nearby countries (for example, Cambodia) have.¹

This isolation from the aid industry is beginning to change. Most Western donors – who have traditionally invested heavily in humanitarian aid to refugees and internally displaced people on the Thai-Burma border- are sensing a gradual shift in the Burmese political landscape and are scaling up programs to other areas of the country. This includes both large sectoral programmes in livelihoods or health and funding to support the growth of local Burmese organisations.

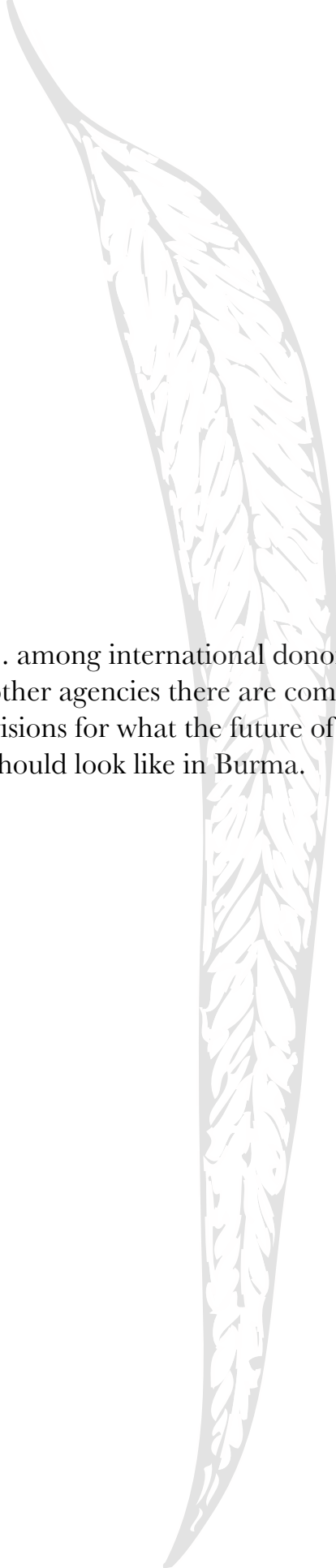
But among international donors and other agencies there are competing visions for what the future of aid should look like in Burma.

One widely held vision is that of a 'big scale up' of humanitarian and development services around the country. With a huge expansion of aid in sectors like health and education, they assume that Burma's development challenges can be turned around. While in most countries the vast majority of aid goes to governments, it is argued that the authoritarian leadership in Burma should be shut out of receiving any direct aid. International and local non government agencies need to pick up the baton and deliver the required services to the needy around the country.

This is an attractive vision on the surface but there are a few critical flaws in the way it is applied in Burma.

First, backed with global ideas like the United Nations Millennium Development Goals, the advocates of the 'big scale up' are primarily talking about an externally defined solution. Initiatives like the Global Fund for HIV&AIDS, TB and Malaria are providing medicine for sick people in many parts the country and have saved thousands of lives. This is much needed. However,

¹ While exact figures are impossible to come by, Cambodia receives around ten times the aid per person that Burma does.



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when you talk to local organisations implementing the programme they will tell you that they are left with almost no room for locally led problem solving- as the activities are almost all defined according to international templates. This leaves Burmese organisations feeling like they are simply the bottom rung implementers of a grand project designed in Washington or Geneva.

I was at a workshop a few months ago and a Burmese civil society leader told a story about his work in poor rural villages in the east of the country. He said that when he and his colleagues went to one village the community said clearly that what they really needed to move forward was a better communal source of clean water. But since their donor had decided that clean water was not one of their priority sectoral areas- they had to spend the money on something else.

These kinds of mismatches happen all over the country, where international donors have made blanket decisions about how aid money should be spent that doesn't fit with actual needs on the ground. Fundamentally, it stems from the mistaken idea that you can design one big solution to address a million local problems. Local issues usually need locally designed solutions.

The second critical issue with the 'big scale up' is that it misses the central reason for Burma's poverty- which is a problem of governance. Collective decision making systems in Burma- whether at a local village level or in the new national Parliament - are in desperate need of reform. Even the Chairman of the new Burmese 'civilian' Parliament is admitting that the country has been going backwards and needs to change.

While international donors are trying to take a principled stand by having a 'firewall' between their aid money and the government's coffers, they are missing the opportunity to influence the very issue which is at the heart of Burma's problems. Creating a parallel system of humanitarian service delivery through the UN or NGOs may save lives and improve services in the short term, but it does little to rebuild the fractured and dysfunctional relationship between the Burmese government and its citizens.

Civil society's voice in Burma needs to be strengthened. And the government clearly needs to learn how to listen. But the 'big scale up' idea does little to help either of these things.

The final issue with the idea of a 'big scale up' in Burma is to do with accountability of the aid industry itself. As

flows of funding increase, the temptation is for donor governments to be more worried about their voters back home, than about the people they are trying to help. Stringent financial procedures and relentless reporting back to head offices are designed to stop the misuse of money. But what it can mean on the ground is that local

organisations are forced to think more about whether the donor is happy, than about whether beneficiaries are happy.

The effectiveness of aid should be measured by how well it serves the needs of poor people. Sadly, as the scale up happens and donors design more and

more stringent systems, the aid industry easily loses sight of this.

At its best, the 'big scale up' approach to aid in Burma can save lives and bring temporary relief to thousands of vulnerable people. But at its worst, it can be patronising, superficial, unsustainable and unaccountable.

Burma needs more aid. But more importantly it needs better aid. Aid that encourages local problem solving, aid that influences the core issue of Burma's governance and aid that is primarily accountable to the vulnerable people it is trying to reach.

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Tamas Wells is an Australian development worker. He has lived in Burma/Myanmar since 2006 and works as a civil society and policy advisor for a consortium of international agencies including Save the Children, Oxfam and CARE.



Photo: Distributing relief supplies in western Burma after cyclone Giri.

Living with an open hand

The role of giving in discipleship

by Jonathan Cornford

*Since there will never cease to be some need on the earth,
I therefore command you,
“Open your hand to the poor and needy neighbour in your land.”*
Deuteronomy 15:11

When I run workshops or give talks, a theme which I nearly always touch on is the urgent need for us to learn how to live with less. Nearly every time, someone will ask, ‘But wouldn’t it be better for me to earn more money so that I can give more?’. This question is so inevitable that I now lie in wait for it, ready to spring my profound and highly nuanced response: ‘No, not really.’

So what role does financial giving have in our discipleship and what contribution can it make in the world? Before we can tackle this, we need to put some things in perspective.

The assumptions behind that inevitable question – ‘Shouldn’t I earn more to give more?’ - reveal a lot about our culture. Essentially they say two things: (i) the most important and valuable contribution I can make is money; and (ii) money is the answer to all problems – we need more of it.

I am fairly convinced that these are false assumptions. We do not need to make more money to solve anything (how we distribute what we have is another matter) and money is certainly not the solution to all problems. I have too often seen how large sums of money can distort and sometimes even ruin good work, here in Australia and in the developing world. What is first needed for good work in the world is people who are willing to give of themselves. I am firmly convinced that the most important and valuable thing you can give is your time – that is, yourself.

Nevertheless, heeding this important qualification, I believe the discipline of giving away our money is an important part of following Jesus. First and foremost, this is because the economy of the gospel is fundamentally centred around giving things up, and no matter how much we might spiritualise ‘dying to ourselves’, the rubber starts to hit the road when it involves giving up our money.

The other reason is obviously that the money we give *can be* useful. While I am keen to stress that the value and utility of money has been gravely overestimated, I do not want to fall into the opposite error by suggesting that money has no use. Right now I can think of a few exciting, courageous and innovating ventures by committed groups of people that only want for a bit of extra money – comparatively small amounts by the world’s standards. And for these groups it is hard to come by.

The practice of voluntary giving is a central part of God’s economy. The Apostle Paul lays out the principles for this in 2 Corinthians 8, where he relates the practice of giving directly to the manna economy of Exodus 16 (see *Manna Matters* June 2009):



The widow's mite (Mark 12:41-44): is this a story of selfless giving, or a case of the redistributive economy gone wrong?

Our desire is not that others might be relieved while you are hard pressed, but that there might be equality. At the present time your plenty will supply what they need, so that in turn their plenty will supply what you need. The goal is equality, as it is written: “The one who gathered much did not have too much, and the one who gathered little did not have too little.” (vv.13-15)

It is clear that for Paul, as for the Jerusalem Community in Acts chapter 2 and 4, giving was seen as a mechanism for *redistribution* amongst God’s people. For the early church, giving was not so much an act of charity as an act of justice.

But how do we give, how much should we give and to whom? Over the years Kim and I have come to identify a few dimensions to the discipline of giving which have become important to us, and I intend to share some of these below. However, I have a number of hesitations in doing so.

Firstly, while I believe that there is a real need to talk personally and practically about matters of home economics, I also take very seriously Jesus’ injunctions about giving in secret and not ‘sounding a trumpet before you’ (Matt 6:1-4). In discussing our own giving here I am painfully aware of the deep temptations of ‘practising your piety before others.’ Secondly, I need to acknowledge that as a recipient of giving, I have a clear conflict of interest in writing about this. I can see no way around this embarrassing situation other than to be honest about it. Thirdly, there is always a danger that personal examples will be taken as prescriptive principles – this is not intended and our examples are certainly not worthy to be taken as such. Finally, I am also aware that the complexity and lack of flexibility in the financial arrangements in many people’s lives will make any new thinking about giving seem almost impossible. On the one hand, I do not want to discount this real difficulty; on the other hand, I am convinced that whatever our situation, this is a subject which deserves some hard thinking. So, with these caveats, let me proceed.

Structured giving

The first dimension of giving that Kim and I have come to see as important is simply that it should indeed be a discipline. That is, giving is something about which we should think carefully and make decisions intentionally, and which we should faithfully follow through. In this, we have been informed by the Hebrew ideas of tithing and first fruits. Unfortunately, these ideas have been caught up in a surprisingly bitter and turgid debate within some parts of the church (especially in the US) about whether the tithe is a Biblical ‘law’ which still applies to Christians or whether we are

‘liberated under the new covenant’. Both of these positions miss the point. The Hebrew ‘law’ represents a vision of life whose underlying *principles* remain consistent through the Old and New Testaments, even if the details are no longer relevant (see *Manna Matters* November 2009). I believe this is true of the tithe and first fruits offerings.

The essential idea behind the tithe (which simply means ‘a tenth’) is the simple acknowledgement that all we have comes from God. Leviticus 30:1 states: ‘A tithe of everything from the land, whether grain from the soil or fruit from the trees, *belongs to the Lord*; it is holy to the Lord.’ By giving a tenth of their incomes ‘back to God’ the ancient

Hebrews were simultaneously bearing witness to this fact, demonstrating their gratitude for what they had, and (as with the Sabbath laws) declaring their trust in a different system that was not defined by ‘every

man for himself’. This statement of both trust in and commitment to God’s economy is taken further in the first fruits offering (Deuteronomy 26:1-11). The simple idea here is that what was given to God deserved to come from the first of what they got, and not from what was left over (if anything) once they had used what they wanted.

Over a number of years of grappling with how we can try to apply some of these ancient ideas, Kim and I have settled on a couple of key practices. Firstly, we decided long ago that our financial giving should be structured at the centre of our household economy. When drawing up a household budget, this is the first fixed budget line. Rent and food comes next. In fact, for us, this means that our tithe comes out (in theory at least) even before tax. Caesar must take a back seat to God. Practically, this simply means that we follow the long established practice of calculating our giving on *gross* income as opposed to *net* income.

Of course, the implication is that we must accept that our standard of living will be affected and even, to some extent, determined by these commitments. But that is exactly the point. What to our culture is a heretical and unthinkable proposition – a limit to our comfort – is precisely what is good for us, good for our neighbours and good for the planet. We have found that choosing to give away a portion of our income before any other costs are accounted for is the surest and best way for us to consume less. The

uncomfortable reality is that, compared to people I know in Laos and Cambodia, we are still unimaginably wealthy.

The second practice which has become important for us, is that if our giving is to be

at the centre of our household economy, then it needs to be carefully planned and followed through. This means that each year, we write down a plan of exactly how

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much money we are going to give, and to whom. One of the advantages of modern technology (which I think are generally overstated) is that we can arrange to deliver most of our giving plan through automatic electronic transfers. This ensures that our giving is not dependent on us remembering, being around or having enough left over at the end of the week. In this way a theological truth can become a practical reality – the money was never ours in the first place!

How much?

The six million dollar question is, of course, ‘How much should we give?’. Perhaps the answer should simply be: as much as we can. Experience tells me, however, that this is much too subjective an answer for many of us. When Kim and I were married we, in our simple way, took the idea of a tithe literally and decided that we should commit to giving away ten per cent of our gross income. I don’t believe that there is actually any need to be literal about ten percent, but that is what we did, and we have found over the last sixteen years that it is a pretty good benchmark. Although we have always lived on what by Australian standards is described as a ‘low income’, we have found ten per cent to be an amount which is both realistic and attainable, but enough to make us wince a little and have to tighten up our household budget.

That said, as the inevitable bracket creep in consumption

patterns and household expenditure sets in, we have lately come to feel that ten per cent is probably not sufficient and we need to be open to increasing it. In his famous book, *Rich Christians in an Age of Hunger*, Ron Sider proposed the idea of a graduated tithe. He argued that ten per cent should represent the *lower*, and not an upper, limit on how much of their income Christians should give away. He wanted Christians to sit down and honestly figure out how much they *need* to get by - to pay the bills and provide comfortably for their families. Settle on an actual dollar amount for what you need. When your income is below, or about equal to that much, then try to give ten percent. But if your income should grow, increase the rate of your giving. Give away twenty percent for the next \$10,000 you earn. Give away thirty percent of the following \$10,000. And so forth.

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Spontaneous generosity

While we have found renewing the act of tithing to be an important and life-giving discipline, we have also come to learn that it does not fully encapsulate God’s intention for the role of giving within the divine economy. Jesus actually shows very little interest in tithing in the gospels. This is probably because of some specific historical factors (such as the exploitative economics of the Temple System, and the legalistic righteousness of Pharisaic Judaism) but also reveals some of the operation of the spiritual economy which lies behind the monetary economy. When Jesus is critical of the Pharisees in Matthew 23, he endorses their tithing but

rejects their failure to grasp the heart of the matter: ‘You give a tenth of your spices—mint, dill and cumin. But you have neglected the more important matters of the law—justice, mercy and faithfulness. *You should have practiced the latter, without neglecting the former.*’ (v.23).

In a context where tithing had become an exploitative form of public piety, Jesus shows more interest in the idea of ‘almsgiving’ (see Matthew 6:1-4). The English word ‘alms’ stems from the Greek ‘*eleos*’, which means mercy. Almsgiving is simply the response of mercy when confronted with need.

A number of years ago, Kim and I came to the painful realisation that we are not very good at generosity, least of all the spontaneous sort of generosity which gives without self-regard. In theological terminology, this is known as being tight arses. While we were good at being intentional in determining a giving plan, we realised that we sometimes used this as an excuse to not respond when confronted with need – our structured giving was in danger of becoming an insulator against compassion and mercy. We learnt, mostly by observing some friends, that sometimes we need to respond with no thought of calculation, to enter into divine risk and to live joyfully in the consequences. I would say that we are still not great at this, but we are learning.

For us the idea of structured giving and spontaneous generosity have now come to represent two different, but valuable aspects of discipleship which roughly equate to following with both head and heart.

Who to give to?

While the ancient Hebrews saw the tithe as giving ‘back to God’, the way this was practically fulfilled was to give to ‘the Levite, the alien, the orphan and the widow’ (Deut 26:12). Put simply, giving was to be put towards God’s healing work in the world. This short list in Deuteronomy has two sub-categories of healing to be supported: (i) ‘the Levite’, or those who are tasked with leading, supporting, enriching and guiding the community of faith; and (ii) ‘the alien, the orphan and the widow’, which is to say the disadvantaged, vulnerable, exploited and poor.

The first of these categories is one which in our time, has some complications. In the Western countries such as Australia, the church has generally become an economically bloated institution. There are too many churches who have massive resources tied up in expensive building projects and top-of-the-shelf audio-visual systems, which in turn demand a monopolistic claim to their members’ giving. While these would all claim that the buildings and sound systems are to further God’s work, it is hard not to be dubious about the extent to which these end up being well-resourced, self-funded services for middle class Christians. Similarly, the major denominations have developed high-

cost bureaucracies of professionalised staff which demand an increasing drain on congregational giving.

There is understandably an increasing reluctance amongst some Christians to continue to fund this sort of economy. I am personally convinced that the church in Australia (as elsewhere in the West) will need to learn, just as individual households will need to learn, to live on a much simpler and more frugal economic basis. But the church, as a community, cannot learn this until its members do.

That said, I have also noticed amongst my generation (so-called ‘Gen X’) and the upcoming generation (‘Gen Y’) that there is a widespread failure to recognise that communities of faith generally require some mutual economic commitment from their members. As one Melbourne Baptist minister put it, ‘Church is not an event that you pay to attend. It is an association [I would say a ‘community’]

**Put simply, giving was to be put towards
God’s healing work in the world.**

whose costs you agree to take a share of, and those costs don’t stop when you’re not there.’

For Kim and I, this has meant that our faith communities (our local church and the broader network which we are part of) have an important, but not exclusive claim on our tithe. We have not developed a view as to what is the ‘right proportion’ of our tithe that should be directed this way – we have rather weighed this contextually based on our discernment of needs.

Outside of contributing to our faith communities, we have aimed to support God’s healing work in the world by giving to three sorts of activities: (i) work amongst the poor overseas; (ii) work amongst the marginalised in Australia; and (iii) work to protect and restore creation. In selecting people, groups or organisations to support we have rejected the idea that ‘bigger is better’ and tended to prioritise connection. Our preference is to give where we know or have made a connection to people doing valuable work, especially if it is work in need of encouragement. That said, we are also happy to support the work of some larger organisations. While we have tended to give to ‘Christian work’, our giving is by no means exclusively restricted to this.

We would by no means claim that ours is a ‘model’ giving plan – it is still a work in progress. Some might feel it is better to channel all their giving to one or two things, and that is fair enough. There is also ample scope for faith communities to collectively pool and use their tithes in creative ways, undertaking healing work in the local community which no one else will. This is something we hope to explore in the coming years. So there are many ways to give, and how we do it is ultimately less important than the intentions behind it. As Paul says, ‘God loves a cheerful giver’ (2 Cor 9:7); after all, it’s only money.



Pass *Manna Matters* on to a friend.

Let us know if you prefer post or email.



(cont. from front page) As part of the meetings in Cambodia, STM members visited villages along the Se San and Sre Pok rivers, major tributaries of the Mekong in northeastern Cambodia. There we discussed with villagers the impact of upstream dams in Vietnam upon their way of life and heard about their fears about more dams being planned on their doorstep. One of these - Lower Se San 2 - although it is a tributary dam will have impacts almost as catastrophic as a dam on the mainstream of the Mekong.

Photos: (left) A woman in P'luk village, Stung Treng, listens intently as STM members discuss the Lower Se San 2 dam with villagers. The villagers have received virtually no information from the government or company about the proposed dam, and seized the opportunity to grill STM members about what they knew; (above) the site of the proposed Lower Se San 2 dam, the impacts of which will be felt as far as Vietnam, Laos and Thailand.

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Manna Gum is an independent non-profit organisation that seeks to:

1. Provide resources for Christian groups to understand and practise the social, economic and political implications of the Gospel of Christ; and
2. Stimulate critical thinking on issues of aid and development, poverty and wealth, and to undertake research and advocacy on matters concerning Australian aid and development involvement overseas.

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