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## Sacrificial giving

*A church in a depressed, Rust Belt town has raised more than \$4 million to help people in Sudan. This remarkable project began when the Rev. Mike Slaughter challenged his congregants to turn away from consumer culture and spend their money to help people in need.*

by [Matthew Dewald](#)

May 25, 2010

The kingdom of God takes root and grows from seeds scattered on the ground, Jesus tells his followers in the Gospel of Mark. For the Rev. Mike Slaughter, the seed took an unlikely form: a BMW sedan.

It has sprouted and grown, changing the faith life of his church, the outreach of his denomination and the relief efforts in a humanitarian crisis half a world away.

Since 2004, members of Slaughter's largely blue-collar [Ginghamsburg United Methodist Church](#) in Tipp City, Ohio, have raised \$4.4 million for people in Sudan. Their contributions have built more than 170 schools, provided education and other assistance for more than 22,000 children, and put more than 5,000 families back on farms that feed more than 80,000 internally displaced people. And their ambitious embrace of service brought the United Methodist Committee on Relief (UMCOR) into Sudan for the first time, creating a sustainable, denomination-wide commitment to the region.

Ginghamsburg members say they're simply the hands and feet of Christ, relieving suffering and planting their own seeds of hope among some of the poorest people on the planet.

For Slaughter, living the gospel means, at its core, serving the poorest and neediest among us. "It's too easy to get caught up in the cocoon of middle-class values and comfort," he said.

### Principles & Practices

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GO

## *A growing church in a struggling region*

Ginghamsburg Church lies just north of Dayton, Ohio, a few miles up a two-lane road off the interstate and past the General Motors plant that has closed up shop. In the last two years, the greater Dayton area has lost more than 10,000 jobs, half of them with GM, and unemployment has climbed to more than 12.5 percent. In 2008, Forbes magazine called Dayton one of the nation's "fastest-dying cities."

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Though the region's challenges are significant, such upheaval can force a community to take a hard look at itself. When what's always worked in the past stops working -- say, old-fashioned manufacturing jobs -- you have two choices: keep fading or start innovating. Slaughter falls squarely in the innovation camp.

When Slaughter arrived at Ginghamsburg as the church's first full-time pastor in 1979, the church was struggling. It had around 90 members and the only children at worship were the grandkids of members. Slaughter started to shake up services with more contemporary music and a new, decidedly casual personal style.

### *Questions to consider:*

- Before organizing the Sudan Project, Ginghamsburg UMC was "successful" but wasn't moving people toward greater faith and service. How can churches work toward standard indicators of success (members, donations, etc.) and deepen faith lives? How do you measure "faith and service"?

Slaughter's approach worked. Through the 1980s and 1990s, dozens of members became hundreds, and hundreds grew to thousands. The church outgrew its space, eventually opening a new main campus in 1994.

Sitting in his book-lined office upstairs from the worship space at the main campus, he speaks about the transformation and growth with the ease and patience of someone who has spent decades helping people see old concepts in fresh ways.

Raised nearby in Cincinnati, the 58-year-old is trim, and

- The Rev. Mike Slaughter has the “gift of irritation.” What has irritated you in the past week? What irritates you about your church or organization? Is it something to which you should pay more attention?
- List the reasons why your church or organization cannot do what Ginghamburg did. How does it compare to Ginghamburg’s list? (It is a blue-collar church, with few resources, in one of the nation’s “fastest dying cities.”)
- Churches can be one of the safest parts of the “cocoon of middle-class values and comfort.” Does your church challenge and push back against that cocoon? Should it? How?

his clothes signal his approachability: simple pants and a long-sleeved shirt for worship services. On weekdays, he wanders Ginghamburg’s halls in a T-shirt, shorts and sandals if the weather’s right, just the type of outfit his members are likely to wear to Sunday morning services.

The church offers five weekend services -- two Saturday night, three on Sunday -- that can draw more than 4,000. There are singles nights and mission trips, basketball courts and mom-to-mom groups, motorcycle gear for sale in the lobby and free-flowing coffee for chilly mornings.

But anyone taking these as signs of success is looking at the wrong metric, Slaughter said. Reflecting in his book “Change the World” on his church’s exponential growth, Slaughter wrote, “We had achieved getting behinds in the seats, but I realized that all we had really done was accumulate crowds of spectators who were not moving toward deeper faith and service.”

This realization developed into a fundamental shift in the identity of the church. It had expertly used the tools

of the prevailing culture to attract the outside world, but increasingly began to understand service as its fundamental purpose, helping both struggling neighbors and strangers thousands of miles away. Ginghamburg had always done mission work, but not like this.

## *The gift of irritation*

What got that project rolling was, of all things, a BMW.

In 1999, Slaughter was flipping through his local paper when an advertisement for a BMW caught his eye. A bit of a car guy, Slaughter studied the details. Then his eye wandered across the page to a photo of an emaciated child and a story about a famine in Sudan. He turned the words over in his head, “sedan, Sudan,” irritated with himself that he knew a lot about one and almost nothing about the other.

Nothing came of it immediately, but the seed had been planted.

In the fall of 2004, Sudan was starting to get more attention in the media, particularly when U.S. Secretary of State Colin Powell called the emerging conflict in Darfur “genocide” and the worst humanitarian crisis in the world.

On his Facebook page “Change the World,” Slaughter writes, “Christians are known ... more for potlucks than for solving world hunger.” The tone of the statement reflects what Slaughter calls his “gift of irritation,” which he sometimes directs at churches themselves.

“The challenge is for us to call people out and set a high bar,” Slaughter said in an interview. “People donate, but they don’t sacrifice. They may have tried small things, but what happens when we really do unto others? All we can do is be honest about the demands of the gospel, and they can either accept or reject it,” he said.

This “gift” dates to his childhood, when he and his father watched Walter Cronkite narrating a historical program about World War II. Slaughter’s father, an Army medic, had helped free a concentration camp.

“Where was the church?” Slaughter asked his father. He asked the same question again when he saw news reports of civil rights marchers beaten on the Edmund Pettus Bridge in Selma, Ala., and again in 1994 during the horrors of the Rwandan genocide.

When he heard the Darfur situation described as the first genocide of the 21st century, he had had enough. “I decided, ‘No, not on my watch. We’re going to do something.’”

## *Sacrificial giving*

Moved by the stories and still mindful of that starving child opposite the BMW ad, Slaughter soon arrived at a meeting with his leadership team to announce an ambitious idea: a Christmas offering organized around the theme, “Christmas is Jesus’ birthday, not yours.”

Slaughter urged congregants to spend on Sudan an amount equal to what they spent on themselves for Christmas. In some cases that meant people doubled their Christmas outlay. More typically, their budget was the same, but they spent only half of it on themselves.

The idea didn’t surprise the leadership team, said Karen Smith, who coordinates communications and global outreach at Ginghamburg. “It fit with Mike’s consistent message: ‘Get off your butt and go do something for God.’”

And they did, despite the fact that there were a lot of reasons not to. Aren’t we just throwing money away in a situation that’s intractable? What about the tens of thousands of people right here in Dayton who badly need our help? And the many more we could be serving? Will this Christmas offering hurt our regular year-end offering, which is so critical to our ability to sustain our church?

To each, the leadership team had the same answer: God will provide. They also returned to Slaughter’s theme: Christmas is Jesus’ birthday, not yours. Turn away from consumer culture, and the money you save can stretch even further to help bring God’s kingdom to people here on earth.

The funds came from throughout the congregation, even the kids. Zack Davies, 10, was sitting in the services with his mother and father that fall.

“He heard about the project, and it was all he talked about,” said his father, Dave Davies. “We told him, whatever you want to do, bud, your mom and dad are behind you.”

Zack collected pledges from family members and friends by promising to run 48 miles in a month. He ran 53 and raised more than \$1,300.

Such stories are common. In teaching about the project over the last five years, Slaughter has emphasized what he called “sacrificial giving,” spending minimally on oneself to maximize giving to others.

One girl asked friends and family to give to the project in lieu of birthday gifts. A woman who worked cleaning homes began cleaning more at night to earn money for the project. A father half-jokingly grumbled, “Please don’t do this to me again,” as he handed over a five-figure check, an amount equal to what he’d just spent to take his family on a holiday cruise. Overall, the first offering drew \$317,000.

After that, the project kept growing. The next year the congregation raised more than \$500,000. The two years after each brought in more than a million. To date, Ginghamburg has raised \$4.4 million for the Sudan Project. The church’s local mission work continues to thrive, and its year-end offering has felt no measurable impact.

Ginghamburg calls itself a “spit-and-mud church,” Smith said, a reference to the biblical story of Jesus using the materials at hand to give sight to a blind man by rubbing spit and mud on his eyes.

“Our congregation is largely blue-collar, and many of us have been hit by the recession,” she said. As a church, “we live very close to the edge. We generally have only three to four weeks of operating cash on hand. We don’t have a large endowment. ... We’ve kept moving forward in faith, not sure what God was going to do with it.”

## *Spreading impact*

Strategic partnerships have been central to the project’s success, both in fundraising and implementation.

“We have not done it alone,” said Amy Johnson, a member of the church who has served on its leadership board.

Fifteen percent of the total funds raised have come from outside the Ginghamburg Church community -- from schools, businesses, other churches and individuals such as Rob Cohen. Cohen, owner of Advanced Packaging Technology near Detroit, heard about the Sudan Project from church member Bill Weikert. Cohen proposed they set aside for the Sudan Project 1 percent of sales to a joint major client. Together, they've contributed about \$20,000.

The money raised got more than just Ginghamburg into Sudan. It also got UMCOR there for the first time.

When Ginghamburg started collecting for Sudan in 2004, Slaughter got in touch with UMCOR and told them, "I'm going to have a chunk of change, and we want to do something for the people of Sudan."

UMCOR, which had been monitoring the situation in Darfur, was not then working anywhere in Sudan. With Ginghamburg's call, it moved quickly. Slaughter had conceived of the project in fall 2004, collected funds through Christmas and turned over the cash to UMCOR in February 2005. By April, there were Ginghamburg-funded seeds in Sudanese ground.

Partnering with UMCOR has amplified Ginghamburg's impact in Sudan far beyond that initial investment, said Thomas Dwyer, executive director of the UMCOR's Non-Governmental Organization unit.

"The commitment by Ginghamburg was the seed money that got us into Sudan and has allowed us to leverage much more for our work there," he said.

Ginghamburg's initial investment provided cost-share funds that allowed UMCOR to secure much bigger grants from organizations such as USAID, the World Bank and the United Nations. While Ginghamburg contributed all of UMCOR's Sudan budget at the beginning of the project, in 2010 UMCOR administered more than two dozen grants, with Ginghamburg accounting for about 10 percent of the Sudan budget. With the start from Ginghamburg, the entire United Methodist denomination now has a stake in the welfare of the people of Sudan.

The Ginghamburg funding has supported UMCOR's work in three areas: agricultural development, safe water and sanitation, and child development and protection, priorities that Ginghamburg and UMCOR developed jointly. UMCOR implements the projects on the ground, providing the professionalism of an organization that has been in the field since 1940. The focus is always on sustainability, not just quick, short-term solutions.

"For me, it's been a great experience," Dwyer said. "Ginghamburg is very collaborative. They've created a model that can be replicated by other large churches. Other churches can contribute to it. We hope to replicate it in more situations and contexts."

Slaughter also is spreading the message of the Ginghamburg experience with Sudan to other congregations. He used his book as a platform to organize a Change the World weekend in May 2010, an event in which people from more than 1,000 churches in 13 countries participated by coordinating events in their own churches. In October, Ginghamburg will host a three-day intensive training session for the leadership teams of churches interested in joining a Change the World network to "resource, coach and train churches to become an unstoppable force of exponential mission both in your local communities and throughout the world."

The message of all of this outreach is simple: If a church in Tipp City, Ohio, can be the hands and feet of Christ in its community and around the world by living the gospel sacrificially, your congregation can too.

"The key is for the church to really take seriously the call of Christ," Slaughter said. "Jesus said, 'I come to proclaim the good news to the poor and the oppressed.' If it's not good news to the poor, it's not the gospel."

