

Strength in Numbers

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3,240. I didn't have any particular affinity for that number before January 20, 2017. It didn't represent some esoteric significance to me, like a secret handshake or a joke shared with the privileged knowledgeable few (that would be either 42 or 11). Before that day, I didn't know 3,240 from Adam. I'd probably passed 3,240 on the street countless times before, and never paid him any attention. But that was before January 20, 2017. You see, 3,240 and I shared a meaningful experience that afternoon that cemented our friendship forever.

That weekend, an organization called Feed My Starving Children (FMSC) hosted several events around Tucson, offering volunteers the opportunity to help package meals to send (in partnership with other organizations) to hungry children around the world. The school my son Benjamin attends went for a few hours as part of a field trip, and my wife and I wanted to tag along. There were other volunteers there, as well, including a team from the local Air Force base. None of us had any particular experience with food packing - we simply shared a desire to make a difference.

The number FMSC is battling is 6,500. According to their research, that's the number of children around the world that die every day from malnutrition. To combat 6,500, FMSC hosts MobilePack events where they set up multiple packing stations, each manned by anywhere from 13-24 volunteers. Though I didn't have the chance to count, I think our station ended up with about 21 people - something like 6 adults and 15 students. After a brief training, we started packing meals at about 12:30PM. We worked until 2PM. During that hour and a half - 90 minutes - we scooped and bagged and weighed and sealed and boxed with abandon, creating specially formulated healthy meals of vitamins, protein, and carbohydrates while music blared, station leaders shouted, and children cheered for each new box that was filled. The bustle in the hall was palpable, not just because of the number of people, but because of the magnitude of the goal in front of us.

I had just finished filling our 15th box of meal packs when our session ended. Each box contained 36 packs, with each of those packs consisting of 6 meals for hungry children. $15 \text{ boxes} \times 36 \text{ packs / box} \times 6 \text{ meals / pack} = 3,240 \text{ meals}$. During that 90 minutes, 3,240 and I became very close friends. In less than two hours, I touched 3,240 meals - 540 bags of food - and yet every one of them touched me to the core. That's because each bag would sometime in the near future be opened and prepared in order to feed 6 children who are just as precious as my own two sons - 6 children who might not otherwise live to see their next meal.

Here are some other numbers. I estimate there were around 300 people volunteering that day, with the large majority being children from 1st to 8th grade. During that hour and a half, the school and other volunteers packed 159 boxes, or 34,344 meals. Let's imagine for a moment that the 300 of us were packing these boxes to feed another 300 hungry children

that would receive the FMSC meals. In that case, each child gave 90 minutes so that one other child in another part of the world could have three solid meals a day for *38 days*. Turning 90 minutes into 38 days sounds like a fairly sound investment to me. But, of course, it's so much more than that. Such simple acts on our part can mean life itself to those on the brink of disaster. Food in the bellies of starving children can mean the ability to walk and run, to grow, to attend school and learn, and to experience the tangible love of a people who aspire to be the hands and feet of the One who loves beyond measure.

I titled this "Strength in Numbers" not only because I wanted to chronicle a lot of statistics and arithmetic. Rather, I intended to emphasize that the concept of synergy is a very real and powerful thing, particularly for the Body of Christ. Synergy is the phenomenon where the total contribution equals more than the sum of the individual parts. How is this possible? Well, one reason is that, left to ourselves, we often choose to do nothing at all. It may not be because we don't care, but instead we may feel overwhelmed by the need we see, and because we believe ourselves to be unable to do anything on our own to make a difference, we ultimately opt to do nothing. We feel impotent against such a great adversary. The kinship of knowing that even just one other person feels our same passion - our same burden - can fill us with a courage we would not otherwise have. When many of us come together with the same singular purpose, under the call of God and in the power of the Holy Spirit, our Goliaths begin to look a lot smaller. Jesus said even the gates of Hell couldn't hold us back.

Even so, the power of the synergy of many often requires a few "ones" to step up and take the lead. Much of the planning and coordination for the FMSC event were accomplished by a single volunteer whose day job is to be an engineer. He was assisted by a young woman engaging in this event for her high school senior project. These two "ones" put many hours, much effort, and untold passion into reaching out to the community in an effort to see who else would come alongside them to make a difference for suffering children. Their passion was enough to inspire thousands who, by the end of the weekend, had given of their own time, energy, and passion to send love to many thousands of kids around the world in the guise of little bags of vitamins, proteins, and carbohydrates.

Do you remember the number 6,500? That's the number of children who die daily for lack of food. That can feel overwhelming, if one doesn't realize that this number is much smaller than it was just a handful of years ago. Relief organizations, with followers of Jesus at the forefront, have made huge strides in the last 25 years toward eliminating famine and extreme poverty in the world. (*Fast Living*, written by Scott C. Todd, is a compelling book on this topic.) And as often as we can partner with 3,240 to turn 90 minutes into 38 days, we will overcome 6,500 until he's defeated - until he becomes nothing. The call to put an end to extreme poverty is not a pipedream - it is a vision for Christ's Church, and something genuinely achievable in our lifetime. It just takes a few "ones" who can inspire, and it takes all of us to step up to the challenge.