



Lifewater
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The Worth of Water

A Rationale for Christian Water Development
as Integral to Proclaiming the Gospel in a Thirsty World

Lifewater International

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"The importance of private voluntary organizations meeting the desperate need for clean accessible water cannot be overstated. Lifewater exemplifies how a relatively small investment can be put to maximum effect at the local level, saving many lives and altering dramatically the lives of thousands of people." - Peter G. Bourne, M.D., former Chairman of the American Association for World Health and Assistant Secretary General to the United Nations

"No matter how much food and health care is given to aid the poor in developing countries, it is simply a band-aid if they still drink contaminated water. Their bodies reject life-giving nutrients when they are plagued by disease from dirty water. Lifewater offers continuing hope and health." - Ted Yamamori, former President, Food for the Hungry

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Introduction

Those of us in developed nations consume gallons upon gallons of safe water every day. A moment's pause reminds us that water is essential to caring for the bodies God has given us. Water is also essential to the lives and dignity of the millions of communities lacking safe water.

Nearly one billion people worldwide do not have safe water, and 2.6 billion people lack adequate sanitation. These huge water, sanitation, and hygiene education (WASH) needs must be addressed. According to Peter Gleick of the Pacific Institute, *"The failure to provide safe drinking water and adequate sanitation services to all people is perhaps the greatest development failure of the 20th century."* (Gleick, 2002) Failing to address the water crisis costs millions of lives and imperils our Christian testimony.

Practiced as part of proclaiming the good news of Christ in word and deed, Christian engagement in water development helps express the fullness of the gospel. It is like the mustard seed; investments in it multiply and reap spiritual and physical benefits for generations to come.

The Need for Water

Safe water systems and the sanitation facilities and hygiene knowledge communities need to benefit from them are the first, essential step to helping the poor emerge from poverty.¹ God created water as the lifeblood of all of creation—both our environment and our human bodies. No living thing survives without water, and no human being thrives without clean water. Humans survive less than four days without any water at all. With unsafe water, like a person with poisoned or diseased blood, we suffer a slower death.

More than one in ten children dies before the age of five, largely of water-related diseases. (UNICEF, 2008) Studies show that at least 10 percent of the world's total incidence of disease is related to unsafe water. Worldwide, **between two and five million people die every year of water-related diseases**, most of them young children. Millions more die of malaria, dengue, and other mosquito-borne diseases, which are perpetuated by stagnant, unsafe water. At any given time, nearly half of the population of the developing world suffers from illness caused by lack of access to safe water and sanitation. (Sanctuary, Tropp, & Berntell, 2005) A physician who supports Lifewater says that

¹ By definition, good water development involves improving sanitation and hygiene education. Safe water does not remain safe without these components. Hence, any reference to safe water in this article represents water, sanitation, and hygiene (WASH).

he does so because, after dozens of mission trips to developing countries, he realized that curative work has little effect in places where people return home to unsanitary conditions without safe water.

Even when children drinking contaminated water avoid acute illness, they are likely to suffer malnutrition, stunted growth, and impeded intellectual development due to parasites and chronic diarrhea. Summarizing the results of a broad study from a team of researchers led by Christopher Eppig, *The Economist* reported on July 3, 2010, “*Places that harbour a lot of parasites and pathogens not only suffer the debilitating effects of disease on their workforces, but also have their human capital eroded, child by child, from birth. There is, moreover, direct evidence that infections and parasites affect cognition. Intestinal worms have been shown to do so on many occasions. Malaria, too, is bad for the brain. A study of children in Kenya who survived the cerebral version of the disease suggests that an eighth of them suffer long-term cognitive damage. In the view of Mr. Eppig and his colleagues, however, it is the various bugs that cause diarrhoea which are the biggest threat. Diarrhoea strikes children hard. It accounts for a sixth of infant deaths, and even in those it does not kill it prevents the absorption of food at a time when the brain is growing and developing rapidly.*” (The Economist, 2010)

Without an accessible safe water system in their community, most children forfeit a good education. Families that need children to transport water do not send them to school regularly. In addition, children sick with water-related illnesses frequently miss class. According to the United Nations Development Programme, approximately 443 million school days are missed each year due to water-related illnesses. (Beyond Scarcity: Power, Poverty and the Global Water Crisis, Human Development Report, 2006) Lack of adequate sanitation at schools compounds the problem, particularly for girls. Once girls reach puberty, many drop out of school because of the indignity of attending to their personal hygiene in schools without sanitary facilities. (Sanitation as a Key to Global Health: Voices from the field, 2010)

Women and children also risk physical danger during their daily journey to collect water. In addition to risking permanent damage to their spines, they risk assault when walking in remote areas to fetch water for their families. Drowning is a danger as they gather water in slippery, dangerous conditions. According to the World Health Organization, thousands die every year as they are collecting water. (Peden, Oyegbite, & Ozanne-Smith, 2008)

Without a sustainable safe water system, it is impossible for a community to emerge from poverty. **Significant economic development is nearly impossible in places without safe water.** In addition to the burden of disease, communities without reliable water supplies spend inordinate amounts of time and energy collecting water. A study by the World Health Organization and UNICEF shows that almost 20 percent of the population in sub-Saharan Africa relies on a water source that is more than thirty minutes away. (Progress on Drinking Water and Sanitation: Special Focus on Sanitation, 2008) In some

areas, women spend 40 percent of their caloric intake gathering water for their families. (Africa Water Atlas, 2010) This leaves little time and energy for income-producing activities. For lack of economic opportunity caused in part by lack of safe water, millions of young people migrate to the cities every year.

Throughout human history, **water shortages have been one of the most common causes of violent conflict between people groups.** Water basins that span two or more countries cover more than 45 percent of the world's surface, host 40 percent of the world's population, and account for 60 percent of all river flow. (Environment and Security in the International Context, 1996) Water shortages, usage, and contamination disregard borders and often lead to conflict. Capturing a small portion of this, the Pacific Institute for Studies in Development, Environment, and Security database on Water and Conflict lists 203 documented cases of violent conflict over water. (www.worldwater.org)

Perhaps most tragically, **lack of safe water wounds human dignity.** Unable to emerge from poverty, chronic diarrhea, and unhygienic conditions, people struggle to believe in their God-given worth. A student in Kenya told a Lifewater partner, *“Our teacher used to send us to get water from the lake. On the way to the lake, we really faced harassment from boys, bicycle taxi drivers, and fishermen. Sometimes, when I get back from fetching water, I need to use a latrine. I am unable to use it because the latrine walls are made of iron sheets that have holes, and the boys come peeping. When they find someone inside, they urinate on the latrine walls. One day when I had gone to the latrines, I felt some water splashing on me, only to realize that a boy was passing urine on the rusted tin of the latrine that had many holes. I stayed at home for over one week without telling my mother what happened. They thought I was sick.”* Such stories of indignity occur to millions every day.

When people feel powerless before humiliation, disease, and death, they often come to erroneous conclusions about God and his relationship with them. A Ugandan woman named Akello told a Lifewater partner, *“I was born again, but salvation did not help me at all. My elder son fell sick and I struggled with him much. The clan leaders and my husband wanted the boy taken to the diviner, but I stood my ground. However, the boy passed away. The same thing happened to my next son. He too passed away. The clan called me the killer of my own children, a witch.”* Akello and her community's ignorance about disease distorted the gospel message. Her people need the clarion love of the Gospel of Jesus Christ communicated in word and deed. They need opportunities to see God at work among them through works of compassion that involve safe water, sanitation, and hygiene education.

No Substitute for Christian Water Development

In Scripture, water is used as a metaphor for healing, restoration, and delight. Scripture deliberately compares Jesus to water. In John 7:38, Jesus says, *“Anyone who believes in me may come and*

drink.” The Bible concludes with another reference to water: *“Let the thirsty ones come—anyone who wants to. Let them come and drink the water of life without charge”* (Revelation 22:17). Water is life. **In communities without safe water, there is arguably no better way for the church to express the power of the Living Water** than helping to provide this essential resource.

As God wants us to be in relationship with him, God wants all people to enjoy safe water as part of abundant life on earth. Jesus says in Matthew 25, *“Then the King will say to those on the right, ‘Come, you who are blessed by my Father, inherit the Kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world. For I was hungry and you fed me. I was thirsty, and you gave me a drink. . . . The righteous ones will reply, ‘Lord, when did we ever see you hungry and feed you? Or thirsty and give you something to drink? . . . And the King will tell them, ‘I assure you, when you did it to one of the least of these my brothers and sisters, you were doing it to me!’”* We have the duty and privilege of serving our Lord by providing safe water to those in need.

Christ’s command in Matthew 25 is encompassed in the Great Commandment: *“Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind, ‘and, ‘Love your neighbor as yourself”* (Luke 10:27). True Christian water development stems from this high calling. **In gratitude for all that God has done for us and in obedience to his command to love our neighbors as ourselves, we offer safe water in the name of Christ.** Our work enables those who thirst to hear the gospel, demonstrates God’s presence among us, and gives evidence of God’s power to redeem all things.

When communities gain all of the components of sustainable water development, **the incidence of diarrheal diseases decreases dramatically** and many lives are saved, especially those of young children. When cleaner water is combined with hygienic practices and good sanitation, diarrhea incidences decline by up to 65 percent. (Global Water Supply and Sanitation Assessment Report, 2000) If all people had access to WASH, the world’s total incidence of disease would decline by at least 10 percent. (Bartram, Bos, Gore, & Pruss-Ustun, 2008) Individual homes would become more sanitary places of healing, and hospitals beds would vacate by nearly 50 percent. (United Nations)

With WASH, **individuals have a chance at unhindered intellectual development.** Says the Economist, *“A rise in intelligence over the decades has already been noticed in rich countries. It is called the Flynn effect after James Flynn, who discovered it. Its cause, however, has been mysterious—until now. If Mr. Eppig is right, the near-abolition of serious infections in these countries, by vaccination, clean water and proper sewerage, may explain much if not all of the Flynn effect.”* (The Economist, 2010)

With safe water at a nearby source, **children are more likely to nourish their growing intellectual capacity through formal education.** In addition to providing safe water systems, Lifewater helps train educators in how to establish school WASH clubs to make safe WASH practices

popular. As children learn and create new cultural norms that incorporate safe WASH practices, they become powerful catalysts for change in their communities. In time, their education moves entire nations forward, positioning their citizens to solve their own water and sanitation problems.

With WASH in their community, **individuals are better poised to increase the economic productivity of their community.** In arid and semi-arid areas, communities with reliable water systems are less likely to be forced to migrate or enter into conflict over water, and individuals are more likely to remain in their rural contexts. This increases the likelihood of stable income generation. In addition, Lifewater and other organizations committed to sustainable development incorporate community ownership of water system maintenance. Community members gain valuable knowledge and skills as they learn to coordinate and participate in user fee collection and basic repairs, which can then be used to sustain other economic activities. Because of its many economic benefits, one dollar invested in water and sanitation usually results in economic gain of between three dollars and thirty-four dollars, depending on the nation. (Hutton & Haller, 2007)

With WASH, individuals in impoverished communities **gain the ability to care for their appearance and health**, thereby more clearly reflecting their God-given dignity and worth. Christians in these communities are empowered to share that God has given us much of the knowledge we need to maintain good health. A Chachi Christian who works with Lifewater in Ecuador said, *“One way I am a testimony to my village is that I do not go to the witch doctor for frequent spiritual cleansings like most Chachi do to stay healthy. I tell them, ‘Look, I have not had a cleansing for fifteen years and I am healthy.’”*

Finally, **helping people gain safe water in the name of Christ offers a tangible expression of God’s love.** When individuals gain WASH, they begin to experience the physical security and self-confidence that God desires for all people. Through physical water, they witness God’s love poured out for them, and their hearts open to the Living Water that will quench their deepest thirst.

Time and again, communities gaining safe water affirm the power of the gospel expressed in the provision of these resources. Zachariah, a parent of a student at a school where Lifewater is working in Kenya, told a visiting staff member, *“What you have done for our children is showing God to us and to the world.”* In Ogur, Uganda, a teacher said, *“I found out most things we have been doing in our school promote poor WASH. As stewards whom God has put in this school, I am going to train the young generation in good WASH and God fearing.”* In Ethiopia, Tessema, who works with Lifewater in water development, said, *“We often target Muslims as beneficiaries. When they see our commitment and see that our objective is to help their community, when they see that we are living out our Christian values, they trust us. If you say that your goal is to convert them, they will not accept you. If you say, ‘We have a mandate from God to*

help you,' this is accepted. Then you are being a witness. Then maybe they will be converted. In Ethiopia, Muslims sometimes become Christians."

Conclusion

Water by nature is a community issue that engages people's deepest values. Do people inherently deserve safe water? Who should make decisions about whether or not they possess this most basic resource? Should they have to pay for it? How about those whose activities pollute traditional water sources? Should they be held accountable? In word and deed, Christians need to be part of resolving these questions, insisting that biblical values guide our world's responses. Our water development efforts are part of proclaiming these values.

While community based water development alone cannot solve the global water crisis, it **raises awareness about the human face of the crisis** and insists that the well being of those struggling for subsistence be factored into the costs and benefits of water management.

While community water development alone cannot solve the problem of poverty, it **provides a basis for all other forms of development work.**

While water development work alone cannot fully articulate God's love in Christ, when combined with the evangelistic efforts of the local church, it **proclaims God's all-encompassing, redeeming love for the poor.**

In sum, Christian water development affirms God's love for the least of these, for us, and for God's creation. It points to the inherent value of every human being and provides a tangible sign of God's healing work on earth. **When done well, it serves as a beacon of God's love and a sign of the powerful current of Living Water that cleanses, nourishes, and propels us all.**

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