

# Saving Starfish



**My first encounter with real poverty was in India in the 1970s. Working with a team of local Christians, I spent two years touring the countryside, preaching and handing out literature about Jesus Christ. We visited remote villages where no one knew the name of Jesus, and we visited great cities where masses gathered to listen because they had nothing else to do. I never got used to the beggars, the mentally deranged who roam the streets, the children who tugged on my trousers and pleaded for a coin.**

I lived in Calcutta for two years. Sometimes I would travel over to Howrah Railway Station, the city's huge rail terminus on the west bank of the River Hooghly, and give biscuits to the children that crowded the station platforms, begging and eking out a living. I enjoyed doing that – they were always good humoured and eager to play games and it made me feel good to mix with them. Sometimes I shared a meal with a poor man or dropped a few coins in a beggar's outstretched hand.

Once I was rebuked by a senior missionary for giving to beggars. 'You are only encouraging a scourge,' he said. 'You cannot solve the problems of poverty by giving to the beggars. You only encourage people to beg rather than to work.' It was an easy answer that failed to convince me. I knew that many beggars are lazy, some are scoundrels and phonies, others have bank accounts or are members of wealthy begging co-operatives. But God still offers mercy to the poor, as the Bible makes very clear. Life is only safe if we stay away from dilemmas and turn a blind eye to the reality of human suffering.

The ugliness of human poverty hit me most forcibly in the refugee camps that formed along the India-Pakistan border before the war of 1971 that brought Bangladesh into being. Ten million, mostly poor and desperate people, flooded across the border and gathered into makeshift camps. I found myself

compelled to help, bringing in supplies, driving our vehicles through the night to distribute urgently needed medical equipment, setting-up shelters to protect these vulnerable, suffering people.

That's when I first met Mother Teresa – the little nun in a blue and white sari, who ran a home for dying destitutes in a Calcutta suburb. I met her in a refugee camp outside Calcutta, where she was organizing relief for a pathetic mass of humanity that had just arrived from across the East Pakistan border. It was raining and there was no shelter for the newly-arrived refugees, except for some bamboo structures and heaps of black plastic rolls. We spent an afternoon in the rain, cutting up sheets of plastic and making them into shelters for the refugees, under the authoritative directions of the lady in blue-and-white.

That was three decades ago and I have never reconciled myself to the fact that the world is an unfair place. While we complain about our National Health Service, millions have no access to a doctor or money for proper health care. *Time* magazine tells us that 'more than eight million people around the world die each year because they are too poor to stay alive.'<sup>1</sup> Breaking that down to reality bites, it means that every day we could read headlines in our papers: More than 20,000 people died yesterday of extreme poverty. The tsunami was a disaster that shook the world – and shook many people's faith – but more people die every three weeks from the effects of poverty.

I am a Christian. I believe that Jesus came to preach good news to the poor (**Luke 7:22**), and that he said that they would always be with us (**Matthew 26:11**). It is said that 'there are 2,000 Bible verses that call on Christians to help poor people.'<sup>2</sup> By his example and his teachings Jesus exemplified an extraordinary bias in the heart of God towards the downtrodden and the wounded. And his disciples did the same – selling their possessions and giving 'to anyone as he had need.' (**Acts 2:45**) The relief of poverty was clearly on the agenda of the early church.

But it is one thing to be concerned for the poor – it is quite another to do something about it. I wear a white plastic bracelet on my wrist that declares 'Make Poverty History'. It is part of a worthy campaign to pressure the Government to cancel debt in Africa. I recommend joining the campaign.<sup>3</sup> But will it do away with poverty once and for all? Government and big business have the resources to transform economies, but they can never mend the broken lives or restore hope to the destitute – nor can they fulfil the Christian's commitment to follow Jesus.

## What can we do?

Some years ago I was asked to lead Bible studies for a group of Bangladeshis, and I chose to give three talks on the subject of Love. I prepared carefully and my messages covered the love of God for us, our love for him and our love for each other. I travelled by van to the conference site in the north-east of Bangladesh where the meetings were to be held, and on the way stopped off for a meal at a wayside restaurant.

I was sitting in the van, waiting for the others to join me, when a beggar approached the window to ask for money. She was about 30, poor, dressed in ragged clothes, and two small children tugged at the hem of her sari. I gave her one or two coins, and I watched as she crossed the square and squatted down on the ground and started to count her day's takings. It probably amounted to no more than 50 pence. ▶



by  
**Mike Wakely**

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## What is poverty?

The World Bank defines the international poverty line as those who have to survive on between 50 pence and \$1 a day. More than 315 million Africans live on less than 50p a day.

The most common definition of poverty in Britain is £118 per week – 60 percent of the average national income.

\* taken from the *London Metro*, Feb 4, 2005

Like a light in the night the thought struck me – if my messages on love were worth anything, then they affirmed that God did not love me for anything that I had done, but because it is his nature to love. And if God loves me, then God loves that beggar lady no less than he loves me. Why then am I so privileged, while she is so poor? I have spiritual and material riches that she can never dream of. Why is life so unfair?

It is a question I still have not answered satisfactorily, but part of the answer is that God has given me (the privileged one) an awesome responsibility to share my wealth with the poor and the underprivileged. 'For everyone to whom much is given, from him much will be required.'<sup>4</sup>

### I am overwhelmed

Emotionally I cannot cope with the needs of the whole world, but I have been greatly helped by the story of the Starfish (see box below). I came across it in a magazine, cut it out and stuck it inside the cover of my Bible. I am still inspired by its simple message. I cannot possibly rescue everyone – but I have got to help some!

In 1995 there was a catastrophic flood in Lahore (Pakistan) and the sewage canal that runs through the southern suburbs of the city overflowed its banks. At one point,



Photo: Starfish now supports more than 1,000 children in school – children who would otherwise never have learned to read or write

squeezed between the canal and a graveyard, a colony of about 35 very poor Christian families had built small mud, or brick-and-mud homes. As the sewage waters rose and spread over the surrounding area, so all of these homes collapsed or were washed away, leaving 35 destitute families huddled under twig and plastic shelters or sleeping out in the open. Their pastor came to my door with tears in his eyes on behalf of these families. What could I do? Bury my head in the sand? Appeal to the United Nations?

To cut a long story short, we organised an appeal for help. Several groups and individuals came to the rescue, donating around \$20,000, with which we constructed 35 small brick-and-cement buildings, all of them finally with toilets, running water and electricity. And in the centre of the new colony they constructed a small church building where the Christians could gather for worship.

It was only a short span before another crisis developed – a lady whose husband had died, leaving her with three small children and nowhere to live. For the poor, with no job and no resources, a crisis quickly becomes a disaster. We found and provided help. Two poor blind ladies, whom we had known for several years, were ejected from their residence and wandered from home to home, with no income, few friends and no one to advise them. We were able to raise the funds to

build them a small home. Did it make any difference to the problems of world poverty? No. But it certainly made a big difference to Alice and Saroyya.

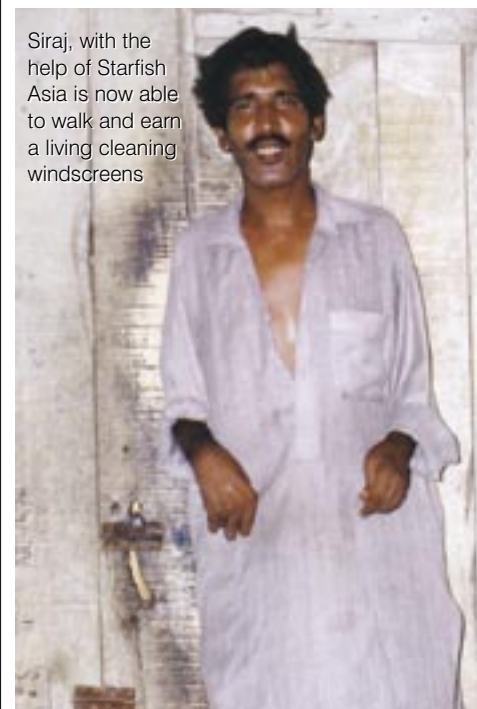
My wife 'adopted' a family in Lahore. Visiting from door-to-door to share the Gospel, she stumbled on one home, to find a young crippled man lying on a rough bed inside a small dark room. His name was Siraj and he was stiff with arthritis, his joints locked into grotesque shapes, so that he was no longer able to walk, feed himself, or do anything without help. Without money or influence they were helpless to do

## The Starfish

An old man, walking the beach at dawn, noticed a young man ahead of him picking up starfish and flinging them into the sea. Catching up with the youth, he asked what he was doing. The answer was that the stranded starfish would die if left until the morning sun.

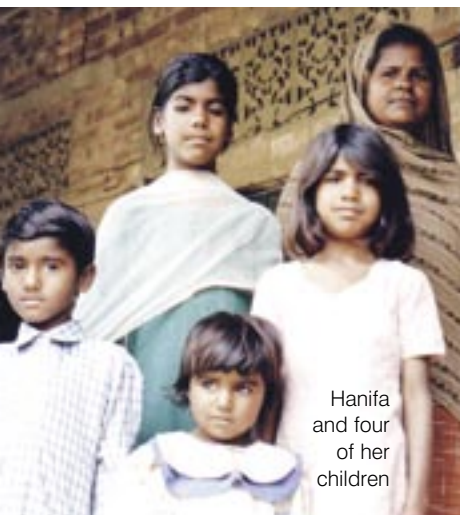
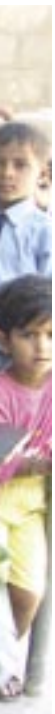
'But the beach goes on for miles, and there are millions of starfish,' countered the old man. 'How can your effort make any difference?'

The young man looked at the starfish in his hand and then threw it to safety in the waves. 'It makes a difference to this one,' he said.



Siraj, with the help of Starfish Asia is now able to walk and earn a living cleaning windscreens

anything about his condition, so he simply lay on the bed, ate and slept. What should my wife do? Move on to the next home? Leave him a gospel tract? Or get involved – the most risky option? It carried the hazard of possible long term, emotional involvement, but that is what she did. She took him to the hospital, consulted doctors and surgeons and finally helped him through a series of operations – and put his brother's children into school. They attended Christian camps and made professions of faith. Siraj still has locked joints, but he gets around, cleans windscreens at the local garage for a small income and has a phenomenal sense of humour. There is a reward of great satisfaction for those who save stranded starfish.



Hanifa and four of her children

### The Starfish Asia fund

In April of 2003 I was passing through Karachi. For some months I had been struggling with the difficulty of finding help for the growing number of needy people with whom we had contact. Ashley and Seema, close Pakistani friends with a passion for the downtrodden, had opened a school for the poor in Lahore, now bursting at the seams with more than 300 children. We raised the money to give those children a free Christian education and the chance of a decent future. In financial terms it was phenomenal value for money, costing no more than £3 monthly for each child. But that was just a start. Other committed Pakistani friends were struggling to find the means to help their community, or were telling me about people in need. I was seeing too many starfish

and was at a loss to know how to find the resources to rescue them.

I awoke in the middle of the night – an hour when thoughts often take on their most grotesque and troublesome shape. But that night I woke with the conviction that I must bite the bullet and register a Charity to collect the funds to help these people. What should we call our new Charity? What else but the Starfish Asia fund – dedicated to rescuing stranded people and restoring Christian hope to those with no hope.

Calls for help continue to come. I visited a lady in Lahore who has a poorly paid cleaning job. Hanifa lives in a simple one-room home with her husband and eight children. As we sipped tea together I asked how many of the children went to school. School? – they could not afford to send any of the children to school. I looked at little six-year-old Seher hiding in a fold of her mother's sari. 'Would you like to go to school?' I asked. Her gleaming eyes and broad smile told all, and now she and two of her sisters proudly put on their simple uniform and join the children at a small private Christian school. The cost to us? About £2 every month for each child.

We now support more than 1,000 children in school, children who would otherwise never have learned to read or write. Several have now graduated and moved on to nursing training, or have landed good jobs – fine Christian girls with a sound knowledge of Christ and his word. We have also responded to cries for help from a home for disabled children and a home for blind girls, and we are still small and flexible enough to be able to help at a more intimate level too. We know we cannot help everyone – but we have got to help some!

### Starfish everywhere

As Jesus approached Jericho, a blind man was sitting by the roadside begging ... There must have been many blind and needy people in Judea in Jesus' day, but here was one that cried out for help. He called out, 'Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!' And he shouted all the more, 'Son of David, have mercy on me!'

Jesus stopped and ordered the man to be brought to him... 'Receive your sight...' (Luke 18:35-43).

A starfish indeed.

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Our Starfish Asia fund needs help to provide more where people have so little. But the point of these stories for all of us is this:

We are all walking that beach at dawn. We don't have to look as far away as the needs of the suffering in Africa or Pakistan. We just need to lift our eyes and look around us, wherever we are. That surely is what Jesus meant when he said: 'Love one another as I have loved you.' (John 15:12). He found starfish wherever he went – in blind Bartimaeus and desperate Zacchaeus, in guilt-wracked Mary Magdalene and even in the thief by his side at Calvary. With a word and a touch Jesus made a difference in their lives. We should do no less. ■

<sup>1</sup> Time magazine, March 14 2005, p.40

<sup>2</sup> Christian Herald, 7 May 2005 p.14

<sup>3</sup> Look up their web page: [www.makepovertyhistory.com](http://www.makepovertyhistory.com)

<sup>4</sup> Luke 12:48



**The Starfish Asia fund is a Christian response to this world of need. We know we cannot rescue everyone – and yet we know we have to save some!**



You can learn more about us from our web page

[www.starfishasia.com](http://www.starfishasia.com)

You may also correspond with us, Mike and Kerstin Wakely,

and we will gladly send you more information about how you can help us in our work with the poor.

In thanks for any gift towards our work with the poor in Pakistan, we will send you a complimentary copy of Mike's book: Generosity (published March 2004 by IVP, ISBN: 1-844-74020-X) or a copy of the 15-minute Starfish Asia fund DVD/video (please state which) entitled *Saving Starfish*.



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