

Mormons, Muslims, and the Miracle That Blessed the Children of the Tsunami

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Gary: Do you remember the time when you were a child and you got your first dot-to-dot book?

The beginning ones had a faint version of the picture that would result, but as you grew older the dots were there but you had to wait to see what the picture would be. The Lord's work is much the same way. We start with a series of dots and the Lord helps connect them to complete what He has in mind. And we may not see it from the beginning.

In recent Sunday School lessons we have realized more than ever the example of service our forefathers left us. We read of countless acts on the part of the pioneers that show us the way.

Under some of the most terrible circumstances as the pioneers crossed the plains their hearts were turned to help and serve one another. As a result, we have been given a legacy of service. And it continues to grow as we see Latter-day Saints across the globe giving humanitarian aid to those in need, even when they are in need themselves, much like the pioneers did when they bound up the frostbitten feet of pioneers of the handcart companies and provided them with loving care.

It was families saving families. These valiant pioneers inspired us and have helped us discover who we really are.

We all have been media eye witnesses to the catastrophic destruction caused by natural disasters during the last 10 months. As terrible as they were, miracles abounded in their wake. We want to share a few with you, but first we need to set the stage.

Joy: When the Lord is in charge, as He always is, events happen that unfold much like the child's connect-the-dots picture, and then we see the big picture more clearly. Such an opportunity came to us just after Christmas last year. We'll begin by setting the stage for the first series of dots that need to be connected. As part of the 2004 10th anniversary of the International Year of the Family we worked with the World Family Policy Center in our calling as Church service missionaries. We assisted in the development of an important conference known as the Doha International Conference for the Family held in Doha, Qatar.

This conference resulted in the adoption of the Doha Declaration which reaffirmed many international legal norms that are consistent with principles in The Family Proclamation.

One of our responsibilities for this conference was to help organize citizens throughout the world to hold neighborhood and community meetings in support of the family.

We worked with individuals and organizations and received reports from 36 countries, holding over 200 meetings worldwide.

It was through this effort that we met our Muslim friend, Asim Alavi, the director of the Serendib Institute of Research and Development in Colombo, Sri Lanka. He held a Save the Family community meeting and involved local leaders of the Muslim, Buddhist, Hindu, and Christian religions of his country, where each discussed ways to preserve the family and family values. We then met him in person at the Doha International Conference for the Family in Qatar in November last year.

Unbeknownst to us, the dots were beginning to connect. We became good friends and our hearts reached out with love for this good man of a faith so different, yet similar, in that he too loved his family and God.

We all remember well when the tsunami hit at the end of December; the news flooded the world.

Gary: And we remember how horrible and shocking it was.

Joy: It killed hundreds of thousands of people in Indonesia and tens of thousands in Sri Lanka; we were immediately concerned about our friend Asim and sent him an e-mail. Our prayers for the tsunami victims became very personal. We were praying for Asim and his family. In answer to our letter of concern, Asim wrote:

We lived closer to the sea in the southern part of the country. Water came to my home, but my wife and children were able to escape, thank God almighty. Thank you very much for including us in your prayers. The catastrophe is unimaginable – in only a matter of less than 10 minutes, over 30,000 dead only in Sri Lanka. I am now fully involved in the administration of relief supplies to various parts of the country.

He sent pictures of the disaster. It broke our hearts to see the suffering of his people.

Then he wrote again:

Would you show some kindness and love to the children who lost their loved ones in the disaster? I am sure as Mormon you would! I saw thousands of them who are so small that they are unable to comprehend what their future would be. Can your Church group sponsor any school supplies or relief packages for these innocent little ones? Is any humanitarian intervention possible?

His plea was heart-wrenching. We had donated to the fast offering fund as requested by the Prophet to help the tsunami victims, as we're sure most members of the Church did and would continue to do so, but we could see we needed to do more. The disaster was so enormous that it was going to take many willing hearts and hands to give the relief that was needed.

The task seemed insurmountable. The words of Sir Edmund Burke rang true:

“Nobody made a greater mistake than he who did nothing because he could do only a little.”

Regarding this disaster, author Anne Perry wrote: “We can't help everybody, but we can help somebody. Don't let the enormity of it overtake us; none of us is alone. We have to do something; we don't have to do everything.”

We *had* to do something. As writers for *Meridian Magazine*, an online magazine for Latter-day Saints, we decided to send out a plea for help. We knew that with

the help of the thousands of Latter-day Saints who would read our article, we could *do something*, and with many doing a little something, it could be significant.

Gary: We love how the Lord works. We pray and He begins connecting the dots. Actually, we are certain He begins connecting the dots long before we start praying. It's probably through praying that we have the privilege of being some of the dots that He can use in the connecting process. We asked our ward members to become involved and in the process one of our ward members, Scott Evensen, introduced us to Paul Holton.

He is known affectionately as Chief Wiggles and is director of Operation Give, a humanitarian organization in Salt Lake City already deeply involved in helping disadvantaged children in Iraq and other places around the world. Through Scott and Paul, more dots were connected, and suddenly we were partnering with Operation Give and would be able to send any amount of aid we could gather to Sri Lanka, and it would go directly to Asim and his organization there. From the donors anywhere in the United States FedEx would ship any amount of goods to Operation Give in Salt Lake at *no cost!* Operation Give volunteers would then assemble the donations on palets and ship them to Sri Lanka.

The miracle was beginning to happen.

Now, to continue connecting the dots, all we needed was the help of Latter-day Saints throughout the U.S. to assemble the supplies needed, as indicated by Asim—supplies that would bless the children of the tsunami. This would be their opportunity to be God's hands in succoring the suffering. We suggested they involve their families and friends and neighbors of other faiths. This project would give us all the opportunity to live the scripture:

“Love one another, as I have loved you,” (John 15:12).

Instructions for assembling children's kits were then posted. The kits would each contain:

1. • A teddy bear or other small toy
2. • A coloring book and crayons
3. • Flip-flops or other shoes
4. • A T-shirt
5. • A hand towel
6. • A comb
7. • A large bar of soap
8. • A toothbrush

9. • A large tube of toothpaste
10. • Some Band-aids

School supplies were also requested to help equip schools so the children could quickly be involved in as normal a routine as possible.

Joy: So what happened? It was incredible! Goods started pouring in. It happened in our own ward and our house was flooded with donated goods.

Living rooms across America were filling up. The response from readers was overwhelming. Many people wrote that they had already donated money but they wanted to do more, something physical, something that would involve their children in making a sacrifice for these suffering people.

Words cannot express how touched we were by the generosity of so many. The dots were forming all over the U.S.

Through this project, thousands of boxes of goods poured into the Operation Give warehouse in Salt Lake City. Paul Holton's dedicated crew worked untold hours receiving and preparing the boxes for shipping.

As a result, our donations were sent by ship, in two 40-foot, semi-truck-size containers—thousands of pounds.

Asim was overjoyed at the number of kits and quality of the donations. Some of the children's kits contained letters from children who helped assemble them. Asim wrote,

I was just skipping through the letters sent by kids along with the consignment. They are showing an extreme form of kindness towards the tsunami-affected children here. We all are really surprised to see this kindness from thousands of kilometers away across the ocean.

It was an enormous task at the port in Sri Lanka and then organizing distribution to the needed areas. Several times we received this request from Asim:

Please increase your prayers for a successful implementation.

This was our Muslim friend requesting our prayers. The government there kept changing their restrictions, which caused him and us great concern. Prayers were

answered. Asim said,

Indeed, the distribution was possible with the hard work of so many volunteers; they spent several sleepless nights. God bless them.

We were extremely impressed with the organized way Asim and his institute handled the distribution. He said there have been many containers sent by other organizations that are simply abandoned at the port due to unforeseen cost and lack of help.

Following are excerpts from e-mails we received from Asim on April 8, 2005:

I am happy to send this brief note on the implementation of the project. All together we did the distribution to about fifty places. The Tsunami made a devastating impact on the children who live along the 80% of the coastal belt of Sri Lanka. It snatched away their parents and siblings in front of their very eyes so horribly that they could not extend their hands or jump into the water to rescue them, thus creating a permanent scar in their minds on their failure to save their own family members.

Gary: Asim went on to say:

The major commendable feature of these two 40-footer container loads of items was the large variety of toys for kids and stuffed animals.

This is in fact an innovative humanitarian intervention. We, as social workers involved in several Tsunami recovery missions, encountered a major problem on how to present substitutes of a temporary nature to these children who were so confused and saw a bleak future.

Usually in such situations when survivors of a catastrophe were herded and packed into public schools and makeshift tents, children become extraordinary problems to their parents. They are compelled to manage their own aftershocks and that of their children. Its not difficult for a person with least common sense to imagine the mental agony a family undergoes when they break into pieces after a Tsunami that relegates them to refugee camps in a matter of less then ten minutes.

The consignment from Operation Give was very well organized so the sorting was very easy and pleasurable here. Cartons and packets, although they reached one central point from all over the United States in all types of packings, were serialized item by item and neatly arranged as if they were packed in one place. This indeed made our task of sorting and reducing them into individual kits much easier.

We kept Asim informed about the donors so he and his people would know that many, including children, made significant sacrifices to help them. Regarding this

sacrifice Asim wrote:

This made our task here much more pleasurable.

He reported:

We mainly focused on preschools, schools, and religious institutions in the five affected districts. As we went to a Muslim village which lies within the 100-meter coastal buffer zone we announced that this consignment is a gift from a Christian church group in the USA. On hearing this some were taken aback while some others showed apprehension. We explained to them from what I knew of Mormons from friends. I said this sect is not as the ordinary Christians we have encountered in this part of the world. They do not indulge in what is prohibited in their scriptures like alcohol which is Haram for Muslims. They promote and practice extended family system and do not kill their infants in the womb which Islam equates with slaying a complete human life. After that students and the youth actively participated in the mission. In some other villages, the entire village celebrated upon receiving the gifts.

As we pasted a sticker on each and every packet depicting Operation Give and Serendib Institute of Research and Development, people were very curious to know the background of Operation Give. We deliberately took this opportunity to explain to them that the consignment is from Christians given to Muslims for distribution among all communities.

This is a very good example of mutual trust and cooperation. It shows a fine way for inter-religious harmony.

We visited a Buddhist monk who runs a preschool. He was surprised to see his portion of the relief was channeled through a Muslim base organization by Christians. He opined, "Its the best way to ensure fair treatment of all citizens."

One mother told us that her son, on hearing that the portion given to his school would be distributed the next day, had prayed to God frantically that he also would be a recipient.

We were rained with thank-yous to the donors; in some areas parents, children, and teachers came en masse and thanked in chorus.

Asim Alavi ended by saying, "Thank you to everyone for your kindness and loving concern for the children of this terrible Tsunami disaster."

Joy: We want to share a few samples of letters from those who donated to this project.

From a mother in Mesa, Arizona:

My heart was broken. I wanted desperately to do something. But how? The devastation and need is daunting. I prayed and prayed for something that I could do. I wish I could get on a plane and go there and just hold some of those poor hurt little children! Or put my arms around the grieving women I see weeping on TV. Just when I was about to give up, I found the article from *Meridian Magazine*. I knew it was the answer to my prayers! I dropped to my knees to ask Heavenly Father if in fact this was what I should do. The spirit was so strong I could hardly stay on my knees. I felt Him saying "Get up and get busy!" So we have been busy ever since. The Lord has truly guided us through this process. We solicited the help of friends, neighbors, wards. I wondered if people would really do this. The response has been overwhelming. The doorbell rings nonstop. We love it.

Also, I set up a laundry basket outside my front door so people could drop their kits off if I was gone. Every time we pulled into the cul-de-sac we would get so excited to see the basket overflowing with kits! It's been like Christmas for us as we get the kits and look through each one ooh-ing and aah-ing over them. Also, my 12-year-old son and my 9-year-old daughter made boxes and fliers to set up in their class to collect school supplies. When I started, my goal was at least 50 kits or maybe 100. Two weeks later we had 600 kits! I am so thrilled. We have had so much fun. We went through each and every one of the 600 kits to make sure they had everything they needed. We loved looking at the cute little shoes or the cute shirts, etc., but our favorite thing to do was take out the little stuffed animal and give each one a hug. I promised my children that if they hugged the animals, their hugs would get to the children in Sri Lanka and it would be as if we were hugging the children ourselves.

Gary: From Ann Arbor, Michigan:

We were all so excited to participate in this great effort to help the orphaned children of Sri Lanka. We packed a whopping 61 boxes averaging 20 to 30 pounds. Included were around 600 backpacks and school bags; probably around \$6000 or so of collected supplies. The Ann Arbor Michigan Stake was awesome. We all loved participating in the great project. Thank you for letting us know about it.

Joy: From Tomball, Texas (close to the Houston Temple):

My sister in Nashville told me about the Tsunami project that they were doing at her kids' school in Tennessee. I decided to do a collection at the school I teach at here in Texas. We did a collection for 1 week, and involved over 70 students, teachers, and staff in the project. We sent 74 boxes to Operation Give in Salt Lake that weighed about 1,000 lbs. We had a few parents that went the extra mile and involved their children's daycare and the local Wal-Mart. The daycare (which is at a local Presbyterian church) brought in a minivan full of donations

from the kids. Also, Wal-Mart donated \$100 worth of school supplies to our collection. The *Houston Chronicle* newspaper caught wind of the activity through our school district and printed an article about it with photos. What a great experience for our students.

Gary: From Wilburton, Oklahoma:

Fed Ex just left a little bit ago with four boxes for the Operation Give campaign for Sri Lanka. For our small branch we did pretty well in the short time we had to get things all together, just one week. We had help from our local dentist and grocery store; the rest was from our Relief Society sisters. We sent health kits, children's kits, and a box of school supplies which Staples helped us out with a lot. This has been a very rewarding project to work on, and we were glad to be able to be a part of helping out all those people over in Sri Lanka. We hope we can get involved in something to help out again. Thank you for this opportunity.

Joy: From Eugene, Oregon:

Just wanted to let you know we got our shipment sent off tonight. We have 8 boxes on their way to you: 30 health kits, 11 children's kits, and LOTS of school supplies. Thanks for organizing this. It's truly been AWESOME to be involved in.

From Fox, Arkansas:

Thank you for the opportunity for our students to participate in relief efforts for the Sri Lanka tsunami victims. The students from Rural Special School in Fox, Arkansas, donated items for health kits. Our student body is small, with only about 200 students in grades K through 12, but they participated in a big way. Yesterday we shipped four boxes to you via FedEx. Thank you again.

From San Mateo County, California:

We sent a total of 23 boxes with 134 health kits and 108 children's kits. We also sent 6 boxes of school supplies, 1 box of stuffed animals, 1 box of shoes, and 1 box of T-shirts. We had a lot of donations from stores and a great response from our ward. Everyone really enjoyed participating. I've been contacted by other groups in our community wanting to get involved with this project as well. Thank you so much for the opportunity to help in some way.

Gary: From Waseca, Minnesota:

I'm an LDS home school mom. I organized a service project for our home school group where we put together 40 health kits for Operation Give. This was a great opportunity for all of us from different faiths to gather and teach our children about

the joy of serving others.

From Salt Lake City:

We read your article in *Meridian Magazine* and decided to see what we could do as a family. We were able to assemble 28 combination kits which have all the items on the children's list plus the extra items from the hygiene list. We hope these kits bring some happiness to a few children. Thanks for giving us this opportunity.

From LaGrange, Georgia:

We sent 61 health kits, 46 children's kits, and some school supplies. It feels great to have done a little bit to help out with all that needs to be done in the Tsunami Relief effort.

From College Station, Texas:

I wanted to let you know the results of our gathering. We shipped a total of 2,900 pounds of kits and school supplies. All was generously donated by our community within a week and a half. I was amazed.

Joy: From Memphis, Tennessee:

Following is a portion of an article appearing in our local newspaper: "After learning about Operation Give to benefit the Tsunami victims in Sri Lanka, the Collierville Ward of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints organized a project to gather children's kits and health kits to send to children in Sri Lanka who were left orphaned by the Tsunami. They were able to ship approximately 200 health kits, 100 children's kits, 150 pounds of school supplies, and 3 big boxes of miscellaneous items."

From Spanish Fork, Utah:

Thanks to donations of books from a school district in Eureka, Utah, we were able to send 73 boxes of books to the schools in Sri Lanka. Several people from our ward came and helped sort the books into grades and categories and box them for shipping. Many of these same volunteers and others donated items for children's and health kits—two van loads full of items! Thanks for this great opportunity to serve.

Gary: From Gilbert, Arizona:

Our son Matthew did the Sri Lanka project for his Eagle project which was more successful than he thought it would be. YEAH! It was really a neat project for him

to do. His goal was 50 of each kind of kit. He was able to complete 90 health kits, 80 children's kits, and 3 boxes of school supplies. 13 boxes were shipped to Operation Give. I personally was amazed at how generous and giving our ward members and neighbors were. Matt was able to do this in a two-week time period, and on the day of assembly, 40 people came to help!

From Springville, Utah:

Another scout, Josh Reidhead, also did this for his Eagle project. The response was overwhelming. Enough supplies were gathered to assemble over 600 kits!

When Asim was invited to the World Family Policy Forum in July, it gave him a chance to meet Josh and his parents and discover the caliber of young people and their families who helped the children of Sri Lanka.

Joy: Many more dedicated people sent reports. One caller touched us deeply when she said, "A family in our ward took their food money for a week and bought supplies for the kits for the children of the Tsunami disaster."

Another sister called and said, "I have been very depressed lately. This project has given me a reason to live. Thank you!"

President Hinckley said: "The most effective medicine for the sickness of self-pity is to lose ourselves in the service of others." *Ensign*, August 1982, p. 5.

Children as well as adults can rise above depressing situations when they serve.

Gary: Little did we know that just seven months later we would be hit with a catastrophic disaster right here in the United States. Hurricane Katrina delivered a blow of destruction greater than any in the history of our country.

People wrote asking if we were going to organize an effort to help like we did for the tsunami. We called the Church Humanitarian Office and were told that the greatest need was for funds so that supplies could be purchased near affected locations to meet specific needs. Our decision was to encourage family participation in supporting this effort.

So once again we wrote an article for *Meridian Magazine* seeking help for the suffering. This one was entitled "Operation Families for Katrina Aid: Here's How Your Children Can Help the Hurricane Victims".

We told them of the Church's request for members to give generously to the Humanitarian Fund to help with the needs for this disaster. The humanitarian directors know what is needed and will use the funds to purchase the appropriate goods, which will vary depending on current needs.

Joy: We had learned from the previous experience that when we give money we sometimes feel that it's too easy and that our children don't experience the joy of giving like they do when they participate in a hands-on project, such as assembling kits. Even though they may have already given money, we suggested they could still help their children feel the joy of sacrifice by organizing their own family fundraising project.

To help accomplish this goal we organized Operation Families for Katrina Aid. Here's how it worked:

1) Hold a family council as soon as possible where you talk about the hurricane and the resulting needs. Immediate action is needed, so set yourselves a deadline. It's amazing how fast a project can be organized and completed when the whole family is involved.

2) Let your children know what our Church leaders have asked us to do to help. Instructions are clear on the Church's Web site: www.lds.org, PROVIDENT LIVING. ORG

This site is updated daily, so needs are always changing and specific to the current needs. Humanitarian donations can be donated to through your local ward or branch of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints or by following instructions on the Church site.

Gary: 3) Ask your children for ideas on how your family can raise some money for the Humanitarian Fund. Help them understand that even a small contribution will be helpful. We gave them a few ideas to consider.

- Bake "**Katrina Care Cookies**" (any favorite recipe) and sell them in the neighborhood, letting people know that all proceeds will go to help the victims of the hurricane. Orders can be taken over the phone.

Joy: • Set up a **lemonade and/or popcorn stand** with a large sign that says proceeds go to the hurricane victims. Be creative by naming your drink "Katrina Quench" or your popcorn stand "Poppin' for Katrina Kids". People who would not ordinarily

buy from a stand will likely be drawn to do so for this cause.

Gary: • If you have older children, make and tie a **“Katrina Care Quilt”** of your own design and offer it for sale in the neighborhood or your ward. Maybe orders could be taken for more quilts and others could be enlisted to help make the quilts. If children have a way to earn their own money or if they have an allowance, they can use some of it to help buy the materials. The need right now is not so much for quilts as it is for the money the quilts can earn by selling them.

Joy: • If you have musically talented children, put on a home **“Katrina Care Concert”** and sell tickets, noting all proceeds go to the hurricane victims. The stars do it, why can’t you? Or maybe arrange with a store to play an instrument out front where people can toss money into a violin case or some container, like they do on the streets of New York.

Gary: • Go door to door with a **“Katrina Care Kettle”** and ask for donations to be placed in the kettle, explaining that all money will be sent to your church Humanitarian Fund for the victims. If they want to write a check, make it to LDS Humanitarian Services or Emergency Response Fund (as noted on the Church site). We suggest you accompany your children and be ready to answer questions. Make a handout flyer that explains your goal, if you wish. If people prefer writing a check to the Red Cross, take their donation and deliver it to your local Red Cross. Church leaders encourage Red Cross support, if that is preferred.

Joy: • Make and sell **“Katrina Care Bracelets”** out of beads or braided string.

• If your children are old enough, offer yard work and call it **“Katrina Clean Up”**. Fall is a good time for clearing flower beds and gardens. Let neighbors know the project is to earn money for the hurricane victims.

Once you and your family start thinking about it, other ideas will come to mind. We suggested they could share with their children a few scriptures about giving service, such as the story of the good Samaritan or the words of King Benjamin:

“When ye are in the service of your fellow beings ye are only in the service of your God,” (Mosiah 2:17).

Then pray for the victims of the hurricane and ask the Lord to help you know what to do that will be most helpful. The Holy Ghost will be our guide as we go forth to help those in need. Through participation in **Operation Families for Katrina Aid**,

your children can then feel the peace and joy that comes from hands-on helping when disaster strikes.

Gary: Among the responses that came in, we'll share this one, from a mother in California. She wrote:

When I read your article I was excited. Donating money was fine for my husband and I, but that type of help was invisible to the kids. Your call to action was just what we needed!

We talked about it Sunday afternoon and I asked my five children how they thought they could make some money. They had recently had a successful lemonade sale, so they decided that was where they would start: lemonade and popcorn. Then their creative juices began to flow! After an enthusiastic brainstorming session, we decided to sell lemonade, popcorn, cupcakes, bracelets, window hangings, and a rice pack you can put in the freezer to help with injuries we lovingly call "Mr. Cold." With this list the kids set to work.

All day Sunday and Monday they were working. I had a hard time getting them to get ready for school in the morning. Instead they were stringing beads, sewing Mr. Colds, or ironing window decorations. They worked pretty much on their own and were SO enthusiastic. I could tell they were feeling empowered!

She went on to say they set up their stand across from the elementary school and business started pouring in. She wrote:

People we didn't know stopped and donated generously. The kids were amazed to realize there were even people who donated WITHOUT buying anything! I think that's so wonderful for them to see! I'm so tired of everyone telling them that "strangers are scary and can't be trusted." I think in general it's the opposite, and this was such a wonderful way for them to learn that most people are good and kind! There was even a jogger that called out "God bless you!" as he ran by.

Anyway, after 2 1/2 hours of enthusiastic selling. I finally had to put my foot down and close shop; they still had homework! At the end of the day they had earned \$86.15! They were SO excited!

Joy: That's a lot of money to young children.

Gary: They did several more sales at soccer games. Her children were so motivated, they just wanted to keep going. She said:

It's been a wonderful experience so far and I'm truly grateful. It's teaching my children that they CAN care for their brothers and sisters around the world and that they CAN do something to help. That is a powerful lesson in these times.

Joy: Giving aid such as this provides many benefits to our families. Not only do our children feel the joy of sharing with others, but it comforts them to know from their own experience that if they are in such as disaster, people will rally to help them, too.

Nothing gives hope quite like helping. We can give this blessing to our families and in the process we'll be teaching them that this is one of the most important ways we show the Lord how much we love Him. For He said:

“Verily I say unto you, inasmuch as ye have done it unto one of the least of these . . . ye have done it unto me,” (Matthew 25:40).

When we all work together, the dots connect, the miracles happen, and we become more like our Savior.

As we do His work to help save others, we, in effect, will be saving our own family, and nothing is more important than that.

The world is made up of families, and no matter where we are, we can help each other, family to family.

Gary sings: SAVE THE FAMILY (Song is available to download free at www.garyjoylundberg.com)