

BACKGROUND & SERMON NOTES – GRACE’S STORY

The following notes can be adapted and used in conjunction with the DVD story of Grace from Uganda. These notes can be used for a 5 – 50 minute talk in your local church, bible study or community group during the autumn period.

Key messages for Harvest

- God’s provision of food through improved agriculture techniques.
- Tearfund is equipping the local church to support vulnerable families in their community – this has led to spiritual and material transformation of the people in Ogongora.
- As part of the global church we have an opportunity to use our bounty this Harvest to bless those in need.

Key messages for Christmas

- Women are extremely vulnerable. Grace as a widow needs the support of the local church to cope with the challenges of raising her children.
- Tearfund is equipping the local church to support vulnerable families in their community – this has led to spiritual and material transformation of the people in Ogongora.
- As part of the global church we are called to support vulnerable women and children this Christmas.

Individuals - opportunity to respond

- A little goes a long way in Uganda. A gift of just €22 per month can keep another family together by providing seeds and agricultural training which generates income to send their children to school.

Churches - opportunity to respond

- A gift of €750 can enable a well to be built by the local church. This will provide clean water for all the village preventing children from falling ill and it means women like Grace will no longer have to walk hours every day to collect dirty water from the river.

Connected Church is a way that your church can develop a relationship with a specific church project overseas. You’ll know exactly where your money is going. Your church will receive quarterly updates from that project, giving information about the impact your support has achieved and prayer points to share with your congregation. For more information view the Connected Church film on the Grace DVD or contact Cliona at 01 8783200.

BACKGROUND NOTES

Vulnerable families

Sadly Grace’s story is far from unique. A widow with eight young children, left destitute due to the death of her husband from malaria. Many women like her, lose their husbands to diseases such as malaria or HIV, or through famine and war. It is difficult being a woman in such situations’, it can feel overwhelming and incredibly isolating.

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There are many vulnerable mothers struggling to keep their families together and cope. Often mothers abandon their children to orphanages in the hope that this will provide a better future and a chance for education. In Uganda a study conducted by UNICEF found that 80% of children living in orphanages had a living parent.

Because of Grace's difficult circumstances, her ten-year old son Dan could easily have become a 'forgotten child' - abandoned to an orphanage or left to fend for himself on the streets of Kampala. However because of the churches support Dan is able to attend school and after school he helps his mother on the farm, watering the vegetables and clearing weeds. Dan hopes to become a teacher when he grows up.

By identifying the most vulnerable families, the local church is able to support them both spiritually and materially and prevent them being torn apart through poverty.

Ogongora village – the local church and community

In Ogongora village, in a beautiful part of Eastern Uganda, it is from the church that healing has come to these families. Pastor Joseph has a vision of a church where everyone belongs and the weak and vulnerable people in the community are supported. On Sunday morning, during a lively church service, the reality of that can be seen as young and old sing together and Pastor Joseph greets everyone with a warm hug regardless of their background. But it wasn't always this way.

The village church – led by Pastor Joseph – began in 1980 when four villagers met as church, under a mango tree. The tree still stands, fruiting (symbolically) in what is now the village centre and home of the straw-thatched church building. When Pastor Joseph came to the church, there was, he explains, 'not a good relationship between the church and the community. People did not respect the church and did not see the value of the church so they didn't want it to be here.' But that has all changed as Tearfund has worked with Joseph and the Pentecostal Assemblies of God (PAG) to mobilise the church to serve the community through a process called *Umoja*. As a result the congregation has grown – from 40 in 2005 to well over 300 today.

How Tearfund brings sustainable change in a community - church mobilisation

Tearfund is training churches across Africa through a church mobilisation process called *Umoja*, a Swahili word that translates as 'Togetherness'. As a result churches are reaching out to the most vulnerable in society, helping widows, families and communities respond and positively address the issues they face. The process of *Umoja*, means that families and communities are sustained, made self-reliant and given a sense of responsibility to help themselves.

The stages of *Umoja* includes firstly the local church envisioning - helping local church leaders understand through the Bible that God has called them to serve in their communities. It's about building the confidence of the local church by helping them identify and utilise their own resources, so that they come to believe that change is possible. Secondly, the community is envisioned. The local church brings the whole community together to discuss their situation, their needs and resources.

Thirdly, they dream and plan for action. Once everyone is agreed on what needs to change, the church and community work together in developing a vision for the future and planning how they can bring about this change, using their resources. Once the community start taking action, all sorts

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of advice is provided in helping to ensure that the plans are carried out and positive change happens. The last stage is a review of how the church and the community have worked together to plan and run projects to improve the lives of individuals and the community.

There are many benefits to the local church in using this process; including taking on a positive influence in the community life, building relationships with people outside the church and it identifies and utilises their own resources more effectively and becomes an attractive and growing community. As a result many churches like Pastor Joseph's in Ogongora are seeing a rapid growth as people come to faith after experiencing God's love for them.

Other benefits include- self reliance, self-esteem, sustainable change, improved community relationships. This is how we helped Grace, by teaching her how to cultivate crops according to the time of year and as a result she can now feed her family.

Improving agriculture

In eastern Uganda agriculture is the main form of livelihood. Families like Grace's rely on cultivating a small plot of land for their food and income but often poor agricultural techniques (lack of irrigation and no crop rotation) means that harvest yields are very low. Tearfund's agricultural training and provision of improved seeds and tools means that the harvest yield can be greatly improved and multiple crops can be harvested every year.

Grace recently attended a farming course run by the church. 'Through it, I learnt about the seasonal calendar – that I can plant crops at a certain season for a good year-round harvest,' Grace explains. 'This has enabled me to transform my life. I came back and planted three gardens. Before this I was just worried all the time as I knew we needed food but I didn't know where to start.'

SERMON NOTES

From one widow to another widow let us turn to the book of Ruth in the Old Testament

The Setting and the Problem

Ruth's story occurred during the time of the judges — a period of disobedience, idolatry, and violence. Even in times of crisis and deepest despair, there are those who follow God and through whom God works. No matter how discouraging or antagonistic the world may seem, there are always people who follow God. He will use anyone who is open to him to achieve his purposes.

Let's us turn to the first chapter of Ruth. (Please choose a passage you feel is appropriate for your audience).

Naomi has lost her husband and sons and with Ruth returns to Bethlehem, where there had been a good harvest. She is returning in disgrace, a widow without children, with only her daughter-in-law, by her side, Ruth who was a Moabite.

God's Solution

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Their future looks bleak and hopeless.

In Deuteronomy God had given laws to his people to care for the poor and widow. So Ruth gleans the fields to pick up the remaining wheat, and with that wheat they can grind it and with a little oil, make bread.

Ultimate redemption however comes through Kinsman redeemer, and Boaz. In Israel, land had to stay in the family. The family could mortgage the land to ward off poverty; and the law of Leviticus 25:25 required a kinsman to purchase it back into the family. Redemption among the Israelites included both that of people and of land.

The kinsman, who Boaz meets at the city gate, first says he will purchase the land, but, upon hearing he must also take Ruth as his wife, withdraws his offer. His decision was primarily a financial decision since a child born to Ruth through the union would inherit Elimelech's land, and he would not be reimbursed for the money he paid Naomi. Boaz becomes Ruth and Naomi's kinsman-redeemer.

The Israelites' understanding of redemption is woven into their understanding of and appreciation of the nature of God. God stands by the oppressed and needy. Through his servants, he extends his love and mercy liberating through hope.

God has a deep concern for the welfare of his people, materially, emotionally and spiritually. The redemption theme extends beyond this story through to the New Testament.

We see this clearly in James 1:27. 'Pure and genuine religion in the sight of God the Father means caring for the orphans and widow in their distress and refusing to let the world corrupt you'.

In New Testament there is another emphasis too. It is that the responsibility for widow and orphans belongs to the whole church. And that family is not now a name reserved for blood relatives, but is expanded to include all those who are members of Christ's family.

The New Testament sees every Christian as part of the 'household of faith' with responsibilities for others in the household, irrespective of geography.

That is why Paul did not hesitate to ask those in the church at Corinth to make a regular gifts for those in Jerusalem (1 Corinthians 16:1-3) and why he praised the churches of Macedonia for their sacrificial generosity to those in great need many miles away (2 Corinthians 8:1-12). So the task of taking care of children orphaned and widows belongs firmly to us and the wider church community.

Through your support we are mobilising churches to respond to the needs in their community, helping more women and families like Grace and her eight children.

There has never been a time in history when we have more need to recover this biblical mandate. When there are millions of children orphaned and robbed of their childhood, the Bible is uncompromising in what it expects of us; sacrificial love.

We might not be there ourselves, but through your support, we can partner to mobilise more churches to implement *Umoja* and support the wider family of God.

Can you give €22 a month to help more women like Grace and her family?

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€22 can keep another family together by providing seeds and agricultural training which generates income to send their children to school.

Thank you for your support and for the opportunity to share this morning.

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