

Jeff Farmer's \$6 Mission to Save the World

Jeff Farmer was recovering from cancer surgery when he read the statistics in a World Vision newsletter: 1) Every 45 seconds a child age 5 and under dies from malaria, according to the World Health Organization; 2) Although the United States successfully eradicated malaria 60 years ago, this deadly disease spread by infected mosquitoes kills nearly 2,000 children every day. The World Health Organization's commitment to wipe out malaria across the globe by 2015 has been joined by secular organizations such as The Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, the NBA and many others.

Among Christians, however, charismatic and Pentecostal churches have been missing in action for the fight to eliminate malaria. But that changed when the Holy Spirit gave Farmer, who retired as president of charismatic Open Bible Churches earlier this year, a wake-up call to help bring an end to the disease. Farmer had been meditating on Psalm 91 during his ordeal of discovering he had cancer and the ensuing surgery when God began to speak to him about malaria—a stealthy, silent killer.

"The deadliest predator in Africa is the mosquito that strikes the most vulnerable [people] at night," Farmer says. "God began to show me through Psalm 91 that 'terror by night' [v. 5] is malaria because the female mosquito, which carries the parasite, strikes primarily at night."

The Holy Spirit then quickened Farmer with the idea of how he could mobilize charismatic churches to combat the disease. In his other role as chairman of the Pentecostal/Charismatic Churches of North America, Farmer had been charged with planning the PCCNA's national leadership meeting. He felt impressed by God to present the 30-member group with a

challenge to join World Vision in its fight against malaria.

"This was the biggest leadership risk I had ever taken, but I had heard from God," he says. "I called my friend Steve [Haas] at World Vision and proposed the idea of having the PCCNA meeting at their headquarters."

Haas, vice president and chief catalyst of World Vision, responded to Farmer's request by saying he had been praying for a "David" to rise up from the church to battle this Goliath-like foe.

"I have seen too many sick children stricken by this deadly killer," Haas says, "and find it unacceptable that we wiped this plague from our very own domestic footprint but we're not as aggressive in eliminating this menace in other places."

Most Westerners have never heard of malaria, though it wreaks havoc in tropical Third World countries and Sub-Saharan African nations. More than 1 million people a year die from the disease, and between 300 million and 500 million cases of malaria are reported each year, according to the U.S. Centers for Disease Control.

Malaria is a parasitic disease marked by high fevers, shaking chills, flu-like symptoms and anemia. When a mosquito bites a person infected with malaria, the insect becomes a carrier. The parasite is transferred to the human blood stream from the mosquito's bite where it ultimately infects and destroys red blood cells, which can bring death.

When Farmer called for the PCCNA executive board to hold its meeting at World Vision's headquarters, it was the fulfillment for him of a long-standing dream. "For 45 years I had a hope that the church could speak with a single voice on one issue that would cause society to take notice," he explains. "I wanted unbelievers to see a love letter from God's people to society. I believed by taking up the cause of fighting malaria, we could send a message of God's love to the world."

Upon sharing his vision with PCCNA denominational leaders, Farmer says they immediately joined the war against malaria by signing a letter of intent, effectively placing charismatic and Pentecostal believers strategically in the battle to defeat the disease.

The War on Children

"We believe igniting the church will push [support for malaria] over the edge so malaria is gone for good in 2015," says John Volinsky, National Director of Church Partnerships. *Charisma* interviewed Volinsky while he was in Kenya showing a group of pastors the need for churches to be involved. The week before, he was in a remote area of the Congo exploring the need for resources to fight malaria.

"I was in the equatorial region of the Congo, where there are no paved roads or electricity," Volinsky says. "I spent some time talking to the Evangelical Covenant Church, and the pastor told me he had conducted 20 funerals for children who had died, mostly from malaria. In this village, none of the parents name their children because the child mortality rate is so high."

While Volinsky and his videographer toured a clinic there, they noticed a 3-year-old girl who was receiving an IV blood transfusion. As they walked out of the room after the tour Volinsky asked his videographer to go back and interview the child.

"She was sweating heavily," Volinsky says. "The nurses were working on her, and 30 minutes later Tom [the videographer] told me she had died."

Volinsky added: "A \$6 bed net could have saved her. The nurse told me that last week there were 15 children admitted, and most of them were malaria patients. Five of them have died. This happened even under the care of a physician and in the hospital. This hospital is the largest in the area and has no

bed nets. We must win this war.”

The reality of foreign children dying from a preventable disease has sparked the interest of children stateside. Pastor Dan Powell of Calvary Open Bible Church in Dayton, Ohio, said the project has helped to get more children in his congregation interested in giving to missions. “They could relate to a child dying because of a disease,” Powell says. “That was a pretty powerful connecting point.”

Children were also involved in fundraising at pastor Chris Hansler’s Celebration Center church in Puyallup, Wash. “One of our members wrote a children’s book that told the story of how they could help, and the kids participated in the giving,” Hansler says.

During the discipleship-themed Ignite youth conference in Los Angeles in 2011, high school students generously responded after being challenged to action by Gary Emery, regional executive director of Pacific Open Bible Churches. Emery had seen Farmer on video discussing the need and was heartbroken “for these precious children who wanted the most basic parental desire: to keep their children alive,” he says.

Emery attended the conference expecting only “to encourage our youth pastors and connect with young leaders” but says that he was instead “surprised when I found myself standing in front of these students, tears streaming down my face, sharing the plight of these little ones in Africa and challenging each of these students to buy a net. I had no video to show, no materials to present, just a heart broken and challenged by a tragic, yet preventable situation.”

The students responded immediately with donations for bed nets. “I have no doubt that young people across the nation will respond to this life-and-death cause and will lead the way in winning the war against malaria,” Emery adds.

One Net, Two Lives

The chief weapon against the spread of malaria, according to World Vision, is a simple bed net treated with pesticides or pyrethroids, a manufactured pesticide that's safe for humans when not ingested. Mosquito nets treated with insecticides are about twice as effective in preventing malaria compared to untreated nets and offer more than 70 percent protection compared to having no net.

One net can cover two children and costs \$6. The combination of insecticide-treated bed nets, indoor residual spraying, therapy with the anti-malaria drug compound Artemisinin, and rapid and accurate diagnosis has led to dramatic drops in malaria. By combining these measures, Rwanda successfully reduced malaria deaths by 60 percent.

Another success story is Senegal's southern region. In 2005 there were 2 million recorded cases and at least 2,000 deaths from malaria, according to the World Health Organization. World Vision worked closely with Senegal's national malaria control program to reduce the incidence of malaria. The result of that partnership was a 41 percent drop in confirmed malaria cases, from nearly 300,000 to 175,000, all in 2009.

Malaria in children under age 5 dropped from 400,000 suspected cases in 2006 to 30,000 confirmed cases in 2009. Overall, the child mortality rate was reduced by 30 percent from 2005 to 2009. Nearly 6 million insecticide-treated mosquito nets have been distributed since 2005. And as of 2010, World Vision reported that 82 percent of households owned at least one insecticide-treated mosquito net—a 36 percent increase in less than two years.

Rallying the Troops

Farmer conducted a "beta test" in Open Bible Churches by asking local congregations to host a Malaria Sunday. Some participating churches displayed the mosquito bed net on stages or in foyers and educated members on the spread of malaria. Hansler launched a five-week campaign, "Death to

Life," at his church that culminated on Easter Sunday.

"We hung one of the malaria nets in our sanctuary so that people could see what it was they were purchasing," he says. "Our goal for the first year was to raise awareness and to raise enough money to purchase 250 bed nets. The congregation responded by giving enough for 760 bed nets! We will make this our annual Easter outreach effort."

Hansler showed the congregation how giving up just one personal leisure item could save the lives of children. "We made cards and attached them to a bed net that showed how giving up a movie could save two children or giving up a round of golf could save 10 lives."

Powell also asked for each member of his church to buy a bed net. "Our typical weekend attendance is 165," he says. "We set a goal of 250 nets, knowing that some would give more. Powell's church raised \$2,100, covering the cost of 350 nets."

Nancy Rupli, director of the Eastern Region Women's Ministries for Open Bible Churches, is also launching a campaign at the beginning of 2012.

"I'm really excited about joining forces with secular world organizations such as the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation," she says. "This says so much about the church linking arms instead of segregating ourselves. I'm encouraging the women to think outside of the box, such as collecting corporate donations. We must go beyond bake sales. We need to infiltrate the private sector; we need to integrate with the world on this cause."

Rupli's goal is to get her region's 20 groups of women—in Connecticut, Indiana, Kentucky, Michigan, New York, Ohio, Pennsylvania and West Virginia—to raise \$12,000. "That will equal 4,000 lives, or 'two days' of conquering the disease," she explains. Though she's not met anyone affected by malaria, Rupli says, "I'm excited by the thought that we can make a

profound difference and literally change the fate of a nation!"

Denominations Team Up

Farmer's beta test was successful. Now a full-scale campaign for churches to celebrate World Malaria Day on April 25 is being rolled out with World Vision partnering with PCCNA.

Moreover, Christian Churches Together, a group that includes evangelical, Orthodox, Roman Catholic, Pentecostals, historic Protestant, and racial and ethnic churches invited Farmer to their annual meeting in January to address the topic of malaria.

"There has been nothing short of a grand awakening of evangelicals and Pentecostals who are grasping the truth of the 'whole' gospel that is an integrated faith formation of the Good News made manifest in our lives, words, deeds and the signs of the Holy Spirit," Haas says. "Some have called this the greatest apologetic for the faith we have joined ourselves to."

Farmer, who's now cancer-free, believes that malaria isn't just a health crisis but also a social justice issue. "Our African brothers and sisters lose \$12 billion a year in their economy because of malaria," he explains. "This is a matter of justice for them."

In a PCCNA statement Farmer made this declaration: "One day in the future this untitled Pentecostal/charismatic action will be as significant as the Memphis Miracle, which launched our movement and committed us all to reconciliation and justice. Malaria is a justice issue, for it perpetuates the cycle of poverty.

"Malaria is a reconciliation issue because many of us have ancestors who enslaved Africans and destroyed families. This war against malaria is one way we can go back to Africa and give freedom and hope and healing."

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