

WE CAN

by Andrea DeGroot-Nesdahl



DO MORE

**Children. Dozens of children, hundreds of children swarm around our vehicles when we arrive to see their school or visit a feeding station where they eat. Children, laughing and dancing, singing and staring, delighting in being photographed. Children.**

Soft hands tucked into ours as we walked from place to place. Curious, bright, beautiful children. We met a great number of Malawi's children recently while visiting schools run by the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Malawi (ELCM).

Jesus said, "Let the little children come to me; do not stop them; for it is to such as these that the kingdom of God belongs" (Mark 10:14). I thought of Jesus' words as I walked through the African villages full of children. As I observed them at a feeding center receiving their one meal of the day—porridge cooked in a large cauldron over an open fire. Or as they squeezed together in a small classroom, and the headmaster

explained that this class of second-graders has an enrollment of 280 with just one teacher.

I thought of Jesus' words when the Rev. Joseph Bvumbwe, the bishop of ELCM, told us how he often feels the children's foreheads or faces when he visits the more remote areas of his church. Like any parent

knows, he is checking for fever that, he tells us, usually indicates the child has malaria.

### TREATABLE AND PREVENTABLE

Malaria is a blood-borne disease that is transmitted by a mosquito bite. It affects millions of people of all ages every year all around the world. But by far the greatest number live in sub-Saharan Africa. Of those affected by malaria, most of those who die from it are children under 5. A child under age 5 dies every 45 seconds in Africa from malaria: treatable and preventable malaria.

Malaria has some of the same symptoms as the flu—fever, lethargy, headache, nausea. There's a window of time when it can be treated fairly successfully with medication. But the medication isn't always available, especially in remote areas. It also isn't affordable for people who live in poverty as many people in Africa do. Poverty is as much a cause of malaria as are mosquito bites. People with adequate financial resources don't suffer the same consequences as those living in poverty do, mainly because they have been educated about the symptoms, can receive medical treatment readily, and often have addressed preventive measures in their homes and communities.

Mosquito nets help greatly in prevention. Think of trying to go to sleep with a mosquito buzzing around your head, then multiply that mosquito many times. Just one bite from just one in the swarm could bring disease. A mosquito net helps prevent malaria, but it's not enough on its own to turn the tide on this dreaded disease.

## THE CHURCH RESPONDS

The ELCA Malaria Campaign will help our African companion churches equip their members with nets and more. More methods of draining stagnant water where mosquitoes breed; more access to free or lower cost medicine for treatment; more education about the symptoms so treatment can occur in a timely way; more first-responders in communities to diagnose malaria and to help people access treatment; more voices to advocate for government protection from root causes of malaria and other deadly diseases.

The more factor matters to me. It reminds me of a story from my own childhood when my parents took me to a school gym where we waited in a long line for a long time. At the end of the line, we received a sugar cube and promptly ate it. I remember thinking it was odd to stand in line for just a sugar cube when we probably had some at home. We weren't just waiting for a sugar cube, of course, but for the new vaccine that warded off polio, distributed inside the cube. My parents told me that we were now vaccinated for polio. I didn't know what polio was, but thanks to a sugar cube, I wouldn't have to know.

Up until then, polio had been a fierce disease, debilitating people all over the world. But at that moment in my life, it lost its power. Many years later, well into my adult life, I came to know that the polio vaccine hadn't been given to every child in the world. I learned that polio was still a threat and a crippling or fatal reality for too many children. I learned that we could have done more way back when I received the sugar cube. We could have done more to ensure that all children were protected as I was. We could have done more.

Now, with malaria, we can do more. Like polio, malaria is not a threat to children in the United

States. It was largely eliminated in our country in the 1950s. But malaria still exists in other parts of the world—in Africa—for children who are living in poverty. We can do more.

## MAKING A DIFFERENCE

At the ELCA Churchwide Assembly in August 2011, an action is being put forward asking the whole church to embrace the ELCA Malaria Campaign. If adopted, the action would set every synod, every congregation, and every member, and a lot of potential members, on a course to do more about malaria. Our fundraising goal—"15 by 15"—is \$15 million by 2015. It's a daunting goal. But remember the power of one mosquito? Even small efforts will make a huge difference that creates health and wholeness for children.

The Women of the ELCA is supporting the ELCA Malaria Campaign at its 2011 triennial gathering in Spokane this July by designating a portion of the closing worship offering to the campaign. In 2012–13, the organization is also designating the Malaria Campaign as one recipient of its 25th anniversary appeal.

I have been touched by children in Malawi, in Zimbabwe, and in other parts of Africa over the years. I have had the truth of Jesus' words brought to life: "theirs is the kingdom of God." I am grateful for the role the ELCA will play in the Malaria Campaign as it helps churches like ELCM fight malaria. Mostly, I'm

grateful for children, God's children, who—in spite of their struggles—laugh and sing, dance and pose. I want joy and song for their lives. And I want more—health and hope for a long and fruitful life, free from malaria. I invite you to join me in supporting the ELCA Malaria Campaign. 🌿

**The Rev. Andrea DeGroot-Nesdahl** is coordinator of ELCA Malaria Campaign and the HIV and AIDS Strategy for the ELCA.

### TO LEARN MORE

Go to [www.elca.org/malaria](http://www.elca.org/malaria) to find out the facts about malaria and how the ELCA hopes to make a difference in the lives of those at risk and affected by the disease. To support the malaria campaign now, send a check to Women of the ELCA, P.O. Box 71256, Chicago, IL 60694-1256, with ELCA Malaria Campaign in the memo line: 100 percent of the gift will go to the campaign.