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Changing Lives

Penn Central Conference



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Opportunity International Changed My Life

By Les Loucks

In 2002, after owning a small business for about 25 years and in the process of slowly working into retirement, I read a book called "Rich Christians in an age of hunger" by Ron Sider. The book had a good many statistics, including the fact that we are not as a country in the top 10 in helping hunger in the third world. The book also said that one of the ways to help was through micro-lending.



CELEBRATING 40 YEARS OF OPPORTUNITY
1971-2011
Opportunity International

I had never heard of Micro-lending so I checked the web-site of Opportunity International, the organization the book recommended. Their web-site gave me information about how it worked and suggested going on an insight trip. I was pretty well convinced that this was a terrific idea for helping the poor help themselves! In about a month's time, I met a representative from Opportunity International in the Los Angeles airport on our way to Manila in the Philippines for an insight trip. Manila is one of the most successful areas for micro-lending and Opportunity has seven large operations in the area.

We visited 3 Trust Banks. The first Trust Bank was brand new and the second bank had been in operation for some time, I could see a huge difference in confidence. The second bank representatives would look you in the eye when talking and you could tell that they were very proud of their accomplishments, while the first group would look at the floor while talking.

When I came home, I was truly excited about micro-lending and got Pastor Cathy Sherry and my church Mt. Zion York involved. Pastor Cathy suggested getting the York Association involved and with her help, we did that and have raised enough money to start over 15 trust banks. 20 of the 29 churches in York Association have been part of this endeavor.

My wife, Doris, and I have been making presentations ever since. We have made over 50 presentations, mostly at churches but we have talked to service organizations throughout Central PA as well. The following Penn Central Conference UCC churches not in the York Association have also contributed to Micro-lending: Grace, Hanover, Hummelstown, Zion, Arendtsville and Penbrook, Harrisburg.

Doris and I are on the Board of Governors for Opportunity International. Doris went on an insight trip to Nicaragua and we also went together on a trip to Ghana, Africa. We have both seen Micro-lending working successfully in several parts of the world. Supporting & promoting micro-lending has become a very important and rewarding part of my life and many churches in our conference while knowing that it has helped many hundreds of poor help themselves.

If you would like to hear more about this, I would love to talk with you and/or your church about it. Call or e-mail me at 717 755 2868 or LLoucks@aol.com.

Les Loucks is a member of Mt Zion UCC, York and serves on the Conference Congregational Vitality Team. He served on the UCC Wider Church Ministries Board.

Changing Lives

What are your stories? How is your local church changing lives?

Have you started something in your church that is attracting new people? Is the mission work of your church changing your community? How are you changing lives in your part of Penn Central Conference? We want to hear from you. We'll feature some of these stories in this publication "Changing Lives" or on our website. Contact Brenda Waleff, Minister of Communications with your stories and ideas. bwaleff@pccucc.org or 717-652-1560.

Why Give to OCWM?

By George Martz

There may be numerous things I could say to encourage you to give to **Our Church's Wider Mission**, but let me stimulate your thinking about that question Why give to OCWM? by sharing my reasons for giving. For me this question about giving to OCWM is really two questions. One is the general question: Why give to OCWM? The Other for me at least is a more specific question: Why give to OCWM when the General Synod and the national leadership of my church take stands that I sometimes strongly oppose?

First, I give to Our Church's Wider Mission for the same reason I give offerings to my local congregation, take part in ministry, serve on ministry teams or support charities. I do all of that out of gratitude for all that God in Christ has done for me. All that I am, all that I have and all that I will ever be is a precious gift from God. Because God has done so much for me, I can't turn my back on that great love. I have to share that love with others. One way I can do that so that it extends through out all the world is to give to OCWM. If you are grateful for all that God has done for you, I would encourage you to also give to Our Church's Wider Mission.

My reason for giving to OCWM even when the General Synod and the national leadership of my church take stands that I sometimes strongly oppose comes from two things. The first is a deep belief I hold. that God's love for us is unconditional. St. Paul in his letter to the Church at Rome (8:37-39) tells us that nothing in all creation can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus, our Lord. If that is true – and I know deep within my being that it is – then in the Church – Christ's body – we need to love and care for one another even when we strongly disagree with each other. We can have heated discussions, we can stand diametrically opposed to each other on critical issues of the faith, but we cannot stop loving each other – doing what is right for each other. (In giving to Our Church's Wider Mission, I'm expressing love for the body of Christ.)

The second reason I give to OCWM despite some of the stances the leadership of our church takes is that I've been around long enough (44 years in ministry) to know that Our Church's Wider Mission goes far beyond the controversial stands General Synods or our national leaders may take. Think about our Penn Central Conference. If we didn't support OCWM, the work of pastoral search committees in local congregations would be much more difficult. There wouldn't be Conference leadership to assist the call process or a national data base for ministerial and local church profiles. If we didn't support OCWM there wouldn't be Conference staff to help provide care for pastors and their families. For me those are reasons enough to give to OCWM. But Our Church's Wider Mission does so much more. Through giving to OCWM you and I help minister to people in need in times of disaster, we feed the hungry and send God's love in concrete acts around the world. Giving to OCWM supports military chaplains in all branches of the Armed forces. By giving to OCWM you and I help provide excellent resources for use in local congregations. We also help provide support for retired pastors, their spouses and their widows or widowers in times of emergency needs. For me, these and so many other acts that express God's love go far beyond differences I may have with certain actions of our General Synods or our national leaders.

I hope these personal thoughts about why I give to OCWM will give you food for thought and may encourage you to express God's love to others by giving to Our Church's Wider Mission.

Rev. George Martz was ordained in 1968 and has served 5 congregations in Pennsylvania. Following Retirement in 2005 he has served 3 congregations as an Interim Pastor. George has been a delegate to three General Synods and was the presenter for the "Hearing the Voice of the Churches" resolution at the 1991 General Synod. He is presently a member of the Board of Directors of Penn Central Conference..