

The script for a DVD on the Millennium Development Goals that ended up being the keynote address of the 49th Annual Convention of the Diocese of Northwest Texas
by the Rev. Rich Nelson

Did you know that every 3 seconds a person somewhere in the world dies from completely preventable causes. (snap) This one from disease. (snap) This one from malnutrition. (snap) This one from lack of medicine. (snap) And this one (snap) . . . and this one (snap) . . . and this one (snap) . . .

There are a few moments in every person's life when they encounter a person, an idea, or a dream that completely changes the way they see the world. This is the story of one of those encounters in my life. It's the true story of how I came to love some brothers and sisters I've never met. It's the story of how I came to share in an ancient and common dream the human race is just now bringing into reality. It's the story of how you and I and the other 6.3 billion people in the world are bound in a web of common destiny. It's the story of me coming to understand what it means to love my neighbor.

My name is Rich Nelson and I'm an Episcopal priest. But that's not really what this story is about because what happened to me didn't happen because I'm a priest. What happened to me can and does happen to many other people regardless of whether they're Episcopalian or Baptist or Catholic or U.C.C. or Lutheran or of no denomination at all. What this story is really about, then, is simply my walk of faith as a Christian and how it led me someplace I never imagined I'd go.

I graduated from seminary in 2004 and set out to begin my ordained ministry. I wound up in a wonderful Episcopal parish and a wonderful Episcopal school full of wonderful Episcopal (and non-Episcopal) people. I quickly came to love these people and set out to do all the things I thought a priest was supposed to do. I tried to write and preach good sermons. I tried to teach other people about Jesus and our faith. I tried to care for people in times of tragedy. I tried to learn to smile, even though I'm a bit of a quiet, melancholy sort of a guy.

I found that I was pretty good at all these things. Plus, I found myself smack dab in the middle of a pretty good life living the American dream with a

wonderful wife, a child, a cat, a dog, a fish, two cars, a house with a mortgage and eventually a beta fish and an ant farm.

But on the other hand, the whole deal actually left me a bit confused. “Ok, I’m a priest, now what?,” I remember thinking to myself. Is this weekly routine all I’m called to for the rest of my life? Do you have a life like that? Same thing, day after day, week after week, year after year? What happened to the adventure, I wondered? Jesus came to change the world for the better. Am I not supposed to do the same? Jesus dreamed big, big dreams. What were my big dreams? Is this really all there is God?

Then I found out, you never ask God that question. Because God answers it.

As a Christian I’m supposed to read the Bible regularly. As a priest, I have to. I started reading some pretty disturbing things in the Bible that didn’t seem to have a whole lot to do with the perfect little life I was living. For starters, the bible references the struggle of the poor over 2,000 times. It is clearly one of God’s main concerns. One passage I read said “If anyone has material possessions and sees his brother in need but has no pity on him, how can the love of God be in him?” I thought about the few times I’d driven on the poor side of town and realized my job never took me over there much. Sure I gave money like I’m supposed to, but it was going to the church I worked at so mostly what I was doing was supporting my own salary. It had been a while since I thought much about orphans or widows or really any other poor or disempowered person. Then I thought about the Beatitudes, the greatest sermon that Jesus ever preached. It begins, “Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God. Blessed are you who are hungry now, for you will be filled. Blessed are you who weep now, for you will laugh.” Something was feeling really wrong.

It got me to thinking about just how poor or how rich I am. If you include my salary, all my pension and health benefits, my business expenses, my housing costs, my social security, etc. I make around \$58,000 a year. That’s not bad, but I also wouldn’t say I’m exactly rolling in the dough. Then I came across a website called The Global Rich List (www.globalrichlist.com). This site put things in perspective. I typed in \$58,000 to find that I’m the 55,923,010th richest person in the world. That seems pretty far down the list until you realize all the other people that are behind you. There are roughly 6,144,076,990 people in the world who make less money than I do. To put that in perspective, if 100 people represented

the entire world's population, I'm the #1 person at the top of the line. I'm in the top 1% of the richest people in the world. If you make anything more than \$25,000 a year, you can now boast that you are in the top 10% of the richest people in the world. *"Listen, my dear brothers: Has not God chosen those who are poor in the eyes of the world to be rich in faith and to inherit the kingdom he promised those who love him?" James 2:5*

All of the sudden, being rich didn't seem like such a good thing after all. Especially since I wasn't helping anyone who was poor in any real way. Also especially since it's my call from God to follow as closely as I can to the footsteps of Jesus Christ - a poor, itinerant preacher and healer. Something had to change or my ministry would devolve into hypocrisy.

If one of God's chief concerns is justice for the poor, it seems like we, as Christians, ought to have a primary goal of eradicating extreme poverty and hunger. *I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me. Matthew 25:35* A good place to start would be to set an initial goal to reduce by half the proportion of people living on less than a dollar a day and reduce by half the proportion of people who suffer from hunger. Let's make that Goal #1 – Eradicate extreme poverty and hunger.

My oldest son has gone to school since he was 2 years old and I expect he'll be in school until he graduates from college. When Jesus said, "Love your neighbor as you love yourself," I wonder if he also meant "Love your neighbor's kids as much as you love your own." Seems like we, as Christians, ought to have as a second goal to ensure that all children complete a full course of primary education. Let's call that Goal #2 – Achieve universal primary education.

The next logical step is to ensure that boys and girls are treated equally and have the same educational opportunities. And that wonderful wife I mentioned, she has her Masters degree, just like I do. In many of the poorest countries, women are never able to receive the same education as men.

"There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus." Galatians 3:28 So perhaps we, as Christians, ought to eliminate gender disparity in primary and secondary education. Let's call that Goal #3 – Promote gender equality and empower women.

My wife gave birth to our first son 8 years ago. She gave birth to our second son just a few months ago. Our oldest son was born premature and very ill

and spent the beginning of his life in a neonatal intensive care unit. He battled pneumonia off and on until he was 5 years old. Did you know that every year almost 11 million children in developing countries die before they reach age 5 (World Bank)? If my family wasn't lucky enough to live in a rich country, my son would likely have been one who didn't make it. Other children born the same day as he was died from the same thing he survived. That's not fair. (*"For I am about to create new heavens and a new earth; the former things shall not be remembered or come to mind. . . .no more shall the sound of weeping be heard in it or the cry of distress. No more shall there be in it an infant that lives but a few days, or an old person who does not live out a lifetime."* Isaiah 65:17-20) Seems like we, as Christians, ought to have as a goal to drastically reduce the mortality rate among children under 5. Let's call that Goal #4 – Reduce the Child Mortality Rate.

With the first delivery, the complications were with our baby. With the second pregnancy, the baby did just great. Instead, it was my wife who had the complications. My wife labored for hours and hours with no progress towards birth. Witnessing her labor that day settled in my mind once and for all that women truly are the greater sex. I would've died from the first hour of labor. My wife didn't die. She ended up having a cesarean and came through just fine. In the rich world only 1 in 7,300 women die during childbirth. In Africa however, 1 in every 26 women die in childbirth. Somewhere in the world the same day my child was born, another man lost his wife from the same complications we faced. But we had the medical care we needed. They didn't so they died. That's not right. (*"Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. And now, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus. He will be great . . ."* Luke 1:30b-32a) Seems like we, as Christians, ought to have a goal to drastically reduce the maternal mortality ratio. Let's call that Goal #5 – Improve maternal health.

Of those women and children who do survive labor in the third world, scores end up dying, along with scores more of men, from preventable, treatable and in some cases even curable diseases. Mosquitoes, for some reason, like to pester my son. We tell him it's because he's so sweet. It itches him, but he'll never die of a mosquito bite. In Africa, children die every day from malaria they contracted from mosquitoes, or HIV they contracted from a parent, or a parasite in their glass of water. That's not right. (*I needed clothes and you clothed me, I was sick and you cared for me, I was in prison and you came to visit me. Matthew 25:36*) We, as Christians, ought to have

a goal to halt and begin to reverse the spread of preventable, treatable and curable diseases. Let's call that Goal #6 – Combat HIV/AIDS, malaria, and other major diseases.

And while we're at it, let's do something to ensure that their drinking water is reliable and safe for consumption so thousands of people don't die needlessly each year. Americans spend \$10billion a year on bottled water alone. It would only cost an additional \$2billion a year to provide safe drinking water to every person in the world. That's not right. (*"The poor and needy search for water, but there is none; their tongues are parched with thirst. But I the Lord will answer them; I, the God of Israel, will not forsake them. I will make rivers flow on barren heights, and springs within the valleys. I will turn the desert into pools of waters, and the parched ground into springs..." Isaiah 41:17-18*) Seems like we, as Christians, ought to have a goal that environmental resources, especially water, are protected and accessible for all people. Let's call that Goal #7 – ensure environmental sustainability.

We should do all of these things because we are commanded by God to do them again and again throughout the Bible. We should do all of these things simply because they are the right thing to do. But above all, we should care for them because they are us. When you come right down to it, we are all humans, struggling to survive, to put food on our tables, to provide a good future for our children, to get adequate medical care for our families, to drink and not thirst. My family thrives when others cannot. My family lives when others might have died. Not because we are better or more worthy in any way, but simply because we were lucky enough to be born rich in a rich land. If I truly believe I am nothing but a child of God, equally beloved by God as every other child of God, then I must acknowledge that the great commandment isn't just nice moral advice. It speaks to the very heart of who I am in relation to God and my neighbors, which in this global age means everyone. Jesus said again and again that we are loved by God and the best way to return that love to God is to love other people as the true children of God, *images* of God they are. To not do so is to deny who you are and whose you are. That should be Goal #8 – Develop a global partnership for development.

This revelation changed my life. It changed how I think about God. It changed how I think about other people. It changed how I think of myself as a disciple of Jesus Christ. These 8 goals aren't just some social agenda.

They're gospel imperatives. They're also the 8 Millennium Development Goals or MDGs for short. In the year 2000, the United States joined with every other member nation of the United Nations and committed to completing all of these goals by the year 2015. That every nation was able to agree on anything was a miracle in and of itself. Now the next miracle, I believe is the millions and millions of people around the world just like you and me who have caught on to this vision of ending extreme poverty in our generation. And of course the best miracle is found in the millions of people whose lives are being saved, improved and empowered through this new global effort.

Now is our time to act. I believe Christ has a calling for us at this unique and critical moment in history. It is time for the Church to live more deeply into its calling to "feed my sheep." What happens to a church when we decide to set aside all those arguments and issues that threaten to divide us one from another and instead recommit to working together to do the things Christ commanded us to do? As best I can read in the gospels, that means serving others as Christ served us, especially the poor and disempowered.

It is clear that Christ's vision of God's kingdom was that of a banquet where every person ate and was full. Never before in the history of the world has that reality been such a distinct possibility. We *can* end extreme poverty in this generation. As disciples of Christ we must. We cannot let this moment pass us by.

I invite you to spend some time today thinking and praying about how God is calling you to extend your love to your neighbors in need. Especially this one (snap) . . . and this one (snap) . . . and this one (snap) . . .

Statistics and data courtesy of the World Bank, the Millennium Campaign, the ONE Campaign and Standage, Tom. "Bad to the Last Drop." *The New York Times*. August 1, 2005. www.nytimes.com

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