

We don't have to survive to be Christians, but we do have to be generous to be Christians.

This account comes from a past director of the ELCA World Hunger Appeal. She was doing site visits to some of the places in Africa which had been helped through the Hunger Appeal. In many of the villages, people were giving her gifts of appreciation for assistance they had received through the Hunger Appeal. She graciously accepted these gifts, honoring the African cultures of hospitality.

In one village a 15 year-old boy gave her a chicken. A chicken is an awkward gift but she received it and asked her sponsoring hosts what she was supposed to do with it. They suggested that she take it to the next village and give it to someone there. She was curious about the boy and asked the village elders about him. They told her that he had two younger brothers; that her father had died of AIDS and her mother had recently died of malaria. They were staying with their grandmother who also had malaria. This boy was, in reality, the head of the household. The director asked how many chickens the family had. An elder responded, "Well, they had two, and now they have one."

The director said she could not accept this chicken. Her whole life was dedicated to reducing hunger and making people less food insecure. By accepting this chicken, she was putting this family in greater jeopardy. The elders replied that she must accept the chicken. She thought that it was simply a matter of the demands of their culture and insisted that the survival of this family overrode any cultural expectations. They talked past each other for a while until one of the elders finally said, "They don't have to survive to be Christians, but they do have to be generous to be Christians." The director was struck by the truth of the statement. She understood that these people would not say that lightly – they dealt with the reality of death far more frequently than we do in the Northern Hemisphere. It was a statement of the theology of the Cross that was powerful and true. She did not return the chicken, but has told this story many times to help people understand the importance of generosity.