

catholic ^{digest} **lic** faith+life

When Pope Francis talks about the poor, there is one element he insists upon repeatedly: Poor people, whether they are migrants, refugees, addicts, or the plain materially poor, are still simply *people*. People like you and me, like the pope himself.

They are, he tweeted once, “people who have faces, names, stories — and need to be treated as such.”

And yet, too often the poor are lumped together and slapped with political or social labels. Fast-paced global information technology brings their faces into our living rooms as we see them flitting across our televisions and phones from Yemen, Madagascar, or Nicaragua. Instead of becoming more sensitized to their plight as our brothers and sisters, however, we are desensitized. We fuse them all together under the umbrellas of huge, unfortunate world problems nobody can solve.

“The poor you will always have with you,” Jesus said (Matthew 26:11), and we bleakly nod our heads in agreement as we click to the next channel or scroll to the next distraction.

But what if we could actually meet the poor and befriend them? Not the great huddled mass of them all at once, but just one or two or three? And what if their stories became part of our own?

In the 1980s, an unlikely group of Catholic laypeople decided there had to be a way to make that happen. They wanted to challenge global poverty in a new and different way.

Here’s how their inspiration came about and how it has now led to 1 million families being helped.



Bob Hentzen is surrounded by children at a 2006 gathering in Guatemala. He moved to Guatemala in 1996. For the rest of his life, he remained closely involved in Unbound’s work in that country. Photo courtesy of Unbound

Grounded in Catholic social teaching

Bob Hentzen, born in Kansas and raised in Missouri, had early discerned a vocation to missionary work with the Christian Brothers. He received formation in the Church's timeless doctrine and was sent to Latin America to teach. Fresh out of school, with all the zeal of a youth in his early 20s, he was ready to pour all his energy into helping the poor.

But then something happened.

He realized that there wasn't a deficiency in the poor. The poor didn't need teaching; he actually learned way more from them than he ever taught. He realized that it wasn't a lack of intelligence or character or capability in the poor that resulted in their condition. It was a lack of opportunity.

Hentzen eventually left the Christian Brothers, sensing that God was calling his missionary heart elsewhere. Back in Missouri, he continued to think about the people he had known and loved in Latin America.

A similar trajectory was being lived by Jerry Tolle. Tolle had discerned a vocation to the Jesuits and, like Bob, had spent years as a missionary in Latin America. Eventually he, too, sensed God calling him out of religious life, but he continued to have the missionary heart that had been forged in his years of service.

The two met back home, both now laypeople but with a shared passion for the poor from their years in the missions. The poor need partners, they agreed, not people who think they are saviors.

Hentzen and Tolle wanted to share how they had been eager to go and rescue and help and teach and give, only to encounter a beautiful, rich love, followed by the realization that they were receiving far more than they could ever give. The two friends asked themselves how they could create a space so others might form partnerships and relationships with the poor as they had.

Hentzen and Tolle knew that the solution had to be deeply rooted in Catholic social teaching. They recognized wholeheartedly the Gospel's preferential option for the poor and the dignity of all persons. They also saw the importance of one of the most constant and characteristic principles in Catholic social teaching: *subsidiarity* — the idea that individuals and communities must be respected in their own right, and their responsibilities should not be absorbed by states or other entities acting from above.

And from these convictions and questions, a ministry began to take shape. The roots in many ways mirror the work that had to be done.



A mother and grandmother, Nadine Hentzen Pearce loved children and had a passion to help get more sponsored. In this undated photo from the Unbound archives, she enjoys the company of three children. Photo courtesy of Unbound

Talents and teamwork

Bob Hentzen had an older brother, Bud, who shared his deep loyalty to the Church, but he had something Bob didn't have: a keen sense of business and business experience.

Then there was a younger brother, Jim. Again, he shared with his brothers a love for the Church, but he had his own particular talent: He was a savvy lawyer and a banker.

Finally, there was big sister Nadine. As many older sisters of large families, she had an almost-motherly influence on the brothers (she'd taught Bob how to walk, after all), and it was Nadine who sprinkled the feminine genius on the budding ministry about to be formed.

Along with Jerry Tolle, the four Hentzen siblings each brought their particular gifts and became a formidable team. In 1981 Unbound was born.

From the beginning, the team had a vision of forming one-on-one relationships with people of equal dignity but with unequal financial resources. They envisioned a connection whereby they would find *sponsors* who could walk alongside those who might not have a voice, for whatever reason. A relationship would blossom across international boundaries, and people would simply learn to love one another, even at a distance, and be committed to help each other as brothers and sisters.

The enterprising group started with their own Christmas card lists, but that quickly grew.

Calling on the Catholic principle of subsidiarity, they wanted the ministry to ask some very fundamental questions: What does this child, this elderly person, this family, actually need?

Unbound didn't want a paternalistic sharing from the sponsors' point of view. Decisions regarding funds had to be decentralized, with the rights and responsibilities of the individual (or their mothers, in the case of the children) being respected.

The old adage about teaching a man to fish rather than merely giving him a fish didn't go far enough. The first question should be whether someone even needs to fish. A personalized approach would be absolutely necessary to respect the dignity of the individuals being sponsored; this would also be highly efficient.

Unbound wouldn't parachute in people from the United States to implement ideas either. The founders knew that no matter how well intentioned and well educated these would-be helpers might be, they could never know more about how to overcome a specific family's poverty in Bolivia than a mother fighting desperately to give her daughter a better life.

Of course, it didn't happen all at once, but slowly, step-by-step, a multimillion-dollar international network was built.



In this undated photo from the Unbound archives, Jerry Tolle visits with a young boy. As a former missionary, Tolle understood the obstacles faced by children growing up in extreme poverty. His gift of being able to ask the practical question kept Unbound grounded in the early days. Photo courtesy of Unbound

Helping the poor today

Unbound has three main branches: People can choose to assist a child, a student, or an elderly person with a monthly stipend.

Concretely, the ministry works with “sponsored friends” by hiring social workers from the local community. The social workers help families to consider a basic itinerary, with some simple questions: What are your dreams? From your dreams, what are your goals? How can we help you get there with a little assistance every month?

And sponsors provide that help. But more than the money they donate, they are invited and encouraged to build relationships.

Now, after many decades, many of the social workers employed by Unbound are graduates of the ministry’s programs. There are also nearly 200 full-time staff in Kansas City, Missouri, who handle everything from translations of the letters going back and forth between families, to finding more sponsors, to keeping the finances tracked and in order.

Tolle and the four Hentzen siblings have since died, but the ministry they formed is booming.

It has expanded from Latin America to include Africa and Asia. The number of sponsored friends has reached close to a million during the course of its 37-year history, with 300,000 currently served.

Sponsors can arrange trips to meet their friends and see the regions where they live, and there are also “awareness trips” that afford the opportunity to travel with other sponsors to meet sponsored friends and learn about their friends’ communities, cultures, challenges, and aspirations.

The outreach continues to be about forming relationships and fostering mutual learning. The staff ask themselves every day: How can we better share the lessons the families have taught us?



*Jim Hentzen “shared with his brothers a love for the Church.”
Photo courtesy of Unbound*

Intergenerational support

Unbound’s program to sponsor the elderly has just turned 35.

Each generation supports the other in the Unbound family. The students receiving scholarships work with the elders and vice versa.

In Lima, Peru, for example, those in the elders program help with the children who have special needs. In Guatemala, it’s the mothers group helping the elders. This same intergenerational sharing and support is a hallmark of Unbound in all the countries where it works.

“If anybody were missing, it wouldn’t be as full, as effective, as powerful,” explained Andrew Kling, Unbound’s director of community outreach.

The elder program was supported by Pope Francis, who says that “there should be an alliance between young and old people.”

Sharing the Wisdom of Time by Pope Francis and friends (Loyola Press, 2018) features stories of more than 20 Unbound sponsored elders and a reflection from former sponsored youth and current staff member Yenifer Valencia Morales of Colombia. She represented Unbound at the Oct. 23, 2018, book launch event at the Vatican, where she met the pope.



Photo courtesy of Unbound



Photo courtesy of Unbound

Unbound sponsors speak

Jenny Snarski of Spooner, Wisconsin: We are on our second sponsored elderly person.

We still keep José's picture on the fridge. He was from Honduras, and we sponsored him when my son was only 8. He would tell my son that he was his "godfather." We definitely had a real connection, and it really felt like a loss when he died. Through the letters we received, we knew our \$30 a month made a difference. His daughter was the one who wrote us because he couldn't read or write. We would hear about what he was doing, how he was going to church, how our donation was helping him purchase medications, new shoes, etc.

The woman we sponsor now is from India. She also does not know how to read or write, and that is eye-opening to our middle children (ages 5 and 6), who are learning these skills now. It has helped us to appreciate simple things we so take for granted. When we get a letter from India, it feels like we are hearing from a family member. I love that there could be the chance to actually meet [her and her family] someday.

Monica DeGraffenreid of Wichita, Kansas:

In college I started sponsoring a young girl from Guatemala. I sponsored her for several years, and then one day, I got a letter that she had died. She contracted a water-borne disease that is totally preventable here in the States! Her death saddened me so much, especially because of how unnecessary it seemed.

I went on to sponsor another person who "graduated" out! He had been taught his trade and was able to make a steady, reliable income and no longer needed my assistance. I remember feeling so proud and thinking, *This is what true charity is.*

Now I'm a mom, and with my family, we have sponsored the same little boy for the last four or five years. He is between my two oldest in age. He writes us, and we write to him maybe four to six times a year. It's such great perspective for my kids when we get letters that say something like, "Thank you so much for the money you send. We were so glad to use it to buy cinder blocks for our house."

My kids, with all their first-world problems, are hearing from a kid their age about how grateful he is for a cinder block! Heaven knows I can't teach them that kind of perspective. He is our brother in Christ, and it is so great for all of us to be able to have that relationship. I think it strengthens the body of Christ and really gives us a sense of our oneness, even across the globe.

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