

Assembling Relief Kits as an Act of Worship
Northwest District HUB at Immanuel Church in Cleona PA
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Most of us have learned that the old saying, "Sticks and stones may break my bones but words will never hurt me" is not true. We know the power of unkind words to stay with us and keep on hurting us. It's hard to quiet a criticism or condemnation. And too many people seem to take pride in having a critic's sharp tongue.

So what about good words or blessings? Ancient people believed in the power of blessing or bene-diction (good talk). When a blessing was spoken, ancient people understood that the messages came alive. Blessings weren't seen as mere words that faded away after a short feel good moment. Blessings were seen as strong words that lived on to bring about the good things they were intended to accomplish.

One example is the High Priest's blessing from Numbers 6: 22 – 27.

The LORD said to Moses, "Tell Aaron and his sons, 'This is how you are to bless the Israelites. Say to them:

The LORD bless you and keep you;
the LORD make his face shine on you and be gracious to you;
the LORD turn his face toward you and give you peace.'

"So they will put my name on the Israelites, and I will bless them." NIV

The idea of putting God's name on people sounds strange to us but it indicates the understanding that a blessing would stick with people and help them.

Many of us are familiar with the use of blessings in Celtic Spirituality.

May the strength of God pilot you
the power of God preserve you
the wisdom of God instruct you
the hand of God protect you
the way of God direct you
the shield of God defend you
the hosts of God guard you
Against the snares of the evil one
And the temptations of the world - St Patrick 373

Powerful words empowered Celtic followers of Jesus to take courage and carry the good news about Jesus into hostile territory.

Ancient people also understood that blessings could be stuck to objects.

"God did extraordinary miracles through Paul, so that even handkerchiefs and aprons that had touched him were taken to the sick, and their illnesses were cured and the evil spirits left them" (Acts 19: 11, 12 NIV).

These ideas about the power of blessing gave Immanuel Church in Cleona PA the inspiration to make assembling relief kits a part of our service of worshipping God.

Our worshipping congregation had already been organized into prayer groups of 5 to 6 people. These groups had experience coming together in the pews during our service of worship on Sunday mornings.

Our HUB servants start off by discerning which kind of relief kit to work on during a particular season of the year. For example, it makes sense to work on school kits for the fall and birthing kits for Christmas. Of course whatever needs Mission Central identify are considered first. Items for the relief kit our HUB servants select are collected in advance of the Sunday Morning on which the kits will be assembled as we worship.

Each week leading up to relief kit Sunday, we try to remember to collect and dedicate relief kit items the same way we collect the standard tithes and offerings. This reinforces the idea that we want the blessings of our worship, love and prayers to stick to the gifts that will be sent out to the world.

On relief kit Sunday, worshippers enter the worship space and see the relief kit items organized on tables located right up front near the Lord's Table. The placement of the items near the Lord's Table reminds us that whatever we do for others in need, we do for Jesus. After our songs have been sung, the Word of God proclaimed and our prayers and praise lifted up, we gather in our prayer groups.

The ends of the pews are numbered so that prayer group partners can find each other according to the number assigned to their group. Groups gather at the end of two pews so that they can turn and face each other for prayer.

Group members who are able come forward to the area around the Lord's Table to pick up the items needed for the Relief Kit of the day. Often we have enough supplies for groups to assemble two to four kits. Once the items are with the groups in the pews, we ask the group members to take turns blessing each and every item one at a time.

Prayers of blessing are provided and group members that are comfortable reading speak the blessings out loud so the entire group can listen and participate in heart and mind. People are encouraged to imagine someone receiving the relief kit, opening it and somehow becoming aware of the blessings that have been stuck to the supplies.

Here is an example of the blessings we used for Birthing Kits

Loving God, bless this plastic bag so that it wraps these gifts in hope and helps them arrive safely into the hands of people in need.

Loving God, bless this bar of soap so that it washes away danger and helps provide a new beginning safeguarded from illness.

Loving God, bless this pair of gloves so that they shield caring hands and help provide wisdom, tenderness and skill.

Loving God, bless this square of plastic sheeting so that it helps create a safe space for mother and child. Let them feel your strength holding them.

Loving God, bless this razor blade and the hands that hold it so that they can cut carefully and help love find room to grow outside of the womb.

Loving God, bless these pieces of string so that they hold and heal and help tears give way to laughter.

Loving God, bless these blankets so that they bring comfort and help a child feel and know peace and security.

After each and every item is blessed, the kits are assembled under the direction of a trained HUB servant. Prayer Group members then return the assembled kits to the area around the Lord's Table. A familiar song is usually sung as we move to and from the Lord's Table.

Usually we will set up stations at the front and back of the worship space so that groups can share the Lord's Supper as they depart together. Relief Kit Sunday is often a time when we will offer refreshments in Fellowship Hall following our service of worship.

Incorporating the assembling of Relief Kits into our service of worship has helped round out our worship so that we are not focused so much on what we get out of worship but what we can give in worship. It helps us better understand why worship is called a service.

We are grateful to Mission Central for opening a way for us to experience giving in a simply awesome way. We see how small things can make a big difference. It is especially wonderful for us to see older adults and children working and praying together. A legacy is being created.

Here are other relief kit blessings that we have used:

Layette Kit Blessing

Creator of Life deliver these diapers into gentle hands that are moved by a caring heart that is willing to change and wash them and love the baby who needs them.

Creator of Life, may the love that clothes your child in these shirts (or suits) also clothe your child in healing grace.

Creator of Life, may the love that clothes your child in this sweater also protect your child.

Creator of Life, may the love that wraps your child in these blankets also keep your child in comfort and security.

Creator of Life, may the love that clothes your child in these sleepers (or gowns) also hold your child in rest and peace.

Creator of Life, may the love that washes your child with these washcloths also bless your child with mercy and forgiveness.

Creator of Life bless these pins as they hold things together so that your child finds justice and goodness in the world.

School Kit Blessing

Jesus our teacher, bless this school bag so that it carries encouragement for creativity and learning to the student who receives it.

Jesus our teacher, bless this paper so that it inspires thoughts and feelings that promote understanding.

Jesus our teacher, bless this eraser so that it reminds students to be patient with themselves and others and to accept your mercy.

Jesus our teacher, bless this pencil sharpener so that it gives a little space for wondering about new opportunities.

Jesus our teacher, bless these pencils so that they guide hands and minds to use the power of language for good.

Jesus our teacher, bless these crayons so that they color the student's imagination with joy and beauty.

Jesus our teacher, bless this ruler so that it helps bring order out of chaos and purpose out of confusion.

Jesus our teacher, bless this pair of scissors so that they shape new possibilities and open mysteries.

Health Kit Blessing

God, who heals us, bless this plastic bag so that it wraps these gifts in hope and carries them safely to a person who needs help.

God, who heals us, bless this towel like the towel Jesus used to dry feet so that the person who uses it feels Jesus' touch and love.

God, who heals us, bless this wash cloth and guide it to scrub away dirt and germs so that sadness turns to joy.

God, who heals us, bless this comb like the hand of Jesus that he placed on the heads of children so that comfort spreads from the head to the whole person.

God, who heals us, bless this nail clipper or file so that it helps make rough hands kind.

God, who heals us, bless this bar of soap so that it bubbles up to cleanse and to make laughter without tears.

God, who heals us, bless this toothbrush so that the person whose teeth it polishes has food to chew and the help of a dentist.

God, who heals us, bless these bandages so that they defend and help with healing as well as give encouragement.

God, who heals us, bless this health kit as an aid to healing. We pray that people with healing gifts like doctors and nurses would come along with it.

Amen!