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Water with Blessings provides clean water in Honduras

Sharon Abercrombie | Nov. 23, 2011

A Honduras girl decorates her water container. (Jeremy Ruzich)

Imagine being a mom and having to choose between purchasing safe drinking water or enough food for your family. If you opt for adequate meals, everyone -- including yourself -- gets sick from intestinal parasites. This is the plight facing thousands of women living in the impoverished Colonia Fuerzas Unidas neighborhood of Tegucigalpa, Honduras.

But two years ago, the situation began changing for the better when Water With Blessings arrived on the scene. Water With Blessings is an ecumenical program spearheaded by Mt. St. Joseph, Ky., Ursuline Sr. Larraine Lauter, minister of social responsibility at Church of the Epiphany in Louisville, Ky. In 2009, this nun took a group of Kentuckiana volunteers to Honduras to teach women how to install simple water purification systems for themselves and their neighbors.

For almost a decade, Lauter had been volunteering at Divine Mercy, one of eight communities belonging to St. Peter the Apostle parish in Tegucigalpa , working with a team from First United Methodist Church in Frankfort, Ky.

The scarcity of clean water for these desperately poor Hondurans had always been a major worry for team members.

"Nearly 100 percent of patients at our yearly medical clinic had intestinal parasites -- abdominal pain, dysentery, diarrhea, burning eyes, headache and lack of energy," Lautner said.

Finding a simple, inexpensive, low-maintenance water purification technology, free of any energy dependency, however, was the problem they kept running up against,Lauter explained.

Then two years ago, Lauter and Arnie LeMay, a ministry colleague from St. John Chrysostom Church in Louisville, discovered a remarkably simple and inexpensive method of water purification during a Global Mission Health Conference held at Southeast Christian Church.

"We found our answer at a small booth: the Sawyer PointONE filter," Lauter said.

The filters are modeled after the technology built around kidney dialysis. They sift out everything smaller than 1/1000 of a meter -- or 0.1 microns -- including e. coli and the germs responsible for cholera. The filters work on the gravity flow system and cost $50 each. Just one of these filters can provide a family with up to a lifetime of clean water.

PointONE filters are more than 99 percent effective, Lauter said. And they are so small, "we can fill up our suitcases with them when we travel to Tegucegalpa," said Rosemary Smith, an Epiphany volunteer who will make her fifth trip to Honduras in February.

The simple, can-do, inexpensive technology is the water part of the Water With Blessings ministry. The Blessings side? "We didn't want it to be just a give-away program," said Lauter, who envisioned a grand opportunity for one-on-one ministry at the Honduran parish.

The story of Jesus' encounter with the woman at the well became her inspiration.

"Jesus and the woman talked and shared," she said. "I could see this as a way for women to be empowered -- to show acts of love by providing clean water for two of their neighbors for six months and then training other women to do the same."

And that's just what has been happening. Twice a year, volunteers from Epiphany and the other churches who have become colleagues in the Water With Blessings program travel south to conduct trainings. Candidates are chosen by lottery. At the outset, the women must agree not to sell the water.

They hear the story of Jesus and the woman at the well, and how she was told to go and tell the good news. In effect, they become other women at other wells, providing the blessings of clean water to their neighbors.

Religious formation and spirituality are essential to the program.

"Sharing the water is a ministry of living water, of service," Lauter said. "I tell them that having access to clean water is a basic human right."

Following the storytelling, the women are given their water purification kits, which include a filter, adapter, a hose, a filter cleaner and a hanger.

A July 14 article in the Louisville Catholic Record provides a description of the simple technology: "To assemble the unit, a hole is drilled three to four inches from the bottom of a five-gallon bucket. A hose is secured through the hole with a plastic fitting. The hose is then attached to the filter. A clean container is set below the bucket to capture the water as it trickles through the filter. A five gallon bucket takes 12-15 minutes to filter."

Lauter, a former art teacher, has included an aesthetic element to the training days. She provides colored markers and paints so the women can add personalized artistic touches to those utilitarian white buckets.

"Decorating promotes ownership, and gives them a way to bring some beauty into their lives," she said. "Most of the women have nothing in their homes."

To date, more than 700 families now have the blessing of clean, living water. That blessing is visible in the faces of the people and their children, said Rosemary Smith. It is these little ones who especially touch Smith's heart.

"When we go back, we can see that the kids are healthier," she said. "Their little faces used to be gray and ashen. Now they are pink and healthy and they are smiling."

And this, from a woman named Suyapa, one of the first of 10 women who were trained two years ago: Suyapa says she can now buy more food because she has "a whole eight dollars a month that I don't have to spend on water to drink. I can save for the children's uniforms so they can go to school. This water filter doesn't just help us obtain clean water. It helps us to improve our lives in many ways."

Board members for Water with Blessings are currently working to expand the program. They hope to bring it to Haiti, Jamaica and possibly India by forming partnerships with other churches.

"There are people in parishes who will never go on a mission trip, but they could take up a collection to buy

these water filters," Lauter said. For further information, email her at Larraine@churchofepiphany.com

Meanwhile, Water with Blessings is only one of Epiphany's outreach efforts to Divine Mercy. Volunteers who go along on the trips provide after school child enrichment in art and music, assist in children's checkups, if there is a doctor or nurse-practitioner on the team, and do construction work on the parish community center. Back home in Kentucky, they raise money for children's scholarships.

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