COVID-19 Response: Thanks and Prayers

Across the globe, governments are restricting the movement of their citizens in order to reduce the spread of the COVID-19 virus. GFI partners are reporting the hardships they are facing due to lack of work leading to shortages of basic everyday necessities. For families surviving on the equivalent of only a few dollars a day, staying at home means going hungry. Thanks to Brethren Disaster Ministries, grants from the Emergency Disaster Fund for immediate food relief were recently dispersed to many GFI partners. Words of gratitude have come back quickly, along with prayers for the safety of the members of the Church of the Brethren in the United States.

The economic impact of the current crisis will likely last long after the medical crisis subsides. The support offered by the GFI is needed now more than ever. We are learning that the virus affects the poor and elderly the most severely. Poor nutrition – either through lack of food or lack of healthy food – leads to weaker immune systems. This is something understood well by the agronomists who oversee the agriculture projects being undergirded by the GFI. Going forward we will continue to strengthen our focus on healthy soils leading to healthy plants, healthier people, and more resilient communities. We are grateful for the many churches and individuals who have given sacrificially during these difficult times so that the good work being undertaken by the GFI and its partners may continue.

Honduras: Consultation Visit

In February of this year, GFI manager Jeff Boshart traveled to Honduras together with Richard Petcher of Petcher Seeds of Fruitdale, Ala. Richard is a volunteer with experience running a seed company, as well as many years working as a crop consultant for Auburn University’s Cooperative Extension in Alabama. He has special expertise in crops that improve animal nutrition and soil health.

The small delegation was hosted by Chester Thomas, the executive director of Project Global Village (Proyecto Aldea Global – PAG), and other staff members. PAG, the GFI, and Growing Hope Globally recently completed a three-year small animal production project (2017-2019). Previously, PAG and the GFI joined forces for a four-year effort (2013-2016) before being joined by Growing Hope Globally. The purpose of the trip was to visit recipients of chickens, fish, pigs, or bees provided through this three-way alliance. In 2019 alone, 180 families benefited directly, and each year more than 150 additional families receive animals by way of the “pass on the blessing” phase of the project.
Rwanda, Burundi, DR Congo: Teaching Tour

In recent years, the GFI has attracted experienced volunteers willing to offer their time in support of strengthening the work of GFI grant recipients around the globe. In February, Church of the Brethren pastor and farmer Christian Elliot of Knobsville (Pa.) Church of the Brethren journeyed to the Great Lakes region of Africa. His trip was three-fold: teaching about soil health (Burundi), consulting on a GFI-sponsored pig project (Rwanda), and participating in a seminar on Brethren beliefs and practices (DR Congo). Chris brings a special mix of gifts and talents that fits well with a holistic approach to sharing the gospel of Jesus Christ.

Ecuador: Greenhouse Construction

The GFI has reconnected with an organization born out of the work of Brethren missionaries in Ecuador more than 50 years ago. Fundacion Brethren y Unida (FBU – the Brethren and United Foundation) works with indigenous farmers and school children. Its work includes promoting organic food production, environmental education, cooking classes, and reforestation. Most of the residents in the areas surrounding the FBU campus (located near Picalqui, about one hour’s drive northeast of Quito) work in the cut-flower industry. Two new greenhouses were constructed as part of a $10,000 grant from the GFI, with the purpose of producing vegetables that typically do not thrive in the cool, mountain climate of the Andes. Alfredo Merino, FBU’s executive director, has a vision of promoting organic vegetable production for domestic markets as an alternative to the pesticide intensive methods used to grow flowers for the international floral trade.

USA: Community Garden Grants

Beginning in 2012, the GFI and the Office of Peacebuilding and Policy began giving grants to churches who wished to start or expand a community garden. The name given to this effort was Going to the Garden (G2G). The response was remarkable, with at least 1 grant given to 40 different church-based community gardens. Several have received multiple allocations as the gardening projects expanded. Other congregations reported starting gardens without any outside support. The amount allocated to the various activities related to these gardens in the past 8 years totaled more than $198,000.

As part of the denomination’s COVID-19 response, G2G grants are once again being offered. There will be a limit of $1,000 for new gardening projects. However, larger grants are available for past G2G recipients. For more information, please contact GFI manager Jeff Boshart at JBoshart@brethren.org.