

JUST FAITH AND ACTION:

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On the death of a child

Although this reflection has to do with the fourth goal of the eight Millennium Development Goals, I wrote it last. I had a hard time deciding what to say. Some of you will have experienced first hand the death of a child, or through your ministry have found yourself sharing in such a tragedy. I have not. I won't say, "I can imagine..." because I can't. I do know that it has been hard to look at photos of our children while preparing this reflection.

It's a universal reality, of course, and I will not try to argue here that a child's dying is somehow different in the Global South than it is here, at least in terms of the pain involved. If I were to lift up the African reality, I would simply stress that when death is clearly preventable, then something needs to be done, and there is something that can be done about the ten million children worldwide who die each year from preventable illnesses. We need to do it.

The fourth Millennium Development Goal: Reduce by two-thirds the mortality rate among children under five. The target: 2015.

It's not that progress is not being made. It is, but the change is painfully slow. The Human Development Report 2003 (UN Development Programme) reveals that at the current rate of progress sub-Saharan Africa would not reach this goal of reducing the child-mortality rate until 2165, one hundred and fifty years after the target date. That's shameful. And it's not that the answers aren't available. They are, and often are disarmingly simple: Mosquito netting, affordable antibiotics, vaccinations. And most vaccines cost only pennies per dose.

When the Gates Foundation provided \$50 million for malaria research last year, the grant increased the world's budget to confront a disease that continues to devastate Africa, and Africa's children, by 50%. This too is shameful. In the US and other wealthy countries, less than one percent of our children die before they reach six years old. In some of the world's poorest countries, the figure is over 20%. This also is shameful. Our military expenditures in Iraq, with the war "over," are around \$4 billion a month. By 2011 the world will need about \$1 billion per year to provide 80% of the children in the 75 poorest countries in the world with vaccines. We're not anywhere close to meeting what is needed now. That says something about our priorities that is shameful as well.

I did not know what to do with all of this, in this reflection, until I turned to Edward Hays' wonderful Prayers for the Domestic Church. In his "prayer for a parent whose child has died," he writes.

*Do not take my tears and sorrow
As a sign of my unbelief that all who have died
Are resurrected to eternal life in You,
But, rather, see in these tears
A sign of my great love for my child.*

We can act so that, for so many parents around our world, those words need not be said.

*Yours faithfully,
Leon Spencer*

This is the fourth in a series of reflections on the Millennium Development Goals originally prepared for the Cambridge Consultation at the 2003 General Convention of the Episcopal Church.

If there are others you would like us to send these reflections to, please pass their names and addresses on to us. Alternatively, if these reflections are unhelpful, just let us know and we'll remove you from our list.

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