**WATER+FAITH: SHARED SYMBOL AND DEADLY BURDEN**

**PRESENTATION TO THE 2015 WORLD PARLIAMENT OF RELIGIONS**

**OCTOBER 15 - 19**

**SALT LAKE CITY, UTAH**

THANK YOU, SOL.

I’M HERE BECAUSE I’M PASSIONATE ABOUT TOILETS!

I’M FORTUNATE TO WORK WITH FAITH LEADERS FROM MANY DIFFERENT FAITHS AND I’VE GOTTEN TO SEE FIRSTHAND, IMPORTANT DIALOGUE TAKING PLACE. BUT I’VE OFTEN FOUND MYSELF LEFT ASKING TWO QUESTIONS:

\*WHERE’S THE HANDS-ON INTERFAITH EXPERIENCE FOR THE REST OF US?

\* WHAT ARE WE ACTUALLY GOING TO DO?

AND THAT’S HOW “FAITHS FOR SAFE WATER” WAS BORN. THERE IS JUST ONE SYMBOL ALL THE WORLD’S RELIGIONS SHARE. AND THAT IS WATER. WATER IS PART OF ALL OUR RITUALS. IT BLESSES AND PURIFIES. WATER IS THE SOURCE OF ALL LIFE AND HEALTH. WE CAN ALL AGREE EVERY CHILD DESERVES A CLEAN GLASS OF WATER. I BELIEVE WATER IS THE PLACE WHERE FAITHS CAN UNITE.

[*hold up dirty water bottle*] FOR 663 MILLION PEOPLE, EVERY DAY, THIS IS WHAT THEIR DRINKING WATER LOOKS LIKE.

AND 2.4 BILLION PEOPLE LACK THE BASIC DIGNITY AND SAFETY OF A TOILET. THAT’S ONE THIRD OF THE WORLD’S POPULATION, IN 2015, AND IT HAS TRAGIC CONSEQUENCES:

THE GLOBAL WATER CRISIS IS THE #1 KILLER OF CHILDREN UNDER THE AGE OF 5, KILLING MORE CHILDREN THAN WAR; OR MALARIA, AIDS, AND TB COMBINED. KILLING MORE PEOPLE THAN EBOLA. IT’S A SILENT PANDEMIC. AND THE WORLD’S DIRTY SECRET.

REMEMBER THE NUMBER 50…SOME 50 DIFFERENT DISEASES AND ILLNESSES ARE TRACED BACK TO UNSAFE WATER. WE’RE ALL TOO FAMILIAR WITH PICTURES OF DISTENDED, MALNOURISHED LITTLE BELLIES ON THE NEWS. BUT IT’S NOT FOOD, IT’S THE WATER/SANITATION CRISIS AT THE ROOT OF 50% OF ALL THOSE UNDERNURISHED CHILDREN. REPEATED BOUTS OF DIARRHEA AND INTESTINAL WORM INFECTIONS, BOTH CAUSED BY WATER, MAKE IT HARD -- OR IMPOSSIBLE -- FOR BODIES TO ABSORB NUTRIENTS FROM WHATEVER FOOD IS AVAILABLE. THIS ALSO CAUSES STUNTING, AND THAT’S NOT ABOUT HEIGHT. STUNTING PERMANENTLY HARMS COGNITIVE DEVELOPMENT. THAT’S LIFE-LONG BRAIN DAMAGE THAT CAN NEVER BE REVERSED.

THE WORLD HEALTH ORGANIZATION LOOKED AT HEALTH CARE FACILITIES IN 54 COUNTRIES AFTER THE EBOLA OUTBREAK. THIS IS WHAT THEY FOUND – AND I’M NOT MAKING THIS UP:

ALMOST 40% OF THE FACILITIES DID NOT HAVE ACCESS TO SAFE WATER; ALMOST 20% DID NOT HAVE EVEN BASIC SANITATION; AND 35% DID NOT HAVE SOAP AND WATER FOR HANDWASHING. THE SITUATION IS PROBABLY FAR WORSE BECAUSE MOST OF THIS DATA DOESN’T TAKE INTO ACCOUNT WHERE THE WATER SOURCE IS. IT CAN BE 500 METERS AWAY FROM THE HEALTH CARE FACILITY AND THAT’S DEEMED OK.

THE WORLD HEALTH ORGANIZATION ALSO SURVEYED 86 COUNTRIES TO FIND OUT WHAT THEIR PLANS WERE TO FIX THE SITUATION AT HEALTH CARE FACILITIES. ONLY A QUARTER HAVE PLANS FOR SANITATION AND WHEN IT COMES TO WATER AND HYGIENE, IT’S WORSE. BY THE WAY, AT LEAST IN AFRICA, FAITH-BASED ORGANIZATIONS PROVIDE BETWEEN 30 - 50% OF INSTITUTIONAL HEALTH CARE.

IT SHOULDN’T NEED POINTED OUT THAT THE LACK OF ON-SITE WATER, SANITATION AND SOAP ARE MAJOR HURDLES TO DELIVERING SAFE AND DIGNIFIED HEALTH CARE.

I THINK ABOUT THIS A LOT –

* WE SPEND MILLIONS TO FIGHT MALARIA, BUT POOR SANITATION INCREASES BREEDING GROUNDS FOR MOSQUITOES.
* WE SPEND BILLIONS GETTING LIFE-SAVING DRUGS TO HIV/AIDS PATIENTS, WHICH THEY HAVE TO TAKE WITH CONTAMINATED WATER THAT MAKES THEIR ALREADY IMMUNO-SUPPRESSED BODIES SICK AND UNABLE TO ABSORB THE MEDICATIONS.
* WE’RE TALKING ABOUT FOOD SECURITY TODAY. FOOD SECURITY IS IMPOSSIBLE WITHOUT WATER SECUIRTY.

THE GLOBAL WATER CRISIS UNDERCUTS SO MUCH OF THE GOOD WORK WE DO. NOT MAKING WATER, SANITATION AND HYGIENE A PRIORITY DEFIES ALL LOGIC.

FROM AFRICA TO ASIA, INDONESIA, THE MIDDLE EAST, EUROPE, AND LATIN AMERICA, AND YES, EVEN HERE IN THE UNITED STATES, THERE ARE BILLIONS OF PEOPLE HARMED BY UNSAFE DRINKING WATER AND SUB-STANDARD OR NO SANITATION. YET THESE WERE PRACTICALLY FOOTNOTES IN THE MILLENIUM DEVELOPMENT GOALS. FORTUNATELY, THE SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT GOALS ARE MORE INCLUSIVE, CALLING FOR UNIVERSAL WATER AND SANITATION BY 2030. BUT 2030? WE’RE ASKING LITTLE BOYS -- LIKE CRISTIAN -- TO WAIT UNTIL 2030?! I WANT TO TELL YOU ABOUT CRISTIAN.

A FEW YEARS AGO, A YOUNG WOMAN I KNOW NAMED JORDAN VOLUNTEERED AT A WEEKLONG MEDICAL CLINIC IN THE VERY POOR OUTSKIRTS OF THE CAPITAL CITY OF HONDURAS. THE PROJECT WAS SPONSORED BY AMERICAN BAPTISTS. WHILE THERE JORDAN BE-FRIENDED A DYNAMIC, 9-YEAR-OLD BOY NAMED CRISTIAN.

CRISTIAN HAD COME TO THE MOBILE CLINIC WITH AN INFECTION THAT HAD SPREAD TO HIS LEFT EYE. IT WAS WHAT’S CALLED A NEGLECTED TROPICAL DISEASE. NTDS SPREAD THROUGH UNSAFE WATER. THEY’RE PAINFUL AND DEBILITATING AND IMPACT 1.4 BILLION PEOPLE, 500 MILLION ARE CHILDREN. BUT FOR CRISTIAN, THE NEWS WAS GOOD! HIS INFECTION WAS TREATABLE, THE KEY WAS A STEADY ROUTINE OF HAND AND FACE WASHING.

A YEAR LATER JORDAN RETURNED TO AGAIN VOLUNTEER WITH THE MOBILE CLINIC. SHE WAS SURPRISED TO SEE HER YOUNG FRIEND THERE. HIS INFECTION HAD GROWN AND FORMED A TUMOR THAT COVERED HIS LEFT EYE AND PART OF HIS FACE. THIS ONCE CHEERFUL CHILD WHO LOVED TO PLAY FOOTBALL WAS NOW DARK AND DISTANT.

DESPITE FOLLOWING DOCTOR’S ORDERS, HIS PARENTS WERE SHOCKED THAT THEIR SON’S CONDITION HAD WORSENED. THE DOCTORS WERE NOT. IN THIS COMMUNITY, WATER IS A DISEASE-RIDDEN GATEWAY TO ILLNESS.

CRISTIAN SUFFERED FOR TWO YEARS. AND WHEN HE WAS JUST 11-YEARS-OLD…HE DIED. HE DIED FROM COMPLICATIONS FROM A COMPLETELY TREATABLE DISEASE, SIMPLY BECAUSE HIS FAMILY DID NOT HAVE ACCESS TO SAFE WATER.

I RECENTLY READ ABOUT A LITTLE BOY NAMED ALLAMAN. ALLAMAN SIDIQUI. AT TWO WEEKS OLD, HE DEVELOPED BLACK SPOTS OVER HIS BODY, REFUSED TO DRINK, AND ON HIS 15TH DAY, HE PASSED AWAY. HIS SYMPTOMS WERE CONSISTENT WITH SEPSIS, EASILY PREVENTED WITH SOAP AND WATER. HIS MOTHER, FATIMA, LIVES IN MALI AND HAS A ONE IN 17 CHANCE OF LOSING HER CHILD TO SEPSIS. EASILY PREVENTED INFECTIONS, LIKE SEPSIS, KILL SOME 430,000 NEWBORNS EVERY YEAR.

LET’S PAUSE FOR A MOMENT.

LET’S THROW AWAY ALL THE BIG STATISTICS ABOUT THE GLOBAL WATER CRISIS.

THESE TWO LITTLE BOYS JUST NEEDED SOAP AND SAFE WATER.

EACH OF US WAS DIMINISHED WHEN THESE TWO UNIQUE, UNREPEATABLE GIFTS OF HUMAN LIFE WERE WASTED. I WANT TO SUGGEST THAT PEOPLE OF FAITH NEED TO ASK ONE QUESTION – WHAT DIVINE IS HONORED WHEN THIS SACRED SYMBOL ALL OUR TRADITIONS SHARE, KILLS SOME 3000 CHILDREN EVERY DAY?

WATER-BORNE DISEASES HIT YOUNG CHILDREN HARDEST, BUT WATER IS A WOMAN’S BURDEN. GLOBALLY, WOMEN SPEND 200 MILLION HOURS HAULING WATER EVERY DAY. I CAN’T EVEN GET MY HEAD AROUND THAT. WOMEN CAN SPEND UP TO 60% OF THEIR DAY HAULING FORTY POUNDS OF DEAD WEIGHT IN THOSE BRIGHT YELLOW JERRY CANS. IT’S BACKBREAKING LABOR.

2:00 VIDEO: NAT GEO “BURDEN OF THIRST”

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Q54a4PCV9Ac>

WITHOUT WATER, LIFE IS DESPERATE, AND IT’S VERY DANGEROUS FOR WOMEN. I WON’T SHARE A SPECIFIC STORY HERE BECAUSE THE DETAILS ARE JUST SO HORRIFIC AND SADISTIC. SUFFICE IT TO SAY, IT’S DANGEROUS WALKING ALONG A DESOLATE PATH OR HAVING TO FIND A DESERTED AREA FOR PRIVACY. WOMEN AND GIRLS ARE ATTACKED. THEY ARE FORCED TO TRADE SEX FOR WATER FOR THEIR FAMILIES. THEY ARE GANG-RAPED SO BRUTALLY THAT THEIR BODIES AND PSYCHES CAN NEVER RECOVER. I HAVE INFORMATION ON VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN ON THE FAITHS FOR SAFE WATER WEBSITE IF YOU WANT TO LEARN MORE.

HAULING DIRTY WATER KEEPS MOTHERS FROM CARING FOR YOUNG CHILDREN AND EARNING EXTRA INCOME FOR THEIR FAMILIES. IT PREVENTS GIRLS FROM GETTING AN EDUCATION WHEN THEY NEED TO HELP THEIR MOTHERS COLLECT WATER. MANY GIRLS WILL DROP OUT OF SCHOOL ALL TOGETHER WHEN THEY GET THEIR PERIODS. TABOO IN SO MANY PLACES, IT’S EVEN WORSE WHEN GIRLS HAVE NO FACILITIES OR PRIVACY.

I’VE PAINTED A PRETTY GRIM PICTURE SO FAR, HAVEN’T I? BUT THIS METAPHORICAL AND LITERAL GLASS DOESN’T HAVE TO REMAIN HALF EMPTY!

BIG GAINS ARE BEING MADE IN SOME AREAS. BETWEEN 1990 – 2012, 2.3 BILLION PEOPLE GAINED ACCCESS TO BETTER DRINKING WATER. WE’VE GOT 663 MILLION PEOPLE STILL WAITING. TOO MANY, YES, BUT CLEARLY WE CAN FIX THIS!

IN A WORLD THAT DESPERATELY NEEDS THE FAITHS TO JOIN FORCES FOR GOOD, I WOULD ARGUE THAT WATER IS AN IDEAL PLACE TO UNITE. BECAUSE WATER IS NOT JUST THE KEYSTONE PROBLEM, IT IS ALSO THE KEYSTONE SOLUTION. THE CAUSES OF POVERTY ARE INTRICATE AND COMPLICATED. WHAT’S REMARKABLY SIMPLE IS THE IMMEDIATE IMPACT AND MULTIPLIER EFFECT OF WATER.

PROVIDE A WOMAN WITH SAFE WATER AND A TOILET AND EDUCATE HER ON PROPER HYGIENE, AND WE SET IN MOTION A CYCLE WHERE MATERNAL AND CHILD HEALTH BECOMES A PROIRITY. WOMEN AND CHILDREN ARE NO LONGER BEASTS OF BURDEN HAULING WATER THAT MAKES THEIR FAMILIES SICK. SURVIVING TO YOUR FIFTH BIRTHDAY ISN’T JUST GETTING LUCKY. ILLNESS AND DEATH ARE REPLACED BY EDUCATION, BETTER HEALTH, GREATER PRODUCTIVITY, AND NEW ECONOMIC OPPORTUNITIES THAT BENEFIT US ALL IN A GLOBAL ECONOMY.

HERE’S AN ACRONYM YOU NEED TO KNOW:  “WASH.” WASH STANDS FOR WATER/SANITATION/HYGIENE. W.A.S.H: “WASH”. THERE ARE MANY FAITH-BASED ORGANIZATIONS DOING GREAT WORK IN WASH RIGHT NOW.

ISLAMIC RELIEF/USA IS SETTING UP IRRIGATION SYSTEMS IN MALI SO THAT COMMUNITIES WON’T BE SOLELY DEPENDENT ON RAINWATER AND SO VULNERABLE TO DROUGHT.

CATHOLIC RELIEF SERVICES HAS HELPED BUILD 80,000 ARBOR LOO’S IN ETHIOPIA. IT’S A LOW-COST SHALLOW PIT TOILET MEANT TO LAST LESS THAN A YEAR. BY ADDING ASH AND SOIL AFTER EACH USE, A RICH COMPOST FORMS. CITRUS TREES LOVE THIS FERTILE SOIL! FAMILIES PLANT TREES IN THEIR FORMER LOO AND WITH INCREASED FRUIT YIELDS, THEY’VE GOT MORE INCOME AND HEALTHIER FAMILIES; HYGIENE BEHAVIOR HAS CHANGED; PLUS THE TREES HELP WITH SOIL EROSION. THAT’S A WIN.

I RECENTLY ATTENDED A PRESENTATION ON WASH AT THE U.N. GENERAL ASSEMBLY AND WAS REALLY STRUCK BY A NURSE/MIDWIFE FROM NORTHERN UGANDA. THIS IS WHAT SHE TOLD US,

IN HER WORDS:

“A SIP OF WATER HELPS DEHYDRATION, EXHAUSTION AND COOLS AND SOOTHES A MOTHER DURING LABOR. WATER IS A BATH AND A SHOWER FOR DIGNITY AND CLEANLINESS, AND TO AVOID INFECTION. WATER IS NEEDED TO WASH THE BABY AND KEEP THE UMBILICAL CORD CLEAN. IT’S FOR HANDS, INSTRUMENTS, FLOORS, BEDS, THE OPERATING THEATRE. A TOILET IS ESPECIALLY CRITICAL FOR PREGNANT WOMEN AND WOMEN JUST AFTER BIRTH.

“IN MY DISTRICT, LIRA, THERE ARE NINE HEALTH CARE FACILITIES AND NOT ONE HAD RUNNING WATER. WITHOUT BLAME, WE HELD CITIZEN HEARINGS THAT BROUGHT EVERYONE TOGETHER, TO IDENTIFY THE PROBLEMS AND FIND SOLUTIONS. WE SHOWED MP’S PHOTOS OF THE SITUATION. THEY WERE SHOCKED. THEY THOUGHT IT WASN’T THEIR COUNTRY; IT MUST BE SOME OTHER COUNTRY THEY SAID.

“THEY SENT A FACT-FINDING MISSION. AT ONE OF THE FACILITIES, THEY FOUND THE ONLY TOILET WITH NO DOOR. THE STAFF HAD TRIED TO HANG A CURTAIN BUT THAT WASN’T ENOUGH. AFTER THE VISIT BY THE FACT-FINDING MISSION, THEY GOT A REAL DOOR FOR THE TOILET.”

NOW HERE’S THE PART THAT REALLY GETS ME AND I THINK – HOW POWERFUL THE FAITH VOICE COULD HAVE BEEN HERE. THIS MIDWIFE CONTINUED:

“BEFORE THEN, NOBODY HAD COMPLAINED OR ASKED FOR A DOOR. *THEY DID NOT KNOW IT WAS THEIR RIGHT TO HAVE A DOOR ON A TOILET.*

NOW THEY KNOW. NOW AFTER A 2-YEAR CAMPAIGN, ALL HEALTHCARE FACILITIES ARE ON TRACK TO PROVIDE EMERGENCY CARE. LIFESAVING C-SECTIONS ARE NOW POSSIBLE. WATER IS IN TWO OF THE HEALTHCARE FACILITIES AND THERE ARE PLANS FOR ALL NINE.”

SHE CONCLUDED, “WE LEARNED OUR RIGHTS THROUGH CITIZENS HEARINGS THAT WE HELD AND WE WILL NO LONGER BE QUIET. WE WILL KEEP ASKING AND DEMANDING AND ASKING AND DEMANDING. WE WILL NOT GO AWAY.”

MEN AND WOMEN OF FAITH -- THIS PROBLEM IS NOT BIGGER THAN THE SOLUTION! SO I KEEP ASKING MYSELF -- WHAT’S MISSING? IT’S NOT TECHNOLOGY OR INNOVATION; AND IT’S CERTAINLY NOT NEED. I THINK WHAT’S MISSING IS US.

MOST OF US SIMPLY TURN ON OUR TAPS AND SPARKLING WATER POURS OUT. WE NEVER NEED TO THINK ABOUT HOW VERY FUNDATMENTAL WATER IS TO EVERY ASPECT OF DAILY LIFE AND LIVELIHOOD.

AND THOUGH WE ALL CELEBRATE RITUALS WITH WATER, WE DON’T THINK ABOUT WHY ALL OUR FAITHS PUT SUCH EMPHASIS ON THE POWER OF WATER TO CLEANSE AND SANCTIFY.

AND SO, WITH SO MANY COMPETING GLOBAL CONCERNS, SAFE WATER AND SANITATION REMAIN THE UNDER-FUNDED, UNDERDOG OF GLOBAL ISSUES. THE ONE THAT DOESN’T GET THE FANCY FUNDRAISERS, OR THE ROCK STAR ENDORSEMENTS.

BUT WE KNOW THAT WHEN THE FAITHS UNLEASH THEIR POWERFUL MEGAPHONES -- TO EDUCATE, ADVOCATE AND ACT – CHANGE HAPPENS. IN A WORLD THAT SEEMS INCREASINGLY DESPERATE FOR HOPE, WASH IS LIFE-GIVING HOPE. AND EACH ONE OF YOU CAN BE ITS MESSENGER.

AS WOMEN IN PARTICULAR, WE HAVE GOT TO TURN WATER -- THIS RELIGIOUS SYMBOL -- FROM THE BURDEN THAT IT IS, INTO THE SOURCE OF LIFE IT IS MEANT TO BE. THAT MIDWIFE FROM NORTHERN UGANDA AND THOUSANDS LIKE HER, NEED YOUR VOICE. THE SCHOOL TEACHERS, NEED YOUR VOICE. THE MOTHERS, NEED YOUR VOICE. THE GIRLS, NEED YOUR VOICE. WHAT BETTER WAY TO GET TO KNOW YOUR SISTERS FROM OTHER FAITHS THAN BY SAVING LIVES -- TOGETHER.

FOR THOSE OF YOU WHO DON’T FACE THE DAILY HUMANITARIAN CRISIS OF THE GLOBAL WATER CRISIS, WE NEED YOUR FAITH COMMUNITIES, AND YOUR FAITH-BASED NGOS, TO MAKE WASH – WATER, SANITATION, AND HYGIENE -- A PRIORITY IN ALL THE GOOD WORK THEY DO. THAT SAID, IT’S NOT ENOUGH FOR YOUR CONGREGATION TO INSTALL A PUMP, TAKE A PUBLICITY PHOTO, AND GO HOME. HERE’S ANOTHER “50”: 50% OF FAITH-BASED WATER PROJECTS FAIL. BEST INTENTIONS MUST BE REPLACED BY BEST PRACTICES. LONGTERM SUSTAINABILITY MUST BE ASSURED.

AS FAITH LEADERS IN PLACES WHERE WATER REMAINS A DAILY THREAT, YOU HAVE LEVERAGE BECAUSE PEOPLE LISTEN TO YOU. PERHAPS MOST IMPORTANT, POLITICAL LEADERS IN YOUR COUNTRIES AND COMMUNITIES LISTEN TO YOU, BECAUSE YOU HAVE THE HEARTS AND MINDS OF THEIR CONSTITUENCIES. THINK ABOUT WHOSE EAR YOU HAVE… PERHAPS A LOCAL COUNCIL MEMBER… YOUR MAYOR? PROVINCIAL GOVERNOR? HEALTH MINISTER? PLEASE -- USE YOUR VOICE TO ENGAGE AND SUPPORT YOUR LEADERS WHO PRIORITIZE WASH.

I LEAVE YOU WITH THIS: HUMAN EXISTENCE IS ABOUT MUCH MORE THAN WATER, BUT FROM BIRTH UNTIL DEATH, IT IS NEVER ABOUT LESS. RELIGIOUS WATER IS NEVER PASSIVE. NOR CAN WE BE. WATER HAS THE POWER TO TRANSFORM THIS WORLD. AND SO DO WE. TOGETHER, WE CAN MAKE WATER THE SOURCE OF HEALTH AND LIFE FOR ALL.

AND THAT, IS WHY I AM PASSIONATE ABOUT TOILETS.