



# HOPE STARTS HERE

CWS STORIES OF CHANGE & INSPIRATION





# THE POWER OF ONE

According to the latest “State of Food Security and Nutrition in the World” report, approximately 735 million people face hunger daily. This data, compiled jointly by five United Nations specialized agencies, reports that incessant hunger has seen an increase of 122 million people since the COVID pandemic. More than 148 million children under age five suffer from stunted growth because of malnourishment. 42 percent of the world’s population cannot afford a healthy diet. Cindy McCain, Executive Director of the World Food Programme, warns, “**as humanitarians, we are facing the greatest challenge we’ve ever seen.**”

Since hunger knows no boundaries, this crisis is not limited to third world countries. Hungry people reside in South Sudan and South Carolina. They reside in rural Cambodia and rural California. They live in the cities and the suburbs, the townships and the villages. They are our neighbors. Hunger is one of the most pervasive challenges of our modern culture.

Enter into this global crisis, **Orfelina Portillo**, an agricultural technician with the Mennonite Social Action Commission, a Church World Service partner in Honduras. Orfelina is part of a specialized program that teaches local growers effective and responsible farming techniques. The initiative christened “Produce Green” seeks to establish sustainable practices that will feed these rural communities for generations. She teaches courses that range from basic sanitation to vermiculture (the growing of worms!). She visits the fields daily helping the locals produce the best that the land can offer. “My work is my joy,” she proclaims, “I am part of the strong hand that is feeding the world.”

In this holiday season, we celebrate the strong hand of Orfelina Portillo. We celebrate how her hand touches a household and how that household touches a neighborhood and how that neighborhood touches a community and how the movement compounds until a global crisis is resolved. **We celebrate the power of one.** One person with a passion who finds joy offering a physical and material nourishment that can feed the world.

The prophet Isaiah writes, “if you offer food to the hungry and satisfy the needs of the afflicted, then your light shall rise in the darkness.” It may only be one light, but Orfelina’s light has brightened many a dark day.

“My work is my joy,”  
Orfelina proclaims, “I am  
part of the strong hand  
that is feeding the world.”

# A PLACE TO CALL HOME

---

Although there is considerable debate about its origin, we believe it was the ancient Roman scholar Pliny the Elder who said, "home is where the heart is." Regardless of the source, the sentiment rings true across the timelines of history. As human beings, our heart needs home. Home provides a sense of stability, comfort, security and belonging. Home grounds us in a locale, in an environment, in a culture that shapes our being. Home is critical to the heart.

## But how does one find home when there is no home?

That is a question that **Alejandro** has been trying to answer for months. Since leaving the civil unrest that is rampant in his native country of Cameroon, Alejandro and his family have crossed through more countries than he could ever have imagined. Upon arrival at the dangerous Columbia-Panama border, he enlisted the help of CWS partner, Como Nacido Entre Nosotros. This organization focuses on protecting the rights of migrants and refugees all over the world. Thousands turn to this humanitarian organization for food, shelter, legal advice and safe sanctuary.

"I want what anyone wants," pleaded Alejandro, "a house and comfort for my family, to be at peace, to be able to offer a future for my children. I want a place to call home." Through aid from Como Nacido Entre Nosotros, Alejandro was able to secure bus passes. He and his family went to Costa Rica where they hope to find a place to call home.

As of June of 2023, the United Nations Refugee Agency estimates that more than 108 million people have been displaced from their homeland. That is 108 million people trying to find a new home. It is critical work not just for the physical safety of the world's refugees, but also for their mental and emotional health. Like Alejandro, human beings need a home to provide a sense of stability, comfort, security and belonging. **Home is critical to the heart.**

After a long and grueling journey, the young couple from Nazareth had no place to call home. The city of Bethlehem was so crowded with travelers that the inn was at its capacity. Hoping for someone to step in, Joseph and Mary knocked on the door of the innkeeper's house. "No," he confirmed, "there was not room in the inn, but there was room in the manger." They were home. Mary's heart was so gladdened that she burst forth with a song that we know as The Magnificat. Home is where the heart sings.

*"I want what anyone wants," pleaded Alejandro, "...I want a place to call home."*





# A FORCE OF LIBERATION

---

Fear is born of many circumstances. One might fear losing a job or losing a tooth. One might fear a deadly snake or a crashing thunderstorm. Fear can be triggered by an unexpected diagnosis, an online threat, or a public failure. Fear is intrinsic to the human condition and when it grasps its deadly claws upon our soul, it often requires an outside force to liberate us.

**Alicia Rodriguez** understands this. In early January, after a series of intense storms struck central California, the levee holding back the waters of the Miles Creek burst and the small village of Planada, California was inundated. Nearly half the homes in this poor community of mostly migrant farm workers were destroyed. The lush fields that had been the backbone of the local economy were instantaneously swept away. The authorities issued a strict county wide curfew. Alicia, who is a member of the St. Vincent de Paul Society of Planada, witnessed, firsthand, the fear and confusion of these immigrant citizens.

“At night, they would escape their homes and go through the canal banks to get food and supplies for their loved ones,” she reported. “They had to go in the middle of the night reminding them of their experiences in Mexico.”

Seeking an outside force to liberate this fear, Alicia turned to Church World Service. Hygiene kits, blankets, cleanup buckets and school kits were immediately shipped to Planada and distributed to anyone who needed them. “The children were especially happy with the school kits,” one aid worker noted. “They lost everything, and the school kits were the only thing they had that didn’t get wet. I saw children hugging those kits as they received them. It was just beautiful.”

**I**n this holiday season, we celebrate those outside forces that have the capacity to liberate us from our fears. It may come in the form of a neighbor who provides calm to ease our panic, a faith community that provides asylum to mitigate our angst, a school kit that provides hope to alleviate our despair. **Facing fear alone is overwhelming. Facing fear with others is liberating.**

As Mary reflected on the shocking news of her impending pregnancy, a fear rumbled deep inside her soul. Sensing her anxiety, the angel followed up with the assurance of an outside force. “Do not be afraid, Mary,” the angel announced, “for you have found favor with God.”

**As we face our worldly fears, that is, perhaps, the most liberating force of all.**

“I saw children hugging those kits as they received them. It was just beautiful.”

# SOLAR PANELS EVERYWHERE

According to the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, in the last 100 years, the global temperature has risen slightly more than two degrees. The area of the Arctic covered by sea ice has shrunk by more than 40 percent. The amount of carbon dioxide in the atmosphere has increased by 25 percent in the last half century. Research by the World Health Organization projects that between 2030 and 2050, climate change will cause approximately 250,000 additional deaths per year. Climate change is a statistical and humanistic reality with the impact being most significant in developing countries who tend to have weak infrastructures. As Ban Ki-Moon, former Secretary-General of the United Nations, recently forecasted, "climate change is the single greatest threat to a sustainable future."

Enter into this global calamity, **Oleg Rotari**. He is the current president of Ormax, a Moldovan ecological organization that partners with Church World Service to provide solar panels to vulnerable families. In Moldova, six out of 10 households struggle to afford heating oil and electricity. The recent war in neighboring Ukraine has further taxed the region's power grids causing an even greater increase in shortages and costs. Ormax strives to lessen this burden through the use of solar panels. Oleg says that families whose monthly energy costs were normally \$50, after solar panels were installed, those same costs have now been reduced to as low as \$10.

In addition to the economic impact, the atmospheric impact is significant. "This technology produces energy without having to burn something," Oleg noted. "If one solar panel can have that kind of impact, then imagine a village, imagine an entire country. The impact would be massive if you have solar panels everywhere."

The book of Genesis declares that "the Lord God placed the human in the garden to work it and *care* for it." Unfortunately, instead of caring for the garden, many times we have abused it. We have ignored it. We have corrupted it.

In this season of hope, we celebrate Oleg Rotari for going against those trends and dedicating his career to caring for the garden. **His light is illuminating a sustainable future for all of us.**

“If one solar panel can have that kind of impact, then imagine a village, imagine an entire country. The impact would be massive if you have solar panels everywhere.”





“When I participate in these activities,” he says, “I want to be treated the same way as everyone else. Through this program, I feel that my prayers have been answered.”

# OPPORTUNITIES FOR ALL

The World Health Organization estimates that there are 1.3 billion people with disabilities in the world today. Eighty percent live in underdeveloped countries. Experts report that people with physical and mental disabilities are at a greater risk to suffer from higher unemployment rates, lower educational achievements, increased risk of living in poverty, lack of viable transportation options and a higher death rate. In a world that has diligently legislated for racial, ethnic, gender and age equality, disabled persons are still the largest minority in the world.

**Moh Zain** has spent his entire life trying to overcome those barriers. He was born with albinism and suffers from severe visual impairments. Additionally, an accident in 2015 further exacerbated his struggles when his right hand and leg had to be amputated. Living in a small farming village in Indonesia, Moh Zain has access to very few resources. Yet, he is determined to live as an independent adult. He enrolled in a two-year vocational program and began farming coconuts and corn. In 2021, he and a group of local farmers met with Church World Service and developed an action plan to help the entire community. Since that initial meeting, Moh Zain and CWS have created a disaster risk reduction plan, organized training sessions on manufacturing liquid fertilizer and developed outreach programs to support people with disabilities. Despite his physical limitations, Moh Zain uses his passion and skill to make the world a better place for all. “When I participate in these activities,” he says, “I want to be treated the same way as everyone else. Through this program, I feel that my prayers have been answered.”

**M**oh Zain reminds us that equality means opportunity for all. It challenges us to understand the relationship between the way people function and how they participate in society, and then provide opportunities for everyone to participate in every aspect of life to their fullest abilities and desires. When we fail to provide equity for all persons, it is not the individual who is disabled, it is the society.

The season of Christmas reminds us that Christ was born into this world to establish that equity. In his letter to his friends at the church in Galatia, the apostle Paul proclaims, **“there is no longer Jew or Greek, slave or free, male or female, for all of you are one in Christ Jesus.”** Moh Zain inspires us to add **“able or disabled”** to that list.

# FREE TO STAY

---

According to the World Bank, nearly 10 percent of the world's population subsist on less than \$2.15 per day. That number equates to more than 670 million people living in extreme poverty. It is a barren existence. It strips individuals and families of the basics: food, shelter, electricity and medical care. In response to this unabating struggle, millions are fleeing their homes in search of brighter and more prosperous lands. In his recent message for the World Day of Migrants and Refugees, Pope Francis wrote, "the impossibility of living a dignified and prosperous life in one's native land is forcing millions of persons to leave."

This concept known as "Free to Stay" has been heard by humanitarian leaders all over the world including those at Church World Service. In recent years, CWS has worked in partnerships with local communities to develop and coordinate programs that empower people to stay in their native homeland. One such example is the partnership CWS shares with Comisión de Acción Social Menonita of Honduras. One of the major issues that CASM has identified is the lack of economic opportunities for women in the rural Honduran countryside. Working with other humanitarian agencies (including CWS) as well as the local municipalities, CASM has been able to provide funding for a poultry project. Qualifying women are now supplied with laying hens which provide eggs for the women to sell to local schools. Beyond the economic advantages that allow them the "freedom to stay" in their communities, these women are also investing in the schools and in the nurture of future generations of children. Through CASM and CWS, entire townships now have a brighter future.

It is a poignant irony that the message of Christmas was first delivered to some of the most impoverished of ancient Israel. Because of the migratory nature of their vocation, shepherds rarely enjoyed a "free to stay" existence. They lived off the land herding their sheep to any place fertile pastures could be found. And yet, on the holiest of nights, an angel appeared to these poor, lowly shepherds and proclaimed to them the birth of a Messiah.

**The poor have an important message to bear, if we will hear them.**

“The impossibility of living a dignified and prosperous life in one’s native land is forcing millions of persons to leave.”

