

MERIDIAN MAGAZINE

The Joseph Smith Tsunami Rescue Brigade of 2005

By Professor Warner Woodworth, BYU

Author's note: As I have done throughout 2005 -- in 26 speeches at Harvard, Wharton Business School, Stanford, BYU as well as LDS firesides and seminars in Panama -- this article is dedicated to the hundreds of thousands who lost their lives in the Asian tsunami, and the millions more who survived, but now struggle in poverty. May we never forget.

Ever dream about wanting to change the world? Have you sometimes felt powerless as you witness massive human suffering around the world? At times, have tears filled your eyes as your television shows children's bodies on the nightly news?

Then this story is for you. It's a tale of taking action, reducing human suffering, and lifting the poor. Let me say at the outset that throughout 2005, I have enjoyed the many events held to commemorate the 200th Anniversary of Joseph Smith's birth in 1805. I've participated in conferences and seminars on his history, his teachings, and his eternal doctrines. I've heard choirs sing, orchestras play beautiful music, and even attended a new opera. Many LDS groups held dance and/or musical programs. Others performed dramatic plays, and the media coverage has been extensive.



Volunteers look on and cover their ears as fireworks precede the launching of the first boat rebuilt after the tsunami.

But the most meaningful tribute to the Prophet Joseph's life for me this year did not occur in a scholarly seminar, or a large center for the performing arts. Rather, it occurred in a remote jungle area, far from Utah and church headquarters, where most people had never heard of Joseph Smith or his religion.

This article is the story of a humble little band of Latter-day Saints who actually dared to practice what Joseph taught during this year of many celebrations. But it was not done for big crowds or public relations purposes. Rather, it was done quietly, devotedly, as an act of personal and collective consecration.

This is the true saga of how a group of dedicated BYU students and friends started out a new semester and ended up changing the world. We began assuming it would be simply another course on theoretical concepts and abstract tools, but ended up as an experience of individual transformation.



Wave of Hope volunteers crafting the trade of brick laying at Tap Tawan Village.

The tragic devastation of the December 26, 2004, Asian tsunami shocked people around the world. Ten days later, I stood in front of my new class at the Marriott School, and began by quoting the words of the Prophet Joseph. I knew them by heart since they had become a kind of anthem that had guided my life for decades. He boldly declared his ideal of consecration and stewardship thus: "A man (or woman) filled with the love of God is not content with blessing his family alone, but ranges through the whole world, anxious to bless the whole human race." (Roberts, 1961, p. 227)

The Challenge

As one whose role is to "profess" something, I challenged the group to literally consider how we might try and practice the Prophet's call to action in our own lives, two centuries after his birth. I felt this simple sentence broadens our purpose on earth and moves us beyond the limited confines of the typical Mormon family as just the small nucleus around us. Instead, Joseph enlarges our vista. His words are a call to action. Some of us began to informally refer to our plans as the "Joseph Smith Tsunami Rescue Brigade," a tribute to his anniversary.

With that simple beginning, I challenged the class to consider how we might design a project that could lift a few of the tsunami's survivors: What could be done? How might we proceed? Does college, and more particularly a business school, have any use in alleviating human pain and pathos?



Wave volunteers assist a villager in the construction of his house at Bang Sak.

Taking the Prophet's words and applying them in our day as a pragmatic memorial to him, we began to design a humanitarian strategy to empower the poor who survived the terrible tsunami. We formed a project under the umbrella of a not-for-profit foundation called Empowering Nations. It grew out of a similar BYU course taught several years earlier. For this new effort, one student suggested we call our new project "Wave of Hope," a sharp contrast to the tsunami's huge waves of destruction, death, and hopelessness. So this is our story — one of faith, sacrifice, and genuine consecration.

In the paragraphs below, I seek to do four things: 1) provide an overview of the 12/26 Asian disaster and give it a comparative context; 2) draw on the humanitarian legacy of Mormonism; 3) articulate how this effort mobilized many LDS volunteers; and 4) report a few significant impacts.

The Asian Crisis

The need for global aid was unprecedented in history as the 9.0 earthquake and 500 mile-an-hour powerful tsunami waves of up to 60 feet high wreaked havoc of epic proportions. Eleven countries throughout the Indian Ocean were affected, from Indonesia to Africa. Official death rates range from 280,000 on up, but the unofficial toll may be much higher. For example, in Thailand — where we decided to help — government estimates were that 8,500 were killed, but such a number does not include some ten thousand missing aliens, mostly Burmese laborers who, because of desperate conditions in their own country, had been doing menial jobs in the tourist area of Khao Lak, Thailand. The same occurred elsewhere as well.



Wave of Hope volunteers teaching english at Bang Sak School.

Thus, it may be assumed, that the region's total death toll was closer to half a million people. Hundreds of aftershocks since 12/26 continued to keep people on edge throughout 2005, including an 8.7 quake that killed hundreds more on March 29, 2005.

With millions more severely injured, without houses, jobs, schools or medical care, the overall need was almost unfathomable. Experts estimated that some places like Sumatra and Sri Lanka were set back decades. Towns and villages were completely demolished, industries destroyed, education systems decimated, and transportation in shambles. Infrastructure like roads, bridges and rail lines were obliterated. Wonderful beaches and upscale tourist amenities disappeared. Tens of thousands of families lost their loved ones. The so called "survivors" lacked food, water, shelter and security.

Government relief from nations around the earth was quick and helpful. Billions of dollars were promised, and groups like the Red Cross and United Nations were soon on the scene. The LDS Church joined the effort, partnering with a Muslim relief agency. However, many of the large, multilateral organizations withdrew from damaged areas after a few months. Much of the promised cash from world governments has still not yet materialized, and some of it never will.



It's all fun and games at Laem Pom Village as the women are busy shoveling sand for foundations.

Hence, the time seemed ripe for us as individual Latter-day Saint volunteers to go and serve. The tough and complex work of jump-starting the Thai economy and rebuilding destroyed villages was imperative. We were not a big, rich nongovernmental organization (NGO), with millions of dollars and donors. We were just a small group of college volunteers who possessed the moral energy and some new skills to make an impact. We couldn't do everything, but we felt we could each do something.

As we saw it, many Americans seemed stunned by the horrendous devastation of the tsunami. Some wrote out checks to provide emergency aid, as did people from various other nations. Then Hurricane Katrina and other storms smacked into the U.S. itself, and media attention shifted to those calamities.

Today the press has largely turned from agony and death to "important" new events such as the Grammy Awards and upcoming college football bowl games. Meanwhile, tsunami orphans suffer. Broken-down families try to eke out an existence as refugees in tent camps. Day-to-day survival has become the norm for millions of individuals.



The local schoolchildren surround the bookshelves, tables and benches made and delivered by the Thaikea project.

A Context for Comparison

To put the tsunami disaster in context, let's reflect on the terrible toll 9/11 exacted in New York by terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center. It was truly a reprehensible event. Yet in the tsunami, many Asian coastal villages lost over 50 percent of their population and infrastructure. New York City lost under 3,000 people, much less than one percent, and was set back only for a few months after the airliner attacks.

This is not to minimize the tragedy of 9/11, but to simply show the scale of how it contrasts with the tsunami. After 12/26, the region of Banda Aceh, Indonesia was turned into a massive junkyard of twisted steel and cement, uprooted yards, rubble from tons of cars, and thousands of human corpses strewn over the area, becoming a large breeding ground for terrible diseases such as dengue, malaria and other infections.

The waves rushed to engulf everything in their path, sucking up bodies and violently smashing debris with massive waves three yards high, going as far as six miles inland. That would be equivalent to destroying Manhattan from the tip of the island at South Street, taking down everything in its path clear up to 85th Street. Gone would be the Statue of Liberty, Wall Street, buildings such as the Empire State, and Chrysler, all the big retail giants, Greenwich Village, Broadway and its theater district, the train stations, and half of Central Park.

The percentage of those killed in the destruction of the Indonesian city of Banda Aceh was 60 percent, according to UNICEF officials. Its equivalent, if applied to New York City, would total a staggering 4.8 million people. In Sri Lanka, the tsunami death toll was 24,000, with another 7,000 missing. More than 1.5 million people in that country alone were forced to flee their neighborhoods, including 880,000 who no longer have houses at all.

Again, the comparison between these two tragic sagas is not to diminish the extent of 9/11. But the contrasts suggest how much worse the New York attacks would have been if the results were proportionally equivalent to the shockwaves in the Indian Ocean. I believe both 9/11 and 12/26 will both go down in the history books as epic calamities on a huge scale.

So Wave of Hope was launched as a response by a few individuals to see how much we could do. In our early labors, some non-LDS we sought input from considered us as a kind of "Students-Without-Borders"

project growing out of a college course. It was Organizational Behavior 490: "Becoming a Global Change Agent/Social Entrepreneur."

The class consisted of 33 registered students. Approximately half of them were undergraduates from sociology, international development, pre-med, business, the sciences and/or humanities. The other half were masters degree seekers: MPA, MBA, accounting, law, education, social work, and so forth.

In addition, about a dozen other students from across campus sat in on the class. They either couldn't carry the extra credit hours because their course load was too heavy, or they only learned about the course after the add deadline had passed. One person even drove an hour from Salt Lake City each session to participate. But they all joined in, read the required scholarly material, took the tests, and participated on a service-learning team. No one received credit as a grade for their commitment to join Wave of Hope and go to Thailand. However, individuals were graded according to their rigorous academic performance: heavy reading, quizzes and tests, papers on self-reliance, social entrepreneurship, project design and/or implementation, OB team skills and planning strategies, and in-class presentations.

In addition, more than a thousand hours of collective volunteer group project work occurred outside of regular class periods. Students also attended four other Wave of Hope meetings during certain evenings: a devotional experience with guest speakers from Thailand, a new volunteer orientation and training session, a Khao Lak logistics briefing session, and a final send-off meeting at the end of April.

The Legacy of Mormon Humanitarian Outreach

As Latter-day Saints, we have a rich heritage of responding to aid those in need. In the past couple of decades, some of us have been blessed to help develop such programs as the Church's Humanitarian Services in the 1980s, which grew out of the suffering of millions of Ethiopians in East Africa. In the late 1990s, Latter-day Saint Charities was formed as an NGO to assist impoverished families around the globe. In 2000, the Perpetual Education Fund became official, thereby enabling college-age church members in the Third World to begin a better life.

In addition, private and family-initiated non-profit projects have likewise grown. From only a couple of Mormon-based NGOs started in the 1980s, today there are at least 200 such social enterprises.

However, the story of LDS humanitarianism goes back over a century and a half. Do you recall hearing of the pioneer travelers buried in the Wyoming blizzards of the 1850s? I want to draw a parallel between the long-ago suffering and death they experienced, and the plight of today's tsunami victims in Asia.

The tragedy of both the Martin and Willie handcart companies — trapped by fierce, early winter storms in the 1850s — is one of the most painful episodes in Mormon history. They were unexpectedly caught in early winter storms, deep snow, and subsequent exhaustion. With hundreds of miles yet to travel, their meager supplies dwindled rapidly. Provisions that had been expected along the way were nonexistent, and desperation settled in. The remaining amount of daily flour to be consumed was cut from a pound per person to a mere three-quarters of a pound, and then to only ten ounces.

As our pioneer predecessors faced the challenge of struggling up and over the Rocky Mountains in deep snow, severe concerns increasingly weighted them down as they attempted to survive. Bitter cold seeped through their few layers of worn-out clothing. Wet items became harder to dry, even at night around a campfire. Overexertion, fatigue, and gnawing hunger began to take their deadly toll.

First the elderly and some of the infirm began dying — along the trail or during the freezing night. Then the young, and even some of the strong, started to die. Fathers who had pulled their little ones through snow drifts one day would die during the evening while their children slept. Family members would go to

bed huddling together in a tent, and have to awake in the morning and check to see who had died during the night.

Snow, mud, frostbite, starvation and bleeding feet — all were evidence of the tragic demise of many souls. While some succumbed to the ravages of the early ferocious Wyoming winter, survivors lacked the strength to even bury the deceased. Instead, the two, five, or thirteen bodies of the dead during a single night would simply be piled together and covered with snow to await the resurrection. I believe the graphic story of their rescue has implications for those of us today who have resources to help suffering people across the globe in 2005.

As the handcart pioneers were being brutalized by these extreme conditions, word of their imminent demise reached Salt Lake City. At the General Conference on October 5, 1856, Brigham Young stood before thousands in the tabernacle and announced:

Many of our brethren and sisters are on the plains with handcarts, and probably many are now seven hundred miles from this place, and they must be brought here, we must send assistance to them...

I shall call upon the Bishops of this day. I shall not wait until tomorrow, nor until the next day, for 60 good mule teams and 12 or 15 wagons. I do not want to send oxen. I want good horses and mules. They are in this Territory, and we must have them. Also 12 tons of flour and 40 good teamsters, besides those that drive the teams....

First, 40 good young men who know how to drive teams, to take charge of the teams that are now managed by men, women and children who know nothing about driving them. Second, 60 or 65 good spans of mules, or horses, with harness, whipple trees, neck-yokes, stretchers, lead chains, &c. And thirdly, 24 thousand pounds of flour, which we have on hand....

I will tell you all that your faith, religion, and profession of religion, will never save one soul of you in the Celestial Kingdom of our God, unless you carry out just such principles as I am now teaching you. *Go and bring in those people now on the plains.* And attend strictly to those things which we call temporal, or temporal duties. Otherwise, your faith will be in vain. The preaching you have heard will be in vain to you, and you will sink to *Hell*, unless you attend to the things we tell you.

Brigham the Prophet then counseled church members about how to treat the survivors who would be rescued and brought into the Salt Lake Valley:

I want to have them distributed in the city among the families that have good and comfortable houses; and I wish all the sisters now before me, and all who know how and can, to nurse and wait upon the new comers and prudently administer medicine and food to them. To speak upon these things is a part of my religion, for it pertains to taking care of the Saints...

The afternoon meeting will be omitted, for I wish the sisters to go home and prepare to give those who have just arrived a mouthful of something to eat, and to wash them and nurse them up. You know that I would give more for a dish of pudding and milk, or a baked potato and salt, were I in the situation of those persons who have just come in, than I would for all your prayers, though you were to stay here all the afternoon and pray. Prayer is good, but when baked potatoes and pudding and milk are needed, prayer will not supply their place on this occasion; give every duty its proper time and place...

Some you will find with their feet frozen to their ankles; some are frozen to their knees and some have their hands frosted... We want you to receive them as your own children, and to have the same feeling for them. We are their temporal saviors, for we have saved them from death (Hafen and Hafen, 1960, pp. 120-21, 139).

Of this poignant story of poverty-stricken pioneer suffering, death, and survival, James E. Faust of the First Presidency (1997) declared:

Now I think our prophet today is telling all of us, in this day and time, to go and bring in those people who are out on the plains. I am impressed with what President Gordon B. Hinckley said about this event in the October 1996 general conference: "Wonderful sermons have been preached from this pulpit, my brethren and sisters. But none has been more eloquent than that spoken by President Young in those circumstances" (p.7).

These words, too, gave Wave of Hope a sense of calling and caring. In 2005, Wave of Hope volunteers began to build models of post-tsunami service and useful tools to rescue the contemporary poor among Thailand victims. We realized that the people of Asia might not require teams of horses, but they were desperate for shelter. Instead of "pudding and milk," they needed an income sufficient to buy rice and beans. They also needed education for their children, and their schools rebuilt or reopened.

Clearly, the situation for many Latter-day Saints in America today is a far cry from that of the pioneers more than a century ago. Many dwell in luxurious homes with ample garages to hold one's Mercedes Benz or BMW, along with snowmobiles, dune buggies, and boats. Some stand in church meetings to express gratitude for all the "comforts" of life, glad they do not have to make the sacrifices and endure the hardships that their ancestors suffered. However, much more is needed to lift the poor today, including sharing our financial resources. Writing a check to assist devastated villagers along Asian coastal regions was a good thing. But some Latter-day Saints were able to even do more.

Several years ago, President Hinckley told newly called mission presidents at the Missionary Training Center in Provo, "The day of sacrifice is not over." Some of those in attendance wondered what he meant, as have others who heard the prophet's message second-hand. But to me the implications are clear: It is not enough to merely donate ten percent as a tithe to God and assume everything is all right. Nor is it sufficient to engage in conspicuous consumption patterns, yet pray for the "poor and needy" every morning. We must give of our time and resources, including financial means, as instruments for personal and family consecration. By taking such action, not only are the world's poor blessed and lifted up, but those of us who truly give, also enjoy greater joy and spiritual purpose in our lives. This is the legacy of Mormon humanitarianism.

A Call to Action

The pioneers sacrificed in their era, and so must we today. I interpret President Hinckley's words to suggest that we must give in order to nurture others, even until it hurts. Even though it may not be convenient. This is what consecration signifies. Otherwise, it is not a real sacrifice.

In early 2005, we felt we should reach out to sustain those poor, destitute Asian families who struggled and suffered greatly. Mormonism is a religion that requires taking care of the poor and filling their temporal needs — food, clothing, education, and jobs. Wave of Hope developed superb tools for channeling our resources to lift the poorest of the poor today, whether they were contemporary pioneers suffering in the "Martin's Cove" of modern travail, or non-LDS individuals needing to be rescued from the destruction of 12/26.

Another motivation prompting our tsunami effort was the Lord's call to action in D&C 58:26-28 wherein he declares: "It is not meet that I should command in all things.... Verily I say, men should be anxiously engaged in a good cause, and do many things of their own free will, and bring to pass much righteousness; for the power is in them, wherein they are agents unto themselves."

These admonitions are consistent with hundreds of others such as Jesus' teachings: "For I was an hungered, and ye gave me meat: I was thirsty, and ye gave me drink: I was a stranger, and ye took me

in... Inasmuch as ye have done it unto one of the least of these, my brethren, ye have done it unto me” (Matthew 25:35-40).

I believe that the principles of Mormonism and those of the larger Christian world, as well as Hindu and Buddhist teachings, all suggest that we are, indeed, our brother's keeper. In our course on global change agents, I attempted to help students develop a sense of stewardship. They became part of a work in which we human beings learned to go beyond ourselves. Wave of Hope global change agents became able to think more consciously and broadly than themselves, and respond to the suffering of others. As social entrepreneurs we became able to look beyond the here-and-now to greater social justice in a better future.

Wave of Hope Results

Because of the support, donations, and mobilizing efforts of many, Wave of Hope has had huge results. Some 90 dedicated volunteers were able to travel to Thailand in 10 teams to carry out reconstruction efforts of those devastated by the coastal tsunami. They included individuals from 7 countries and 14 universities. Some 22 older BYU alumni from across America with backgrounds as CPAs, entrepreneurs, management consultants, homemakers, and others also gave of their skills. Wave of Hope became a unique collaboration of many people from across the world, including 40 volunteers who worked on the U.S. Support Team, helping with project design and fundraising. An additional 13 in-country advisors gave technical assistance, management expertise, and other training to ensure success.

The TA in my BYU course, Enoc Velazquez, who was born in Mexico, grew up in Canada, now lives in Panama, and was a Peace Corps leader in Kenya, defined our task. “We needed to match volunteers’ skills with on-the-ground problems in Thailand in order to maximize our impact.” Some critics had told us we would be lucky to get five volunteers and raise \$8,000. But ultimately we raised more than \$200,000 (cash and in-kind goods) and recruited 143 committed individuals.

Over a five-month period, we served in the hot, humid Khao Lak region of the Pang-Na province of Thailand, where the tsunami had devastated whole villages and left some 10,000 Thais either killed or tragically missing. Our volunteers served to restore the quality of the victims’ lives. Instead of desperation, they gained dignity.

The Joseph Smith Brigade gave more than 14,000 hours of service to many different projects, laboring with other volunteers from around the world. On beaches we gathered debris for miles, and worked in the ocean with divers to clean up trash from homes, hotels and shops taken out to sea by the tsunami. We were able to clear away many tons of garbage. Other Wave volunteers helped the Thais construct and paint furniture for their homes and play sets for their schools, teaching Thai adults how to use donated power tools.

Many of our social entrepreneurs worked with the Thais on their house rebuilding efforts in the villages of Thap Tawan, Laem Pom, and Bang Sak, preparing and pouring foundations, raising walls, installing roofs, applying plaster finish, and painting the completed houses. In all, we helped in the construction of more than 120 houses. Still others worked in the boatyard, applying waterproofing caulk and paint to the newly constructed boats for fishermen who had lost their livelihoods. Additional LDS social entrepreneurs taught children English in the schools, as well as to adults who needed to improve their language skills for future tourism jobs.

The BYU student fundraisers generated money with which to buy supplies. With them, Wave of Hope assembled and delivered more than 700 school and hygiene kits to impoverished families suffering in the survivor camps, played games and sang songs with orphaned children. The total value of clothing, quilts, and kits exceeded \$4,100. We also completely funded the building of a long-tail fishing boat (\$4,000) that will be named “The Wave of Hope” as a memorial to our efforts.

Various income-generating projects were started. An example is that we formed and trained a group of men and women in pearl jewelry making. The effort, called Tsunami Pearls, was officially launched as a worker-owned cooperative on the same day as Utah's pioneer celebration last July, commemorating the arrival in Salt Lake Valley of Mormon pioneers more than 150 years ago.

Speaking to this group of Thai villagers, I mentioned the significance of the pioneers in our history of the West. They overcame debilitating poverty. They established several hundred United Orders to create jobs, begin incomes, and build family self-reliance. That effort grew in the western United States as the foundation for the strong educational and economic systems we have today.

I promised the "Khao Lak pioneers" that they could do the same. We are beginning to market the co-op's jewelry in the U.S. Our strategy is to continue funding this start-up venture until it creates long-term jobs for tsunami victims and eventually becomes sustainable. Other income-generating projects may also be established in the future as we evaluate viable possibilities.

Our lives as Latter-day Saints were changed as we served those trying to recover from the devastation on their own. The tsunami victims were aided in their efforts to rebuild their lives and were blessed by the dedication and consecration of our volunteers' time and money, as well as by the generous contributions of many donors.

Readers are invited to get more details about this project, as well information about the future efforts of Empowering Nations, on our website at www.empoweringnations.org. Our little band of global change agents came back from the summer's Thailand service feeling we truly did understand the Prophet Joseph's call that if we're "filled with the love of God " we will "range through the whole world, anxious to bless the whole human race." Wave of Hope has made a difference in the lives of many — the tsunami victims especially, but the volunteers as well. None of us will ever be the same.

References

Faust, James E. "Go Bring Them in from the Plains." *Ensign*, July 1997, pp. 2-7.

Hafen, LeRoy R. and Ann W. Hafen. *Handcarts to Zion*. Salt Lake City, 1960.

Hinckley, Gordon B. "Reach with a Rescuing Hand." *Ensign*, November 1996, pp. 85-86.

Roberts, B. H. (ed.) *History of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints*, 1961, 3rd ed., vol. 4, p. 227.

[Click here to sign up for Meridian's FREE email updates.](#)