

## Character – The Ultimate Sustainable Development

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I am not a scholar. Instead I have spent my life and career in the difficult places, the dirty places, the miserable places of the earth that spring up and are tacked together when the law is brutally broken, religion has been perverted, and tolerance has shattered.

My experiences over many years have convinced me that sustainable development isn't only transactional. The most lasting development doesn't get created through projects or by independent perpetuation. Lasting human development is born at the intersection of law, religious faith, and tolerance. And the basic building block of this development is individual character. I define character simply as the idea that individuals are just as worried about working for another person's safety, happiness, and excellence as they are worried about their own. In other words, the basic Golden Rule that exists in various forms in all faith traditions.

I have just come yesterday from being in 7 different camps in Iraq – Syrians, Yezidis, IDPs from Mosul and Sinjar. The worst horrors are not that they have lost their homes or livelihoods or health or family members -- although those are suffocating and heart breaking. The very worst of what has happened is that they have been robbed of choices, stripped of the opportunity to decide; they have lost the ability to protect and to provide, or to trust a neighbor. Barbarism degrades character in both the perpetrator and the victim. When the violence is in the false name of religion, it robs the people of their spiritual well-springs as well. What can possibly build character back up? Is it religion? No. But it is tolerant religion supported by law. Tolerant religion focuses on small simple virtues that bind us to one another, even as we believe differently. So I come to my point:

- The real long-term objective of aid and intervention is to **build character**. At its core sustainable development is or should be about rescuing the seed of what is finest down deep inside each individual and giving it an opportunity to grow and flower. If we focus simply on the infrastructure of food, sanitation, security, and shelter we miss the heart of the matter. Small experiences with service, tolerance, forgiveness, listening, defending others – these things nurture character. Uncovering and protecting the inner

richness of each individual soul is our reason for being. Stronger character is the ultimate “sustainability.”

Can that really be true?

Ezra Taft Benson was the U.S. Secretary of Agriculture during the Eisenhower administration and also a very fine Mormon theologian and president of the church. He said, using the Christian tradition as his reference:

- [God] works from the inside out. The world works from the outside in. The world would take people out of the slums. Christ would take the slums out of people, and then they would take themselves out of the slums. The world would mold men by changing their environment. Christ changes men, who then change their environment. The world would shape human behavior, but Christ can change human nature.”<sup>1</sup>

Let me give an additional example: HH Sheikh Nahyan bin Mubarak Al Nahyan, Minister of Culture, Youth and Community Development in the United Arab Emirates held meetings last year in preparation for sending the UAE delegates to this same interfaith summit in Brisbane, Australia. He told the delegates:

- Our vision is a global vision.... We want our global community to prosper, not perish. Our leadership knows its true wealth and accepts the obligation to respect and understand the many different religious beliefs of the people living in our country.<sup>2</sup>

He selected among others to represent the UAE in Brisbane Surender Kandhari and Robert Bateman. Surender represented the second largest Sikh temple in the world, and Robert was the leader of a collection of LDS congregations in the United Arab Emirates.

**Power Point Begins**

*Saturday, 7 November 2015:* Assemble 8,500 personal hygiene kits at the UNHCR warehouse in Dubai International Humanitarian City (IHC). Surender Kandhari, leader of Sikh Temple addressed the group at the beginning of the project.

*Friday, 13 November 2015:* Distribute assembled kits, along with food supplies donated by the Sikh Temple, to laborers gathered at the Guru Nanak Darbar Sikh Temple in Dubai. This is the week celebrating Diwali Festival of Lights.

**The Guru Nanak Darbar Sikh Temple**

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<sup>1</sup> Ezra Taft Benson, *Born of God*, Ensign magazine, November 1985

<sup>2</sup> Sheikh Nahyan Bin Mubarak Al Nahyan, Minister of Culture, Youth and Community Development, United Arab Emirates, *Bridges of Communication Vital*, UAE Interact, April 22, 2014

Surender Kandhari and Bubbles Kandhari run the Dubai Guru Nanak Darbar Sikh Temple. As is the generous Sikh tradition, they believe that no one should go hungry. With a large commercial kitchen and staff on site, they feed 1,000 people daily and 10,000 on Fridays (the Holy Day in this predominantly Muslim country). For many construction and other laborers Friday is the only day off; most live in simple accommodations and make a modest wage. In this beautiful structure, workers can feel peace and enjoy a delicious meal.

### **Bridges of Friendship**

The friendship between the Sikh community of the Guru Nanak Darbar Sikh Temple of Dubai and members of the Abu Dhabi Stake of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints began when Robert E. Bateman, Abu Dhabi Stake President, and Surender Kandhari, head of the Guru Nanak Darbar Sikh temple were invited by H.H. Sheikh Nahyan bin Mubarak Al Nahyan, United Arab Emirates Minister of Culture, Youth and Community Development, to participate in the 2014 G20 Interfaith Summit in Brisbane, Australia. Part of a delegation of religious leaders from the UAE, they participated in a panel discussion about religious freedom. H.H. Sheikh Nahyan addressed the Summit by video broadcast about the UAE's example to countries in the region in welcoming people of different faiths to worship freely, and expressed his hope for an increase in understanding and dialog between people of all faiths.

On the flight home from the conference, Robert Bateman and Surender Kandhari struck up a conversation. After a conference of "talking," these two men of action determined to "do" something. One of the results of that conversation is the Interfaith Humanitarian Service Project we just completed with the Sikh community November 7th and 13<sup>th</sup>, 2015.

Robert Bateman and wife, Candace Bateman recently joined Surender and Bubbles Kandhari and others at the Sikh Temple for a World Peace Day celebration on September 20. President Bateman was invited by Mr. Kandhari to address the gathering. He shared the idea from the Book of Mormon that when we are in the service of our fellow beings, we are only in the service of our God.

President Robert Bateman passed away suddenly on 11 October 2015. We were all deeply saddened at this news. In a generous offer of interfaith unity and support, Mr. Kandhari invited leaders and members of the Church to the Sikh Temple for a special Antim Ardas (Final Prayer) in loving memory of President Bateman, on Saturday 17 October. Thirty members of the church attended.

This extensive background is to convey the depth of feelings between the members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints and the Dubai Guru Nanak Darbar Sikh Temple Sikh community, particularly Mr. and Mrs. Kandhari. We were honored to serve side by side with our Sikh friends in providing the laborers with needed personal supplies during the celebration of Diwali Festival of Lights.

We do not pretend that this project was to really to aid the laborers who attended the Sikh temple festival. They will eat up the rice and lentils and use the toiletry items until they are gone. This project at its heart was about removing the slums and prejudices from our own hearts. About getting to

know new friends and a new faith, making relationships that can build for the future, nurturing empathy for people who may be in difficult circumstances far away from their homes or families.

I've chosen this example because it is so ordinary, so pedestrian. It is good to be in the conference today. We will discuss and be challenged by each other's ideas and conversations, but if we fail to take the next assignment that carries into next week and choose to do something ourselves, personally, to further the thoughts of the conference – to act in the same spirit of Surrender and Robert -- it is all in vain.

I extend the challenge and look forward to meeting all you friends in another year to hear your stories of how you have turned your hand to building character in the world. Do these acts in service of what we are devoted to – nurturing the noble character that resides is born in each of us in order to honor the rule of good law, protect the free practice of religion, and defend tolerance and peace for others with whom we do not agree. I believe building character is the only sustainable development on the earth. Thank you.