

World Help Efforts Thwarted by Islamic Backlash

Relief efforts for tsunami orphans come under fire because of ministry's missionary purpose

By Michael Barrick

FOREST, Va. – World Help, a Christian relief and development agency based here, and a ministry profiled by MinistryWatch.com as a Shining Light of the Gospel (http://www.ministrywatch.com/mw2.1/pdf/SL_WorldHelp.pdf), has come under fire from Islamists and secular news organizations in the United States and elsewhere for planning to rescue 300 orphans of the catastrophe from Banda Aceh, a region of the predominantly Islamic nation of Indonesia, and place them in an orphanage in the nation's capitol of Jakarta.

World Help has abandoned the effort because of the backlash caused by the protests and news reports, as well as a refusal by the Indonesian government to allow World Help to partner with indigenous Christians to relocate the children.

What started the uproar was when World Help, in response to pleas from Christians in Indonesia to come to the aid of the orphans, posted the following message on its website: "Normally, Banda Aceh is closed to foreigners and closed to the Gospel. But, because of this catastrophe, our partners there are earning the right to be heard and providing entrance for the Gospel." It continued, "These children are homeless, destitute, traumatized, orphaned, with nowhere to go, nowhere to sleep and nothing to eat. If we can place them in a Christian children's home, their faith in Christ could become the foothold to reach the Aceh people."

Those statements were enough to outrage Islamists in the region, bring attention of the secular media, and eventually cause World Help to abandon the effort, mostly out of concern for the safety of the Christians in Indonesia, in particular the partners they were working with, whose names were published by secular news sources, hence endangering them. Consequently, though MinistryWatch.com has spoken with Mr. Brewer regarding this incident, he declined an interview beyond the official news release offered by the ministry, saying that he felt further comment by him could seriously endanger indigenous Christians and because continued news coverage is harmful to the Gospel message.

The Website message was posted to encourage donors to give to the project, which is typically the way World Help operates, designating funds for specific efforts. The ministry had raised about \$70,000 of more than \$400,000 hoped for to build an orphanage when it came under fire for its effort. Such postings are not uncommon for the ministry, and donors have come to expect up-to-the-minute information, Mr. Brewer told MinistryWatch.com during an interview last year.

The controversy was complicated by the method by which World Help operates. It works closely with indigenous partners rather than sending out its own missionaries. Relying upon information provided by a partner, in an area where World Help has a limited presence, during a time of chaos and in an area generally closed to outsiders, World Help reacted quickly to an urgent request.

Mr. Brewer explained, “On January 3, we received the following email from our Indonesian partners, ‘We just received news that approximately 300 children under the age of 12 who had become orphans are at the airport in Banda Aceh and Medan waiting to be transported to Jakarta. The rescuers of these children had issued (an) invitation to any organization or family willing to adopt or take care of these children ... (we) are anticipating to help 50 children of the Aceh refugees for the period of 3 (three) years.’

“It was our understanding that this was done with the permission of the Indonesian government and we have raised \$70,000 to provide a home for the first 50 children for one year.”

Promising donors that all efforts will be made to use the funds as intended – to help orphans of the tsunami – Mr. Brewer said, “Once we became aware that the government had refused to let these children be placed in a Christian home, we immediately stopped all fundraising efforts for the remaining 250 Indonesian orphaned children and appeals were removed from our website. World Help did not airlift these children and our partners have never been given custody of the children.”

However, Mr. Brewer said, “We are now in the process of trying to identify other children in other countries in need of a home.”

World Help is unapologetically evangelistic. Its stated mission is to “... fulfill the Great Commission and the Great Commandment through partnering, training, helping and serving, especially in the unreached areas of the world.” Certainly, Indonesia, as the most populous majority Muslim nation in the world, is a nation that fits the ministry’s mission.

It was apparently in attempting to fulfill that mission that created the trouble. A source that has spent considerable time in the area, speaking in confidence to MinistryWatch.com said, “Aceh is a closed province under strict Islamic Shar’ia Law. It is normally closed to foreigners and this is why last week they wanted the U.S. Marines and all relief workers to be out by March. There is also an uprising of insurgents within the province and the governor is in prison. There is tension between the Aceh province and the Indonesian government on an ongoing basis. Because of this, there are thousands of Indonesian troops stationed in the Aceh province regularly.”

Despite his own strong Christian beliefs, and the ministry’s visibly-stated purpose, Mr. Brewer insisted, “We are certainly not trying to proselytize helpless children.”

Yet, he added, “I make no apologies for the fact that World Help is a Christian organization. We have provided humanitarian aid all over the world for the past 13 years

and not once have we done so with ‘strings attached.’ While it is our desire that ‘giving a cup of cold water’ in the name of Jesus would earn us the right to be heard, our primary purpose was to simply provide immediate help to hurting children. What we were attempting to do in Indonesia by providing tsunami orphans with a Christian children’s home is no different than Mother Teresa taking Hindu orphans and placing them in her Christian children’s home in Calcutta, and she received the Nobel Peace Prize for doing so.”

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