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(page 36)

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Study guide

Debunking myths about ELCA Good Gifts

By Robert C. Blezard

Improving lives of families and communities in developing nations—that's one of the primary objectives of ELCA Good Gifts. The program approaches this through a comprehensive strategy involving education, sustainable development, agriculture, health care and other necessities. By establishing a broad foundation, ELCA Good Gifts helps ensure that people and livestock will thrive and provide long-term benefits to communities and families.

Exercise 1: "Perfect" gift madness

Who are the people on your Christmas gift list who are notoriously hard to buy for? Uncle Charlie? Aunt Thelma? Grandma? Dad? What did you buy them last year and the year before? Why are they so hard to shop for?

Can you think of Christmas gifts you have received in the past that you have never used and are now sitting in your closets, attic, garage or basement? Can you think of specific ones? How many of these type of gifts wind up in garage sales, church rummage sales or get donated to thrift stores?

How much of our culture's time and attention is devoted to giving things to people who already have everything they need and most of the things they want? Is this a form of madness or what? Why do we continue to participate in this kind of system?

ELCA Good Gifts provides a way to buy a gift "for" Aunt Thelma, but have it benefit a person, family or community that really needs it. What are the advantages of this kind of giving for you, for the "hard to shop for" person on your list and for the eventual recipient?

Exercise 2: Good Gifts

Go online and check out the wide range of the ELCA Good Gifts that you can choose from (community.elca.org/elca-good-gifts/show-all). What are your thoughts as you look through the gifts? What impresses you? Which gifts would have the most impact on a community? An individual? A family?

Looking at the range of gifts, how many of them would assist with things you take for granted in life, such as clean water? Education? Health care?



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Study guide: **Debunking myths about ELCA Good Gifts** *continued*

What does this tell you about the needs of others? What does it say about how well off you are, and not just you but your family and community as well?

Exercise 3: More than livestock

Though goats and chicks and pigs—animals in “God’s Global Barnyard”—are among the most popular of the ELCA Good Gifts, they actually account for a small number of the gifts you can buy.

Looking at all the gifts, list the areas of life that are improved through the program. Which areas or gifts surprised you (biogas stove)? Which amused you (long-drop latrine)?

Not all of the gifts go for international efforts. Some help fund ministries and initiatives here in the United States, such as domestic soup kitchens, new congregations or education for future pastors at ELCA seminaries. ELCA Good Gifts enables donors to select the ministries they think are most important.

If you had \$10,000 to spend on ELCA Good Gifts, which would you purchase and why? Would you want your money to fund domestic or international ministries, and why? Why are all the ministries deserving of funding? For what reasons is it beneficial that ELCA Good Gifts gives plenty of choices to donors?

Exercise 4: Picture this!

When your congregation collects canned goods for a food pantry, how are you impacting the lives of your neighbors and friends? Is this easy or hard to visualize? Can you imagine the family using the food to make dinner?

When you make a purchase using ELCA Good Gifts, you are helping to improve the lives of people around the world, in nearly 90 countries (including the United States) where our denomination has a presence or partner. Why is this easier or harder to envision than a donation to a food pantry? Is it less important? Is it less worthy?

By breaking down the broad mission of ELCA World Hunger into specific ministries and specific causes, in what way does ELCA Good Gifts help donors to imagine specific ways their contribution helps people? How does this visualization help donors feel good about their contribution? How does this help the ministry of the church?

What do you like most about ELCA Good Gifts?

Exercise 5: Low overhead costs

The ELCA is proud that more than 90 percent of the money it receives from ELCA Good Gifts goes to direct programming that meets the needs



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of people, and less than 10 percent for administration and fundraising. By contrast, Heifer International spends 25 percent of its receipts in fundraising and administration, Oxfam America spends 22 percent, according to the respected Charity Navigator.

Have a favorite charity? Find out how much goes to programming and how much to overhead. Charity Navigator (charitynavigator.org) looks at the IRS filings for thousands of nonprofits and rates them on accountability and transparency. How do your favorites compare?

How much money should nonprofit organizations spend for fundraising and administration? Do you feel good about the ELCA's low overhead?

Which of the ELCA Good Gifts will provide for the people on your Christmas shopping list this year?

Debunking myths about ELCA Good Gifts



Photo: Paul Jeffrey/ACT Alliance

By Laurel Hensel

A popular trend in philanthropy is the practice of providing live animals—goats, chickens, cows—to people in developing countries. The idea is that people in these countries use animals for food and to generate an income so they can buy food or improve their living conditions.

This is just one of the solutions that this church has engaged in for years through ELCA World Hunger (elca.org/hunger) and other ministries. Many members support this work by making donations through ELCA Good Gifts, a catalog that highlights more than 50 ways to support these ministries—from sheep to water wells.

But how does this all work? Lending perspective to this discussion is Mary Marete, a native of Kenya and program director for sustainable development for ELCA Global Mission, and other churchwide program staff.

What are ELCA Good Gifts?

The Good Gifts catalog features items representing ELCA ministries in the U.S. and around the world. For all global projects, gifts are chosen based on needs identified by the ELCA's companion churches and their communities, Marete said. Donations are combined to fund areas of work related to livestock, water or health care so each donation has the greatest impact.

What about the animals?

The animals of “God’s Global Barnyard” are the most popular gifts in the catalog. These gifts support training, education and resources to help communities purchase and care for animals and start small businesses selling eggs, meat or dairy products.

“Our main objective is to help communities build resilience and work toward a just world where all are fed. Livestock alone is rarely sufficient to create the transformation to meet those objectives. But livestock can create a great opportunity for capital growth, increased protein and cooperative access to markets,” said Dan Rift, director for World Hunger and Disaster Appeal.

How are projects with animals selected and how is it determined that this is the best answer to alleviate hunger in a community?

When World Hunger funds are disbursed to purchase goats, chickens and other animals, the recipients have requested them. “We listen to what our companions say they need,” Marete said. “We only give [grants for animals] where they are needed and requested.”

To ensure sustainability, she said staff discuss with partners such details as “How will you manage the environment? How can you use animal products such as manure to improve soil fertility or make biogas for cooking?”

Marete and other staff then review the proposal and make recommendations to improve the plan.

Do the recipients of livestock know how to take care of them?

Yes. The ELCA’s accompaniment approach to global mission also includes on-site visits to companion projects. “Most communities have technical people who can teach them,” Marete said. “The ELCA team occasionally organizes capacity building sessions to help companions plan, monitor and evaluate their projects.”

How do hungry farmers feed the animals when they can’t feed themselves?

The most popular animals—goats and chickens, for example—often don’t need special food, but graze on a little grass, sunflowers or corn, Marete said. In some instances farmers may sell their animals to make important purchases.

Rafael Malpica Padilla, executive director for Global Mission, said, “In my recent travels to remote and marginalized communities in Malawi, I saw how goats are used as families’ ‘savings accounts.’ When there’s a need, a goat is sold to buy school supplies, medications and to make improvements to the family home.”

Are the animals ever mistreated?

Cruelty to animals is extremely rare, Marete said, adding, “People take good care of the animals; it’s their livelihood. They understand how to take care of them and they treat their animals well.”

Do these animals ever foster jealousy within a community?

Often the animals are raised by microfinance groups or cooperatives. ELCA companions in Malawi raise goats, whose milk is very nutritious, as part of a cooperative, Marete said. It’s a community effort where members receive training before the animals arrive and then they raise them together or at their own homes.

Many organizations now have similar programs. Why support this work through the ELCA?

The main difference, staff say, is that the church is already present and trusted: the ELCA has strong relationships and long-standing partnerships in nearly 90 countries. These partners identify local needs and solutions to support people in need and donors help make those dreams a reality.


“Supporting this work through ELCA World Hunger means yes to livestock and animal husbandry, as well as complementary agricultural efforts for food security, irrigation and advocacy, for example,” said Mikka McCracken, director for World Hunger planning and engagement. “[Our] approach addresses the root causes of poverty in collaboration with our global partners.” 



Photo: AMEXTRA

See an example of ELCA Good Gifts in action. Search for “A better cow for a better life,” by Laurel Hensel, at LivingLutheran.org.

Download a study guide by clicking on the “Spiritual practices & resources” tab at LivingLutheran.org.



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