

Beyond the Dress



BY CHRISTI BOYD

Handicraft projects like Dress a Girl Around the World, Quilts Beyond Borders and Days for Girls have become popular among PW groups as hands-on opportunities to engage in global mission. These activities are typically undertaken out of desire to engage in God's mission. Yet in many contexts, there are more effective ways to support long-term mission priorities.

When a group approaches Presbyterian World Mission to help identify global partners as takers of sewn items, we find ourselves in a dilemma. We're thankful for the recognition of our collaborative denominational mission efforts, excited about the established connection with mission-minded Presbyterian Women and thrilled about the potential for a greater collective impact. At the same time, missiological and logistical challenges may give us pause.

In service projects we strive to minister in a holistic way. While we respond to tangible physical needs, we also consider emotional, social and spiritual health. We seek mutuality in relationships. We prioritize sustainable and economically viable models that encourage local ownership, stimulate resourcefulness and uplift dignity. Distribution and other charity programs usually do not realize these values and principles; they are one-directional and tend to stifle local initiative, suffocate economic opportunities and create patterns of dependency, reinforcing rather than breaking an ingrained, paternalistic donor-recipient mindset. This is also why, in natural and human-made disasters, we try to shift as soon as possible from relief efforts to rebuilding programs.

To reconcile these conflicting rationales and sentiments, World Mission's Africa team has been working with



Protestant women leaders at a Healing Hearts training event in Goma, East Congo, received Hopewell's dresses for children affected by war.

some PW sewing groups and a few partner ministries that serve vulnerable children in exceptionally precarious settings. One of those places is the Democratic Republic of Congo, where cyclic armed conflicts have been spinning out of control for some time. Unhealed childhood trauma perpetuates the cycle of violence with more children being victimized and needing support. While women leaders affiliated with the Protestant Council of Churches in Congo (ECC), an ecumenical partner of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), coordinate local ministries that provide shelter, food, education and

health care for war orphans and unaccompanied or otherwise displaced children, the ECC's national Women and Families Department has launched Healing Hearts as a holistic ministry to mend children's wounds of trauma.

Church workers are trained as Healing Hearts facilitators. They follow a highly interactive Bible-based curriculum that uses stories, songs, games and crafts to help children recognize the impact of trauma and start a process of recovery to restore relations with God, others and self. To follow the 10-lesson curriculum, however, each child participating in the program ideally receives a kit that includes a Healing Hearts work booklet.

The sewing circle of Hopewell Presbyterian Church in Dandridge, Tennessee, has embraced the idea of sending their sewn items with a \$5 gift so that a traumatized child (girl or boy) can receive the booklet and participate in a Healing Hearts club. World Mission's Congo team ensures the delivery of their dresses (and shorts) to ECC women leaders in conflict zones, with transport costs covered by the sending group. Non-sewers in the congregation raise money through bake sales or other programs to fund the booklet purchase and shipping fees. Others organize special ceremonies to dedicate the dresses and pray for the recipients.

Understanding the need to go the extra mile, the Hopewell sewing circle has gone beyond the dress to help a child feel whole inside. It is the kind of healing needed to break the cycle of violence and give Congo's children a chance for peace.

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Connect with World Mission's Equipping for Mission Involvement team for suggestions on ways to balance short- and long-term needs in your support of mission. Contact Ellen Sherby, 502/569-5612 or ellen.sherby@pcusa.org.