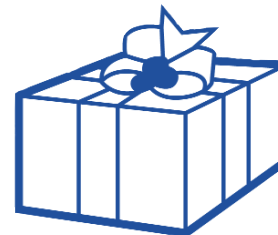


# FOR LEADERS OF CHILDREN AND YOUTH MINISTRY

## Christmas Gift Boxes:

### A good choice for children around the world?

Across Canada, many Presbyterian congregations participated in a gift box project this year. Several international programs invite people, particularly children, to fill boxes with gifts for children at Christmas time. Such projects have great appeal to people who are concerned about helping those in need, especially children who are at risk because of poverty, war, or emergency situations. People in Canada want to brighten the lives of such children and let them know that someone cares. People in Canada are often attracted to a hands-on project, which is easy and fun to do—and which they hope will also make a difference for children somewhere else.



If you are contemplating participating in such a project for next Christmas, here are some questions to help you decide if this is the best way to make a difference for children in need.

### Questions to Consider

- What is the purpose of the project? Does it invite study to understand the global context in which the children live?
- Does the project address the root causes of the suffering or need? If it doesn't, then it may bring momentary delight to the recipient but probably won't make a long-lasting difference. It won't change the situations that cause suffering.
- Have we considered alternative ways to make a longer-lasting difference?
- Are the contents appropriate to our Presbyterian Church in Canada respect for people of other faiths? (Find a statement of our relationship with other faiths in *Living Faith*, Our Mission and Other Faiths, 9.2.1.)
- Does the distribution of gifts contribute to our (PCC) strongly held value of being in partnership with others? Has the partner requested or approved the gift? Did we seek guidance from church international staff as to what is needed?
- How are the children involved in the process? Are they more than receivers? Are the children asked what they need in order to make a difference in their lives? Is there respect for the ingenuity and power of children to make a difference in their own lives?
- Who decides which children get a box and which children don't? What criteria are used? Is it acceptable that some are left out?
- Do the gifts contribute to the health of the child?
- Are the gifts culturally appropriate? Do they export our western emphasis on consumerism?
- If gifts are to be given, could and should they be purchased in that country to support industry there rather than ship them from Canada?

**Inquiries** about the content of this newsletter should be sent to Dorothy Henderson at 1-800-619-7301 (e-mail: [dhenders@presbyterian.ca](mailto:dhenders@presbyterian.ca)) or Brian Doyle ([bdoyle@presbyterian.ca](mailto:bdoyle@presbyterian.ca)).

## February/2002

A newsletter produced in cooperation with the Covenant Community with Children and Youth  
Writer—Dorothy Henderson Design—Pat Martin

## A Story from Nicaragua

by Lesley Harrison

I arrived in Bluefields, Nicaragua, on the morning panga (speed boat) and walked through the town towards the church. I came to Bluefields from Pearl lagoon, where I was serving the Moravian Church as pastor, about three times a month and always stopped in at the church there to say "hello" and collect any mail. This day was different.

As I drew closer, I could see the sidewalk crowded with children of all ages and descriptions. I was confused. The gate was closed, yet the gate to the churchyard was never closed in the daytime. Inside there were more children, many more. These children were different from those outside the gate as they each held a box, a shoe-box wrapped in Christmas paper. I got a church worker to let me in and I stood in the relative chaos: some children laughing, many upset, others beginning to cry, a few fighting over what was in their box, a couple passing small items through the gate to little hands reaching in.

Many of the things in the boxes these children had never seen before, which added to the confusion. There were few adults to guide this experience. Adults, usually mothers, are busy finding and preparing food, washing, and minding younger children.

I went inside the church to find the two ministers looking tired and frustrated. The boxes had landed on their doorstep and they were expected to take time and energy from other tasks to distribute these boxes fairly and justly. Not an easy job! There clearly were not enough boxes—there would never be enough boxes for every child.

The two ministers expressed to me their feelings of being compromised in their positions of ministering with all the people. In the midst of the chaos, they asked me, accusingly, if my country had sent these boxes.

When I left the church, the children from Pearl lagoon who had come on the boat with me were quick to find me and ask when their boxes were coming to Pearl lagoon. But there were no boxes coming to Pearl lagoon. There were not enough boxes. There would never be enough boxes for all the children! Was this what the children of Nicaragua needed for Christmas?

*The Rev. Lesley Harrison, from Saskatchewan, is a former global mission personnel from The United Church of Canada who served with the Moravian Church in Nicaragua.*

## A Story from Guatemala

by Dorothy Henderson

Four years ago, 12 members of my home congregation traveled to Guatemala to experience, first hand, our Presbyterian Church in Canada mission and outreach. Members of our congregation, all well meaning, sent along beautiful school kits for the school situated in the city dump in Guatemala city. Children, youth and adults took great care to prepare the 75 kits in ziplock plastic bags. (I was soon to realize that the last thing Guatemala needed was more plastic!) Each kit contained coloured pencils, markers, coloured and white paper, glue, even a package of lifesavers. We all agreed that they were beautiful and we hoped that the children would love them and find them helpful.

After our tour of the school, situated in the desperate surroundings of the city dump, our guide presented the school kits to the Principal. Since I have limited Spanish, I could only read her body language. Her lack of enthusiasm (or was it exasperation?) with our gift showed on her face. I could see that there was no place to store any of our beautiful kits, and she could not send them home with the students. They had to walk home through the dump where hundreds of children living in the dump did not attend school but spent their days helping their parents scrounge for recycling articles in the dump. The non-school children would be quick to grab and steal the kits.

I could see that what the children desperately needed was a new drinking fountain (they had only a washing trough) and they needed money to buy fruit and bread. The Principal began quietly (or was it wearily?) opening our plastic kits, breaking apart all the boxes of pencil crayons and markers, stacking the various coloured paper in cartons. Even if it had been safe to give a kit to each child, there were not enough kits to go around. Later, we heard, the Principal and teachers would carefully pass out paper and pencils, one at a time, one per child, one per year. Why, I asked myself, did none of us think to ask if our gifts were needed, wanted or appropriate?

I learned the hard way. Last May, when we traveled to Ukraine, I asked our international staff in Ukraine, before leaving Canada, if there was anything we could bring that would be helpful or needed. To my surprise, they asked for peanut butter!

*Dorothy Henderson is national staff person for Education in the Faith, The Presbyterian Church in Canada.*

## Another View about Shoebox Projects

by Janice Van Aertselaer

Some people have asked if we in Saskatchewan are participating in the project in which shoeboxes are filled with things to be sent to children overseas at Christmas. The Global Concerns Committee of the United Church's Saskatchewan Conference has asked us to consider some of the negative aspects of this project.

- Many cultures do not emphasize giving gifts as a way of celebrating Christmas, as we do. To send "stuff" is to impose our materialistic values on others who do not have the means to support an ongoing tradition of giving gifts.
  - Many of the recipients do not celebrate Christmas, as they belong to other faith traditions. In some shoebox projects, Christian evangelistic materials are given out along with the boxes as a way of proselytizing.
  - Some of the things we send are inevitably culturally inappropriate, such as sending shampoo or toothpaste to children who do not use such products, "Pokemons" to children who have never heard of them, or battery-operated toys to places where batteries are either not available or not affordable.
  - It is almost impossible to ensure the gifts are distributed fairly. There are many stories of some children receiving the gifts while others look on longingly, and even some stories of communities fighting over gifts because there weren't enough for
- A lot of money is spent on publicity, as well as the cost of sending boxes and hiring people to distribute them, not to mention the money spent by those who fill the boxes. Such a large amount of money and effort could be better spent on meeting people's basic needs, such as clean drinking water, food, health care, and education.
  - The recipients have minimal involvement in deciding whether or not this is the kind of help they want.
  - It seems that this project is more effective at making us as Canadians feel good than it is at meeting the real needs of children in other countries.
  - One of the reasons this project is so popular is because we want to involve our children in learning about the needs of others and we want to teach them about the importance of generosity. This is important. But how do we do this?

*Janice Van Aertselaer is the minister of Grenfell United Church in Saskatchewan. She served as a volunteer in the economic justice program of the National Council of Churches in Kenya (NCCCK) from 1993-1994.*



## Clearly labelled ... to hurt

by Sonya Henderson

This was my first year to stand at the receiving end of Christmas shoe boxes. As part of my work with International Ministries in Romania, I teach at the Lamont Centre in downtown Cluj. This centre offers education and life skill training for teenagers born with physical and mental challenges. Under the previous communist regime, these young people received no help or support. Consequently, many spent their entire formative years cooped up in apartment blocks without elevators.

Laura is 21 years old and one of my brightest students. She has been unable to walk since birth and lives with her parents. This happy, friendly young woman was delighted to receive a Christmas shoe box from Great Britain. Imagine my dismay when she opened the box and saw, clearly marked on the top, "Female. Wheelchair." That Laura could be reduced to this description was dismaying. I was embarrassed for her. Then, I was further embarrassed when she began to unpack the substandard items in the box. One tube of hand cream had an expiry date of 1997. I concluded that the shoe boxes promote and perpetuate a sense of neediness and they undermine what my colleagues and I are trying to do—encourage these young people to move from an attitude of getting to giving.

*Sonya Henderson, International Ministries staff in Romania, The Presbyterian Church in Canada*

## There are Alternatives

- If you want a hands-on project for your congregation, find out what is needed at a local level. Many non-profit organizations in Canada such as Big Sisters and Big Brothers, women's shelters and Children's Aid Societies welcome Christmas gifts, school supplies and toiletries. Consider, also, asking about needs at prisons, juvenile detention centres, rehabilitation centres, hospitals and nursing homes.
- Presbyterian World Service and Development partners with The Mennonite Central Committee in several areas. For congregations who want to assemble kits, the MCC website <http://www.mcc.org/respond/materials.html> provides very specific instructions for newborn, health, relief, school, and sewing kits. They also list drop off centres in Canada. Contact PWS&D at church offices (800-619-7301) for more information.
- Use the Learning/Sharing resource called *Partners*, produced yearly by our denomination. For 2002, the theme is *Partners: Meeting Friends in Ukraine*. This resource offers stories, games, recipes, and an opportunity for children in Canada to raise money for "bread fees" for children and teens in boarding schools in Ukraine.
- Choose a specific project overseas or in Canada as described in the *Something Extra* package, available from church offices. These projects have been specifically selected to help you make a real difference. Inquire about educational material from church offices ([hchappell@presbyterian.ca](mailto:hchappell@presbyterian.ca); [kplater@presbyterian.ca](mailto:kplater@presbyterian.ca); 800-619-7301).
- Choose to support the work of overseas partners by making an undesignated donation to Presbyterian World Service and Development (PWS&D). Request stories from PWS&D to illustrate how your donation makes a difference.
- Study and learn of the work of overseas staff and how your donations to *Presbyterians Sharing*... support their assignments.
- Study the web-site of PWS&D and support an emergency appeal that is current and has desperate need.

"Can 'Stuff' Save the Children?" by Deborah Marshall; from Mandate Magazine; Special Edition, Vol. 32, no. 3, May 2001. (Pp. 16 & 17). Adapted and used with permission of The United Church Publishing House. Adapted by Dorothy Henderson, in consultation with the staff of Presbyterian World Service and Development and Annemarie Klassen, The Presbyterian Church in Canada, January 2002.

## Response to the February Issue on Christmas Shoe Boxes

There was a lot of feedback—both positive and negative—on the article on Christmas shoe boxes. Please note that this article did not "target" any particular organization. The stories in the article actually referred to three different mission organizations.

Sharing, helping and gift-giving is a difficult business. We want to avoid unequal dynamics and dependency. On the other hand, we are generous people and feel the urge to give. What can be done?

- When Youth in Mission groups visit another country we give money to our partners for small gifts for local children and youth. Our partner buys what is appropriate. They are also aware when and how the gift should be disbursed. This method also has the advantage of supporting the local economy.
- If, however, you want to gather actual goods, we suggest you do so through one of our ecumenical partners, the Mennonite Central Committee (MCC). They welcome:
  - newborn kits (2 gowns/sleepers, 2 undershirts, 4 cloth diapers, 1 receiving blanket, 4 safety pins, 1 bar mild soap)
  - health kits (1 toothbrush, 1 toothpaste, 1 bar soap, 1 fingernail clipper, 1 hand towel)
  - relief kits for a family of four (4 bars soap, 1 shampoo, 10 cups laundry detergent, 1 toothpaste, 4 bath towels, 1 hairbrush, 1 comb, 1 fingernail clipper, 1 box bandaids, 1 package sanitary pads)
  - school kits (4 spiral notebooks, 4 pencils, 1 ruler, 1 box colored pencils or crayons, 1 eraser)
  - sewing kits (1 tape measure), 2 spools white thread, 2 spools black thread, 1 thimble, 1 dressmaker's scissors, 1 pkg. needles, 1 pkg. straight pins, 1 pkg. hooks and eyes, 1 pkg. snap fasteners, 10 assorted safety pins.

These kits may be dropped or shipped to one of the MCC warehouses in Canada. The website, [www.mcc.org/respond/materials.html](http://www.mcc.org/respond/materials.html), gives complete information on where the kits go. Please note: It is VERY important to only include the things indicated.