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Recommended Citation
Available at: http://ir.lib.uwo.ca/totem/vol16/iss1/6
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Keywords
World Vision International, child sponsorship programs, sustainable development, Christianity, critiques

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"THINGS THAT BREAK THE HEART OF GOD": CHILD SPONSORSHIP PROGRAMS AND WORLD VISION INTERNATIONAL

Pamela Yuen

INTRODUCTION

World Vision International (WVI) is a Christian non-governmental organization with a mandate of improving the lives of children and their communities in underprivileged societies. The focus of the organization is on sustainable development projects and emergency relief. However, World Vision is perhaps best known for its use of child sponsorship programs. The organization justifies the use of child sponsorship as a primary method of generating income by noting in promotional materials that “...[c]hildren are the best indicator of a community’s social health. When children are fed, sheltered, schooled, protected, valued, and loved a community thrives” (World Vision 2006). Due to their use of television infomercials featuring celebrities with infamous portrayals of “children with flies in their eyes”, World Vision International (WVI) has become one of the largest and most successful child sponsorship NGOs, generating income in the billions and operating on six of the world’s
continents. However, this organization has not been without its critics who allege that World Vision engages in such unsavoury practices such as misrepresentation to the donors, Christian proselytising, the propagation of stereotyping, and the creation or aggravation of local inequalities.

This paper will address the phenomenon of the success of World Vision International. Firstly, I will provide background into the history, structure, funding, and projects of World Vision from a variety of perspectives. I will then discuss the Christian evangelist roots from which World Vision was formed and the role of Christianity in the child sponsorship scheme. Finally, I will explore the use of the concept ‘child’ by World Vision International and the complexities it entails.

While the literature on this specific NGO is relatively thorough, it has been compiled primarily by three sources: official discourse through World Vision International and its partnerships and the anthropologists Erica Bornstein and Susan McDonic who researched World Vision in Zimbabwe and Ghana respectively. Bornstein has concentrated her work on the religious and economic aspects of World Vision and has claimed neutrality in her research, leaving judgement on the NGO’s efficacy to “experts trained in assessing rural development and perhaps by World Vision itself” (2001:596), however, she has not hesitated in pointing out the numerous shortcomings of World Vision International. This is in contrast to McDonic who in her PhD thesis provides an ethnographic analysis of World Vision Ghana and is almost scathing in her condemnation of the NGO. Notwithstanding her general judgements of the organization, she acknowledges that while she is not a Christian, her experiences working with the group have “brought her back to the child wanting to understand God” (McDonic 2004:x).

While an organization should most certainly not be shielded from criticism due to their ‘charitable’ endeavours (it can be argued that they should be examined even more closely for accountability), I am apprehensive to view organizations such as World Vision with the same level of contempt shown by McDonic, simply because, as she acknowledges, sponsors of children donate out of a genuine concern for underprivileged ‘others’. To believe that we must protect the recipients of aid because they are susceptible to ‘religious brainwashing’ or to believe that they live or desire to live in an unchanging cultural (and religious) bubble is naïve and patronizing. In addition, I question whether World Vision International would be the source of such scorn by academics if the NGO were associated with any other religion besides Evangelical Christianity—a religion whose practices have traditionally been in conflict with anthropological concepts such as cultural relativity. However, the faults in the practice of child sponsorship and the uncomfortable association of Christian Evangelism with acts of imperialism are glaringly obvious and I have attempted to highlight some of the many problems associated with creating fictive relationships reinforced through images of difference as well as some of the local complexities that arise through well-intentioned but misguided acts of charity.

HISTORY OF WORLD VISION

The founding of World Vision can be recalled in several versions of a mythical beginning. According to the official pages of the World Vision USA website (2006), in 1950, a young preacher named Dr. Bob Pierce was in China where he encountered a young girl named White Jade whose mother could not afford to send her to the missionary school. Pierce handed over to the
teacher fifteen dollars he had in his pockets and told the young girl he would send the same amount every month to support her. According to Erica Bornstein, in 1947, during a mission to China, the same Dr. Pierce told the children already enrolled in a missionary school not only to “accept Christ”, but also to, “go home and share with their parents their new faith” (2001:605). He arrived the next day to thank the missionary only to find that a girl named White Jade had been beaten by her parents for proclaiming her new faith Christianity. He then emptied his pockets and gave the missionary teacher five dollars, promising to send five dollars every month so that White Jade could live at the school and avoid the wrath of her parents. In yet another version of this tale from World Vision Canada (2006), it is stated that in 1947, Pierce encountered a teacher named Tena Hoelkedoer while on a trip to China who introduced him to White Jade. She had been abandoned and battered and Hoelkedoer, who could not afford to care for her, asked Pierce what he was going to do about the child. He responded by once again emptying his pockets of five dollars and agreeing to support White Jade. In another version of this tale compiled by McDonic in her fieldwork, an angry missionary brings a battered and abandoned White Jade to Pierce following his encouragement to share Christianity with her parents and demands responsibility for his actions which had caused more harm than good for the child (McDonic 2004:30).

The different versions and almost mythical founding of World Vision serve as a metaphor for some of the conflicts that have arisen in its intentions and vision. In the version from the United States Pierce becomes the welcomed outsider by a family in need. In contrast, Bornstein reports that Pierce steps in as a savior to the little girl both spiritually and physically and highlights the local and family conflicts that arise with child sponsorship. The Canadian version of the story omits the role of Christianity altogether, instead focusing on the secular needs of an abandoned child. The name of the converted/abandoned/needy child herself is of interest: “White Jade” pairs a stone that has traditionally been highly valued and associated with Chinese culture alongside an association with European ‘whiteness’. In all cases, the official versions of the foundation story are tailored to inspire the generosity of various potential sponsors.

In the accounts that involve evangelism on the part of Pierce, he realizes that witnessing Christian truth involves not only spreading the ‘the Word’ but also taking responsibility and following through with his preaching. In order words, ‘faith without works is dead’ and the Truth must be spread through action.

In 1950, Pierce incorporated his organization under the name “World Vision”, which went international a few years later, with partnership offices around the world (McDonic 2004:31). Although Pierce resigned in 1967 in a controversial mutual decision, his photograph still hangs in World Vision offices worldwide; he is remembered as the man who began a program of child sponsorship to promote evangelical Christianity that spread from Asia to encompass 99 nations and raising $1.25 billion USD in 2003, thereby becoming the largest privately funded aid organization in the world by 2004 (McDonic 2004:26).

WORLD VISION PARTNERSHIP STRUCTURE AND FUNDING

The roots of World Vision lay in the anti-communist and anti-poverty sentiments that developed in the United States after World War II when the United States grew out of its isolationist policies to take a greater role in world events. In response,
World Vision grew to become both one of the first trans-denominational evangelical development agencies as well as one of the first organizations to introduce the role of sponsorship in forming transnational personal relationships and providing relief (McDonic 2004:28-29).

Prior to 1978, the U.S office oversaw all international activities in South and Central America, Asia, and Africa. In 1978, a Declaration of Internationalization was signed, whereby World Vision International became a separate entity that monitored the separate international partnerships of World Vision. This allowed the founding and largest partnership office in the United States to focus on fundraising and sponsorship programs like other Western affiliates. The structure at this time revolved around largely autonomous Support Offices (SO) in primarily Western and English speaking countries that focused on fundraising and development programs, while Field Offices (FO) were situated in less developed countries and were responsible for the implementation of development programs. Unlike SOs, FOs are directly controlled by World Vision International.

Representation on the World Vision International board was reflected proportionally in the finances brought in by the partnership offices, with the United States, Canada, and Australia dominating the board in descending order. It was also during this time of expansion that the emphasis began to shift from proselytising to development and relief, thereby positioning the workers of World Vision as both evangelists and aid workers. The European offices, in particular, moved toward an increasing secular focus on relief to reflect its largely secular and leftist sponsorship base in contrast to the conservative evangelical support of World Vision in the United States (McDonic 2004:28-29).

The inability of a homogenous Christian ideology to bind the various offices together resulted in the creation a Mission Statement that World Vision continues to operate under today (McDonic 2004:34).

The Mission Statement of World Vision International reads:

World Vision is an international partnership of Christians whose mission is to follow our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ in working with the poor and oppressed to promote human transformation, seek justice and bear witness to the good news of the Kingdom of God (World Vision International 2006).

ABOUT CHILD SPONSORSHIP

Pierce believed that the program of child sponsorship would be able to facilitate transnational bonds between sponsors in the Northern and Western worlds with recipients in the Eastern and Southern areas that would unite Christians in giving and caring. This began as a direct transference of funds from sponsors to children and is now a phenomenon whereby mostly White, Christian, middle-class, or pensioning Westerners donate monthly to support community development projects (Bornstein 2001:597). Bornstein describes how, “[c]hild sponsorship connects sponsors in ‘developed’ nations with children in ‘developing’ nations through late-capitalist and transnational forms of accumulation”, further noting that through “[c]rossing national boundaries and coordinating fiscal flows of humanitarian aid, NGOs encourage ideas of helping and humanitarianism, redistributing transnational accumulation” and effectively unifying people across borders (Bornstein 2001:598). However, the process at World Vision International today is much more complicated.
Upon navigation of the Canadian, American, and International websites of World Vision, it is clear that the actual workings of child sponsorship are purposefully convoluted for the potential sponsor. The very term ‘sponsorship’ implies a personal system of responsibility to a single individual; in this case, it entails a personal relationship between a sponsor and child, with monthly payments being sent by the sponsor in exchange for a picture of the child, letter exchanges, an annual report on how the child is progressing, and a general sense of connection. Campaigns at local shopping malls to promote sponsorship feature catalogues of children’s pictures and profiles, and similar tactics are used on websites whereby potential sponsors can browse through photographs of children and choose a ‘special child’ they would like to personally sponsor. In other words, child sponsorship is often seen as a long-term commitment to a child based on financial support to improve the lot of that individual.

However, World Vision International only notes that “child sponsorship establishes a relationship between a donor and a single child in a way that personalizes the challenges of community development while allowing donors to see how their money is making a difference to the life of an individual child, family and their community” (World Vision International 2006) and skirts the issue of direct support. Instead, under a heading of “How Child Sponsorship Benefits an Entire Community”, World Vision International notes that funds go towards Area Development Programmes (ADPs). The aims of ADPs are “to empower communities and help build capacity so that the community itself retains ownership of the development process. The community decides what its development priorities are and works alongside World Vision to achieve its goals” (World Vision International 2006). These ADPs are long-term projects that involve such diverse possibilities in initiatives in health, education, agriculture, water, infrastructure, landmines, leadership, gender, and income generation. Sponsorship funds in a community are pooled and then channelled into larger projects. According to a personal conversation with a World Vision Canada representative in December 2006, it was confirmed that the children do not personally see any of the funds donated by sponsors but instead, benefit indirectly along with their community.

At the time of Bornstein’s publication in 2001, gifts from sponsors were still standard practice, as she recounts the toys sent by sponsors alongside letters and photographs (2001:603). However, World Vision today only accepts small gifts that fit inside an envelope and cash donations (“gift notations”) must have a minimum value of seventy-five U.S dollars to minimize administration costs (World Vision International 2006). These gift notations are then used to purchase items that the FOs deems appropriate, such as blankets, clothes, and school uniforms. The child is then required to write a thank-you letter acknowledging the gift; a picture of the items with the child and family are taken and sent back to the donor. Letters between sponsors and children are censored to remove sponsors’ names and addresses, as well as any mention of political or sexual issues and also removing any controversial material. This censorship has a two-fold logic: firstly, it prevents children and their families from asking for money or materials from their sponsors, in spite of the fact that in places such as Ghana reciprocity in the form of gift requests are considered to be essential to building and maintaining relationships (McDonic 2004:31). Western donors are unaccustomed to such request that could seem ungrateful and jarring.
Secondly, by blacking out names and addresses, recipients of aid are forced to communicate with their sponsors on the terms of World Vision. Therefore, sponsors are only hearing what World Vision International deems would be fitting to represent their organization (McDonic 2004:31).

CHRISTIAN DUTY AND SPONSORSHIP AS AN ACT OF FAITH

Much like criticism of child sponsorship, some people who see Christian NGOs as imposing a religion in exchange for aid have questioned the evangelical nature of World Vision. Others believe that World Vision International does not go far enough in proselytizing and parts of the FAQ section of the U.S website are devoted to the questions: "How will my child learn about Jesus?" and "How does World Vision operate in communities with few believers in Christ?" (World Vision USA 2006). Although World Vision has undergone many changes since its founding in 1950, it was originally conceived in the spirit of New Evangelist Christianity that emerged during the 1950s in the United States and this still aspect still retains influence. At least officially, the motivation to spread the Word of God and the salvation of souls has since been eclipse by a sense of duty and righteousness to care for those in need. When I spoke with a representative from the Canadian office, she steadfastly confirmed the official reassurance that World Vision will never deny aid or relief non-Christians or those who refuse to convert. World Vision International (2006) justifies its existence by stating that,

We seek to follow Jesus - in his identification with the poor, the powerless, the afflicted, the oppressed, and the marginalized; in his special concern for children; in his respect for the dignity bestowed equally on women and men; in his challenge to unjust attitudes and systems; in his call to share resources with each other; in his love for all people without discrimination or conditions; in his offer of new life through faith in him. We hear his call to servanthood, and to humility.

When asked about possible evangelical activities among recipients, the NGO notes that while proselytising is banned, they do strive to provide educational activities based on Christian values where appropriate (World Vision International 2006). The American website that targets evangelical Christians also adds that if non-Christian children show a particular interest in the teachings of Christ, they are referred to pastoral services, bible camps, and Christian groups (World Vision USA 2006). Both Bornstein and McDonic have noted throughout their writing that in practice there is a fine line between the encouragement of Christian conversion and the personal affirmation of the NGO’s workers’ faith.

It is clear, however, that World Vision seizes upon the call of Christ to help the less fortunate to instil a sense of responsibility amongst potential Christian donors. McDonic notes that in the Western context, the positive ethics of giving are similar amongst both secular and Christian discourses in so far that social responsibility and caring for the poor are positive and encouraged, hence the ability for ‘crossover’ in donors bases (McDonic 2004:53). For example, during the Christmas holidays, it has become common for municipalities, corporations, and individuals to make large donations to World Vision through purchasing items listed in the NGO’s “Gift Catalogue” such as farm animals and drinking wells. In 2005, the cities and municipalities of the Greater Toronto Area
alone purchased $1,784,341 worth of “gifts” (Laidlaw 2006:A21).

A potential reason for the success of World Vision’s Gift Catalogue in Canada could be attributed to the fact that the Canadian partnership has conspicuously chosen to distance itself from its Christian association. As previously mentioned, the Canadian version of the founding of World Vision completely omits any mention of evangelical activities. The World Vision Canada website, in fact, makes no mention of Christ or Christianity whatsoever, except in the obligatory section highlighting the Core Values of the organization. Moreover, in this section there is a notable absence of any expansion on the workings of Jesus as found in the American and International sites (World Vision Canada 2006). A recent feature on World Vision in the Toronto Star also completely omits their Christian association, referring to World Vision Canada instead as a “faith-based Charity” (Laidlaw 2006:A21).

However, the primary sponsorship base for World Vision continues to be Christian donors. Through the act of child sponsorship, Christians find a way to actively enact their faith; the compassion one feels while watching the ‘children with flies in their eyes’ is actually the voice of God speaking to Christians to act. In this way, many pay heed to the saying that Pierce once famously uttered- “Let my heart be broken by things that break the heart of God”. For believers, sponsorship is modeled on the transcendent love of God, and sponsors “extend the body of Christ and cares for that member as it would every critical part of its own body” (Bornstein 2001:605). The faith instilled by sponsorship touches both employees and sponsors. World Vision International workers, who are mostly evangelical Christians, also consider themselves to be the ambassadors of Christ in their work and through this experience they perform the spiritual rebirth necessary to enter the Kingdom of Heaven as dictated by evangelical faith. Employees of World Vision are required to sign a “statement of faith” acknowledging Jesus Christ as their savior (Bornstein 2001:606). One worker in Zimbabwe noted that “we try to show Christ, the love of Christ in the word that we do” adding that he hoped that the sponsored children would “begin to appreciate that Christ loves them” (Bornstein 2001:606).

Gifts of sponsorship from well-off Christians to those in need in far away places aids in building relationships that create a “global Christian family” (Bornstein 2001:597). Bornstein gives the example of Albert in Zimbabwe, a boy who had been sponsored as a child and was deemed a success story by World Vision. He was chosen for sponsorship while adjusting to a difficult life with a new step-family and he said: “then came the sponsor and everything looked up...the Lord came to my rescue in the form of a sponsor and He was there as a provider” (Bornstein 2001:599). However, with the extra benefits of sponsorship such as gifts and even the full tuition for his education, the jealousy and confusion of his family members were aroused, creating tension in the family. After World Vision abruptly ‘abandoned’ the project, Albert became involved with World Vision as a volunteer later in life, wanting to help others because they were all in essence, one big family (Bornstein 2001:599). However, Bornstein accurately noted,

“Child sponsorship reformed his local identity, placing it in transnational counterpoint to local tensions and conflicts, instead of constituting a unified global (and in this case, Christian) world. Albert experienced a stress between his local family and his perceived sense of place in a global Christian and
ADVERTISING AND THE ROLE OF THE CHILD IN WORLD VISION

World Vision International has come under strong criticism on a number of fronts. One of these stems from the fact that while WVI “recognize[s] children do not live in a vacuum, but in a larger context of family and community” (World Vision International 2006), the organization remains “child focused” and their activities expressly are designed to most benefit children who are the “most vulnerable members of any community” (World Vision International 2006). Both McDonic (2004:83-84) and Bornstein (2003:7) have criticized the use of the child in World Vision International’s advertising and values. Both note that the NGO has chosen the Child to represent the innocence of youth isolated from the political and religious turmoil often affecting their home countries. Bornstein suggests that,

Children serve the international humanitarian community as embodiments of a basic goodness and as symbols of world harmony; as sufferers, as seers of truth, as embodiments of peace, and as embodiments of the future. Children are a tranquilizing convention in the international community. One could argue that new forms of transnational accumulation encourage the consumption of “goodness” and humanitarian ideal, while at the same time children are increasingly interpellated as consumer subjects (2003:7).

It is for this rendering of children as ‘consumer subjects’ for sponsorship that World Vision has come under fire. The advertisements portraying the child as victim have been deemed as emotionally manipulative, although admittedly, so are most advertisements attempting to extract funds from buyers’ wallets generally. The images collected by World Vision International are carefully and professionally assembled by the acclaimed Russ Reid advertising agency to ensure their effectiveness in invoking sympathy for emaciated and dismembered children and, more importantly, to instill a sense of guilt on the part of the viewers in spite of the fact that the infomercials have become cliché in their use (McDonic 2004:51).

Most viewers in Northern and Western countries exposed to World Vision’s fundraising advertisements are inundated daily with reports of violence and poverty coming from the other side of the world that leave one feeling desensitized to some of the ongoing horrors of humanity (2004:84). Conversely, exposure to North American life has bred a sense of cynicism in many viewers who dismiss the glossy paper advertisements and the celebrity spokespeople used by World Vision as a kind of fiction. McDonic (2004:84) writes about dispassionate viewing as “compassion fatigue”- a way for viewers to separate themselves from the emotional images they are viewing by condemning them as false and artificially created to manipulate potential donors. World Vision, or perhaps more accurately, Russ Reid realizes this and is careful to script segments where celebrities appear astonished when they realize that these conditions actually exist. In one segment, Margaret Becker, a Christian rock musician, muses out loud while touring a World Vision site in Northern Kenya, “...I still feel like I’m watching it on television ...[but] they are here. They are not in some ad” (McDonic 2004:84).

Bornstein notes that children are used to both embody hope when donors give aid for development and also despair when we do not respond by opening our wallets
She points out that scholars claim that using children as incarnations of utopia and as depoliticizing agents is in contrast to how children have historically and politically been equated in the international community. The transition of children from being an economic value to a non-labouring emotional value is a modern phenomenon that is incongruent with how childhood is conceptualized in many communities where World Vision is present (Bonstein 2001:601).

In Ghana, one mother of a child being sponsored by World Vision expressed anger and exasperation at being sent coloured pencils, stickers, photographs, and letters from her child’s sponsor (McDonic 2004:92). While a sponsor would have seen these items as symbols of childhood and her kindness, these small gifts were taken to be insulting by the family of the recipient who was more interested in receiving help with their yams than with toys. She pronounces: “Why should I care about these things? They are useless…” (McDonic 2004:92). The ludicrous idea of sending small toys to a child in lieu of the much-needed food for a family is a factor in corroding the faith of recipients of aid, while these small gestures are considered tokens of love by the sponsors.

The “gift notations” sent to families also create or exacerbate inequalities in local contexts. Most sponsors do not send extra gifts with their monthly donations, leading to ‘good’ and ‘bad’ donors. It inevitably means that some families will receive buckets, clothing, farm implements, and school supplies while other sponsored families receive only the despised stickers or coloured pencils from sponsors, or, in most cases, nothing at all. This also leads some communities to think that World Vision must be stealing donated items and keeping it for themselves, since in some communities such as those founded in Ghana, relationships are not built in the Western form of sharing personal information (such as in the form of letters) but rather through reciprocal help as needed (with the constituents of World Vision obviously requiring a much greater degree of help) (McDonic 2004:95).

FURTHER CRITICISMS

Interestingly, the creation of a global Christian family is made possible only through individual agency. Personal relationships between sponsors and children create a sense of intimacy for the sponsor that is not possible in mass and anonymous donations to NGOs such as the Red Cross. Individual responsibility and material betterment, as expressed in Protestant discourses, sits very well with Western donors and administrators. However, as already briefly discussed, child sponsorship often causes conflicts within donor communities.

The sense of individuality and responsibility is often lost on recipients who shoulder the burden of local consequences. It is clear that the profound sense of connection a sponsor feels to his or her child is often also the source of agitation for children and their families. In Zimbabwe, where the belief in spiritual mediums runs strong, one mother was extremely anxious following the departure of her child’s sponsor after a visit, convinced that her neighbours would set zvidhoma, or evil spirits, to harm them. In this instance, a worker’s reassurances that “God would help” fell on deaf ears (Bornstein 2001:610).

World Vision’s work in Zimbabwe is often accompanied with a sense of confusion because the local religious and political scene is not compatible with the concepts of sponsorship. Many Zimbabweans follow a religion of ancestral worship whereby the spirits of ancestors protects a family. Children who are not kin are usually not taken in by strangers because without
knowing the ancestral lineage of nonconsanguine children, families would be unable to appease the spirits. The large size of Zimbabwean families also encouraged people to take care of their own before others. In addition, the ‘middle class’ that forms the primary donor base in the West does not exist in Zimbabwe. Instead, a lower class is juxtaposed with an upper class that hangs precariously to their wealth (Bornstein 2001:611). The presence and works of a foreign NGO seeking to link up sponsors with their ‘children’ from worlds away is puzzlement for many Zimbabweans.

The social order of the local family is also thrown into turmoil by the activities of World Vision. While charity is obviously appreciated in times of need, Bornstein recalls an anecdote of an agitated father who, while thankful for the extra money a sponsor had given to his child, was confused as to why he was not allowed to take the money himself and spend it on his child as he saw fit. The question posed to a World Vision representative was instead answered with a sermon on self-sufficiency and development that skirted the intended query (Bornstein 2001:613). Similarly, in Ghana, fathers in particular are led to believe that their authority is being undermined by the gifts, attention, and correspondence lavished on their children. Many families drop out of World Vision programs due to this uneasy tension, combined with the fact that sometimes only one child in the family would be sponsored, further contributing to instability in the household (McDonic 2004:98). World Vision has attempted to address this concern through the new concept of ‘family sponsorship’ whereby, for an additional cost, sponsors may sponsor an entire family and therefore eliminate inequalities in this respect (World Vision International 2006). However, this only addresses the material instability in a family and not the overall local tensions. The undermining of family authority is an issue World Vision has in part also attempted to address since the story of the agitated father unfolded by allowing families to choose from a limited selection of items when do receive extra money from sponsors. Still, as McDonic points out, no matter how badly a family needs a new roof for their house, they are unlikely to receive it when items such as buckets and blankets are available to be photographed (2004:94).

Another problematic issue with World Vision is the presence of money in a relationship that is idealized as existing through love. The prevailing view in Western discourses is that one cannot ‘buy love’ and that ‘friends and money don’t mix’. The commodification of friendship seems to sully the authenticity of a relationship (McDonic 2004:77). While material improvement is the goal of World Vision, sponsors may find it uncomfortable to ‘buy a relationship’ or, in the case of the ‘child catalogue’ available for potential sponsors, the process of child sponsorship may even be equated with ‘buying a child’. And yet the entire concept of World Vision is based on this premise of building a relationship based on the one-way exchange of money. When sponsors send funds overseas to World Vision children, they may indeed be fulfilling a sense of ethical responsibility, but most also desire to receive personal correspondence and a sense of connection in exchange for their monthly payments.

In order words, they hope that through a meaningful relationship with a child they are helping, the financial transaction of a ‘bought’ relationship can be something that is overlooked. A comparison can possibly be made in the case of the fraternity and sorority system of North American educational institutions whereby social organizations charge sometimes hefty fees for members in return for a sense of
‘brotherhood’, ‘sisterhood’ and ‘friendship’ through organizations that promote such noble personal characteristics as ‘service’, ‘humility’, and ‘honour’, to name a few examples. The fact that members are also ‘buying friends’ is overlooked by the emotional connections and values espoused by these social organizations, just as child sponsorship participants may try to gloss over the role of financial transactions in maintaining relationships.

In Canada, more than 75 percent of sponsors do not bother writing to their children, and yet most are also dissatisfied that they are unable to establish a strong emotional connection to their child (McDonic 2004:74). Half of former sponsors who cancelled financial support reported “child relational issues” as reasons for cancellation of support (McDonic 2004:74). To form a meaningful relationship with a child based on the exchange of money runs contrary to our cultural norms and may perhaps be a source of dissonance in sponsors.

CONCLUSION
There are numerous reasons why people living in affluent situations decide to sponsor a child. For some, child sponsorship instils a sense of awareness in their own children of their luxuries through the differences between them and the less fortunate- the clearly emaciated coloured children in the television advertisements. Through this difference, a need for becoming ‘brothers and sisters’ through giving is accentuated and children are taught that as moral beings, they should share with those who have less. For others, a sense of Christian duty is enough to send monthly payments to a Christian organization reaching out to those in need. The responsibility for some Christians to share their faith with others may also be fulfilled through being a sponsor. For some, a sense of personal fulfillment and even redemption comes with sponsoring a child when a monthly proof of kindness is deducted from one’s bank account alongside credit card and phone bills; in fact, World Vision Canada’s tagline is: “Change a life. Change your own” (World Vision Canada 2006).

As with other NGOs, World Vision has been criticized for benefiting the sponsors and donors more than the constituents who receive aid. However, whether it is a ‘good thing’ or a ‘bad thing’, like other NGOs, the needs of the recipients seem only to be met when the needs of the sponsors are met first. In the case of World Vision, helping relatively affluent sponsors form relationships with impoverished ‘other’ children, no matter how fictive, has led to development programs worth billions of dollars in aid. The question remains as to whether the end goals of World Vision justify the means or whether the goals are appropriate at all. What is indisputable is the fact that through the reaffirmation of difference and the reinforcement of stereotypes about ‘children less fortunate than us’, World Vision International has grown to become the world’s largest private organization in development and relief; for this, they must be contended with as a serious player among non-governmental organizations.

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