

CULTURE & THE ARTS

Teens raise sights to world's need

My name is Benjamin Wright, and I am a firm believer that anyone and everyone can and should make a positive difference in the world."

The opening line of Wright's guest post on the Episcopal Relief & Development blog pretty much sums it up. Feeling called to use his talents and theater experience to make a real impact on the lives of people around the world, he called together a group of volunteers from Desoto, Texas, to stage a benefit production of *Godspell*, an acclaimed Broadway musical based on the Gospel of Matthew.

Through cash and in-kind donations, Wright and his crew were able to assemble permissions, props, costumes and technical elements for the show, so the full amount of box-office sales could be donated to Episcopal Relief & Development.

All of this was accomplished with support from local volunteers; Theater Arlington; St. Alban's Episcopal Church in Arlington; St. Anne Episcopal Church in DeSoto; and Canterbury Episcopal School, where Wright, 16, is a junior.

He instructed that the contributions be used to support programs that provide food and clean water for communities in need. "Regrettably, in our society today, teenagers are not pushed to make such a difference," he wrote. "I wanted to prove that with firm application and determination, a youth could actually create a major difference

in many people's lives."

The son of two priests – his mother, Melanie, is priest-in-charge at St. Alban's; his father, Andrew, is rector at St. Anne – Wright said he first heard about Episcopal Relief & Development through his mother's church several years ago, when they lived in Maryland.

"I learned both of Gifts for Life and the NetsforLife® program... [and] I would contribute from time to time by purchasing an item in someone's name as a Christmas gift," he said.

He said the idea for the *Godspell* benefit came after he participated in a program that explored how shortages of food and fresh water impact millions of people worldwide. He and a number of other teens from the program teamed up with friends, classmates and local Episcopal youth to plan the show.

The project exceeded its fundraising goal of \$8,000 through box-office sales alone and also raised funds with refreshment and T-shirt sales.

"They might not know it, but even the way they organized the event — mobilizing local resources and using their own talents and strengths to multiply the contributions they received for the benefit of many — is very similar to the way our local partners work," said Rob Radtke, president of Episcopal Relief & Development. "It is wonderful to hear about young people taking leadership roles and using their talents to make a difference in the lives of others." ■

CONVERSATION continued from page 13

and missiology. I'm interested in teaching about the church around the world, and my studies will focus on the church in Sudan. There are a lot of really fascinating questions about the church in Sudan, from which we can learn a lot about how the Gospel is spread around the world.

Ultimately, I'm interested in teaching people in the U.S. about the church around the world and teaching people around the world about the church in the U.S. When I spent time in Nigeria, for instance, I realized just how little Americans know about the church there and how the Nigerian response to questions that have shaken the Anglican Communion for the last decade has been shaped by a host of local factors. At the same time, folks in Nigeria have a lot to learn about the church in the U.S. I think there's a real need in the world for bridge figures who can interpret one part of the world to another.

I'm also working on a second book, called *Backpacking through the Anglican Communion: A Search for Unity*, which will be based on my travels in the world church over the last several years. I'm trying to show what it is like to be an Anglican at the grassroots level in different parts of the world — learning what unites Anglicans and what separates them. I think, and I've seen, that what unites us is much greater than what divides us.

Does this give you hope for the future of missionary work through the church?

I am always hopeful, perhaps fool-



Jesse Zink with a young friend.

ishly so. I am hopeful about the future of the world church. I am hopeful that someday we will learn to live by Jesus' prayer for his followers that we all may be one. That's a missional prayer. Jesus says, "That they all may be one ... so that the world may believe." Our unity is connected to our witness to the world.

It's exciting that the church is realizing that what has worked in the past may no longer work now or in the future and that we all need to be missionaries of the Gospel of Jesus Christ and bear that news of reconciliation. This can be a little bit scary but also exciting — to move from a church model with which we're so familiar to a model of church where we are all missionaries, reaching out to people who are different from us. We need to renew ourselves in the transforming love of God in Christ, whether it's at a garbage dump in South Africa or just down the street.

I have a lot of hope that it is already happening in the church and will continue. And I'm really grateful to be part of this diocese [Western Massachusetts], which has nurtured me and sent me out into the world. ■

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The cover of the July 2012 issue of the Episcopal Journal features a photograph of children at a garden project. The headline "Water, seeds and soil" is followed by the sub-headline "'Abundant Life' awaits children at convention". Other headlines include "Remembering Manzanar" and "A cool experience on a spring day!". The journal is monthly, volume 2, number 7, July 2012, \$3.75 per copy.