

Health Environmental Learning Program
Devi Raman Badal help_usa1997@yahoo.com
Madhu Bajracharya

Health Environmental Learning Program (H.E.L.P.) is a non-profit organization (501c3) which began in 1997 and was approved by the IRS in 1999. Tim and Lani Ackerman, MD, an ecologist and family practice doctor, respectively, were the founders. Having already worked in developing countries, our vision was to have an organization which would not be viewed as a “mission”, with its negative connotations in closed countries, but instead as a community development organization. Through prayer and study, as well as previous experience, we felt the Lord wanted development both to and through the churches, rather than working as a Para-church or separate non-governmental organization (NGO). With the problems of “rice” churches, and conversions for perceived material benefit due to the poverty of many in developing countries, the program was also geared toward enabling believers to care for their family and generate income. These believers in turn, we believed, could give to their church to make it more self-sufficient.

HELP’s first few years in Nepal were mainly spent learning the language and culture, finding out how things worked and who the Lord was leading into our lives. We worked with other secular development projects and saw what worked, what didn’t, and developed ideas.

Currently, HELP is serving the people of Nepal using the model of Jesus’ ministry to meet both the physical and spiritual needs of the poor. The foundation of our work is literacy. We target women and young girls in our literacy outreach because in Nepal most have not had the opportunity for education. The believer, who cannot study the Word of God, cannot grow and is susceptible to erroneous doctrine. In addition, general understanding of health issues, environmental cleanliness, sanitation, advanced agriculture techniques, and income generation requires basic literacy and math skills.

HELP is a church-based training and outreach program supported solely through church and personal donations. All denominations of churches are welcome to work with us if they agree to our basic doctrinal statement of faith.

We believe in one God, the Trinity, God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Spirit. We believe Jesus Christ, God’s son, was born of a virgin, died on the cross for our sins, and rose again the third day. We believe the command, which He gave “to make disciples of all nations.” We believe the Bible is the inspired word of God. We believe all believers are baptized (sealed) with the Holy Spirit. We believe in salvation only through faith in Jesus Christ the creator of heaven and earth. We believe that though He has ordained works, they are secondary to our faith in Him, and not the means of salvation. We await and look forward to the second coming of Jesus Christ as we seek to do His will on earth as it is in Heaven.

Our vision is to improve the health, sanitation, nutrition, education, and general social status of the Nepali poor, with a focus on the Christian community. Our mission is empowering Nepalese through facilitating local believers and introducing sustainable community health and income generation. Church communities must participate themselves by contributing time and money, and work together to form groups to maintain the development work.

Because 80% of Nepal is rural and poor, particularly the most unreached groups, our main strategy of working through the churches is through Christian community development in the areas of health, agriculture, animal husbandry, environment, and literacy. Currently we are employing eight full time staff/trainers to help accomplish training in the aforementioned areas. Each staff conducts at least one to two weeks of scheduled trainings each month, as well as field follow-up. Our focus is first to equip the church (Hebrews 13:21, Eph 4:11,12), then through the church minister to the community (Gal 6:10). While we do not directly plant churches, the training we conduct often results in the local church being able to grow and improve the health and livelihood of their members and community. Training of traditional birth assistants, community health workers, animal husbandry, and agriculture were incorporated about a year after literacy classes began. We have only been working in these areas for about two years.

All of our team members (paid staff) are committed believers. Those volunteers who will be later serving in the community, such as community health workers, traditional birth assistants or literacy facilitators, are referred by their churches, and must be Christians. Other trainings are open to nonbelievers, but they are made aware that this is a church-based activity and prayer and devotions will accompany all trainings. Literacy classes, in particular, often include nonbelievers in the community and are an excellent means to manifest the love of Christ to our neighbors. Our purpose is not to only benefit the believers, but through the local church to demonstrate our love for our neighbors, as the Lord Jesus commanded to love your neighbor as yourself.

Our programs currently include:

1. Basic literacy (6 months) and Advanced literacy
2. Sewing training
3. Advanced Agriculture techniques – composting, bamboo plantation, kitchen gardening, etc.
4. Health –Traditional Birth Assistant, first aid/ community health
5. Animal husbandry– goat and chicken raising (to be expanded to include water buffalo and fish)
6. Smokeless stove (chimneys) – for home ventilation and preservation of forests. A very inexpensive yet rare necessity in the villages of Nepal.

All trainings have certain requirements of those attending. First of all, they must be able and willing to teach others in their community the principles they learn. Our teams regularly go to the field for follow-up work, as well as conduct follow-up training in all areas. Most trainings are held at our base, while others are held in the villages or areas that request them. The churches benefiting from the training are expected to contribute in some way, usually providing one day of food for each 3 days of training when held away from our base location. Trainees are expected to pay a small registration fee for each training, as well as half of their transportation costs. HELP provides food and basic lodging during the training. Specific requirements for those attending the training are available from the coordinator and the individual team. In addition to the training, follow-up, and community work, we assist communities in providing clean drinking water, irrigation water, and toilets, in a combined community effort, which requires contribution of funds and work from the community and/or church.

All trainings to date have taken place in participating churches. However, recently the Lord provided land on which a training center is now being built that should be large enough to provide housing for staff, and ample area for demonstration of agriculture and animal husbandry techniques that are being taught.

Because we are against “number counting” we do not know how many have come to Christ, but we know that nearly all churches we are working with are experiencing growth. Team members and pastors also tell us of many individual cases of salvation. We have seen in follow-up those who are trained are earning money and supporting their families. People have even trusted Christ during some trainings, and, better yet, have not turned back to Hinduism or Buddhism. Communities who are antagonistic to Christians realize that the church can be a help to them too, in social ways. Trainings conducted in the communities are undertaken with the church. When people ask, “Who is organizing and sponsoring this?” – it is not perceived as an NGO or INGO or HELP – it is the local church. When church leaders go back to work in their communities as volunteers – whether teaching about health, animal health, or agriculture, they are not our employees, but volunteers who are Christians. Many couple their evangelism (which is illegal) with their other work, and find that their neighbors are happy to listen, in contrast to previous attempts.

In the area of health, we know many individual cases of lives saved or suffering alleviated, but due to our lack of adequate staff, we aren’t able to do proper pre and post data collection. Those communities with community health workers have many more toilets than before. Where we have given training on chimney building, in some instances one person trained builds 5-10 more for his neighbors, even earning a few rupees in the process (and in one case, giving 50% back to the Lord). We hope in the future to have more community surveys and get a better idea of what we are accomplishing. Because of the government’s antagonism to the church, we cannot work directly with their health programs officially. On the local level, many government health workers are happy to work with our staff. We have no scientific data, just reports from people in the community that they are happy with the good results and health of their animals/production of the land. Our programs have not been in effect long enough to really measure them accurately as far as long-term results.

One year ago, in cooperation with two local churches, we founded a Children’s Home for abandoned and orphaned children (James 1:27). Currently we have 33 children who are fed, clothed, educated and loved by Christian couples who live with them. We believe they will be some of the future church leaders of Nepal, and will return to their villages after we train them in the areas HELP is working in.

Many mistakes were made at first in trusting people referred by pastors, and the church leadership, and we have learned that strict rules must be established and followed; any money used must have very close accountability. Often people come to training just for free food, and have no intention of utilizing the information – we now require that they sign a pledge to work in their community, and provide better field follow-up than before

There is always a spiritual battle, of course. We cannot register as an official non-governmental organization due to our close relationship with the churches. Generally the churches are not registered in Nepal. When starting the training center, some Hindus, who

realized it was a church-related program, debated boundaries and caused a long delay. We will be providing goat-raising classes to those living around the land, and they are happy about our coming there. Unfortunately, a number of the money-hungry pastors have become angry with us when because we do not give money directly to them, or give to their personal projects. They can be a bigger problem than the non-believers. We also have the ongoing problem of the civil conflict with the Maoists. Any Christian is suspected of foreign alignment, and our workers must be wise. Sometimes we cannot do proper follow-up due to the danger. In addition, since we cannot register, we must use care in how we present our trainings and cannot give "certifications" even though our programs are of higher quality than those run through the government and INGO's. We have debated registering as an NGO, but it would open up all the church work to government investigation and require us to hire non-Christians to supervise the trainings.

HELP is growing and improving as we get more organized and experienced. More projects and more training still requires more funding, even though we require participation from the community. In Nepal the reality is poverty and a weak economy. Our current building is required because many landowners will not rent to Christians, and we must have land for agriculture, and animal husbandry hands-on training as well as a place for the staff to live where they can communicate well. Phones are a luxury here. Our real test will be this next year, when the Ackermans will not be resident, but will be short-termers, coming twice a year to Nepal, and supervising via email at other times.

Our philosophy is that "missionaries should work themselves out of a job," since staying in the country too long can breed dependency, which can become a problem if the one individual that is being "depended" upon is no longer present. This is especially critical in closed countries. We realize we must continue to direct and fund many things -- especially the orphanage, which cannot be sustainable in the near future, but we want the Nepalese we have trained to take the leadership and everyday decision-making. How our staff works, and how things are conducted should be conducted to please our Savior, and not us, will be the true test of success.

We pray that God will allow us to expand to more churches, to more districts in Nepal, and to more countries, to enable Christians to take better care of their families, and be leaders of change in their communities. We also hope that other missions and individuals can utilize some of our ideas in other developing countries.