



**Foundation**

**Stones**

**mary's  
meals**

a simple solution  
to world hunger

## Introduction

What is it that defines Mary's Meals as a unique mission? Why do we do this work and why do we choose to do it in a very particular way? The answers to these questions are found in our vision, mission and values statement, which includes a section on our origins. I write this little booklet, then, not to change or replace that foundational document, but to build on it, by considering a little more deeply what it means and how it shapes our decisions and behaviours.

We believe that the way we do this work is as important as the end results. It is vital, therefore, to create a consistent and deeply held understanding of 'the Mary's Meals way' in order to help all of us – both current co-workers and those who will join in the future – to live it better. Each little act of love performed in pursuit of this mission, among thousands of others, is as precious as the total consequence of our combined effort. The bold impressive number stating how many children we feed globally on a particular day, has no greater value than the happy serving of one mug of porridge, or the encouraging word spoken to a struggling co-worker.

This is not a rule book, nor something comprehensive, but rather a reflection that can help us understand the principles on which our decision-making and organisational culture are built. It focuses on our ethos, our values, and even our spirituality. Our values have always proclaimed that this mission belongs to people of all faiths and none. That has been the reality of Mary's Meals since our inception and will continue to be, always. People belonging to one particular faith or denomination will never be more welcome in this mission than any other. The only qualification required to join this movement is a desire to see the hungry child fed and set free from poverty. While we may not share the same beliefs, we certainly share a love of the children we serve. As the Mary's Meals movement grows ever more diverse in terms of creed, race and geography, it becomes ever more beautiful and ever more capable of fulfilling our mission and vision.

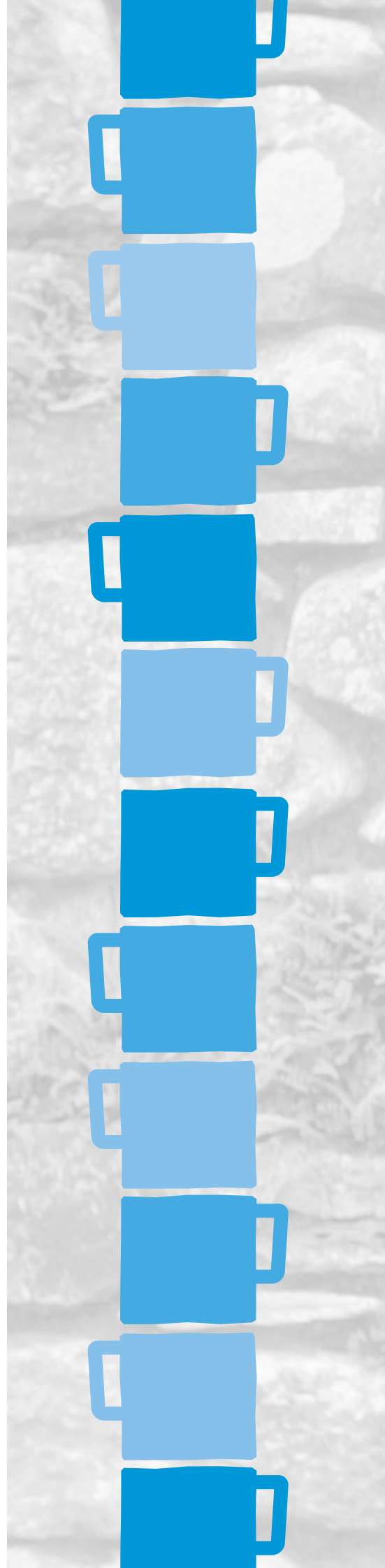
At the same time, we are an organisation named after Mary the Mother of Jesus and shaped by a Christian spirituality which affirms that charity is love, received and given; that true development requires, not only technical progress and relationships of utility, but also love – and that love must be rooted always in truth, to avoid the risk of becoming something only sentimental. For this reason, we strive to avoid placing intelligence and love in separate compartments but instead recognise that 'love is rich in intelligence and intelligence is full of love.'

From the beginning we have always recognised that prayer is one beautiful way to participate in this mission (in fact prayer came first in the story of Mary's Meals) and while prayer is certainly not obligatory for all who participate, its place in the daily life of Mary's Meals is to be respected in a special way.

And so, I would like to begin this reflection with a prayer.

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1. Caritas et Veritatis, Pope Benedict XVI



## **The Mary's Meals prayer**

**Our Father give us this day our daily bread  
and forgive us for the times when we take more  
than our share of the bread that belongs to all.**

**Let us help You fill the starving with good things,  
not with scraps from our table.**

**Teach us how to share what is not ours to keep.**

**Clothe us with Your love that we may complete  
each good work You created us to do.**

**Place in our hearts Your compassion for each  
starving child and use our little acts of love so  
that they starve no more.**

**Amen.**

These words are known as the Mary's Meals Prayer which is said each day by many who take part in this mission in different parts of the world. It can help all of us understand more deeply the gift of Mary's Meals, regardless of our beliefs, and the seven phrases expressed in it lend themselves to the seven short chapters that follow.



## Our Father, give us this day our daily bread

These are, of course, very familiar words, given to us by Jesus when he taught us how to pray The Lord's Prayer. When we ask God for our daily bread, we express our utter dependence on Him for everything we need. By doing this, we also enter into solidarity with those who, in this world of plenty, lack even the most basic things, including those who do not even have enough food to eat. We are all equally dependent on our good and loving God for everything and when we chose to call him 'Our Father', it follows that we are also choosing to call each other brothers and sisters. Furthermore, by asking for our daily bread we assert this bread belongs to us all, and because we make this request to a good and loving Father, we ask with childlike confidence and trust.

Our approach to this simple mission rests on this. Our work – to ensure that every child in this world might eat a meal every day in their place of education – mirrors this prayer. We wish to help God answer this petition made by countless millions every day, by being willing helpers in the distribution of His Daily Bread.

This belief in divine providence and attitude of dependence on God has a profound impact on our decision-making and approach to this work. We do not pretend to be 'the prime movers' of this mission. It does not belong to us; we are simply stewards of this gift of Mary's Meals and at the service of all who wish to participate. Nor are we in control of the future or able to predict each aspect of it with any certainty. We are most interested in today, the need in front of us now, when we think of this work. That does not mean that we disregard the need for forward planning or the desire to carry out this work in a way that aims also to bring about a better future for the children we serve. What it does mean is that we do not neglect the needs of a child today in the service of some uncertain future or ideology.

Therefore, when we do make future plans and strategies – and of course we must in order to be good stewards of every gift entrusted to our care – the realisation of these plans does not become the primary measure of our success or failure. While we want this mission to grow to reach every hungry child, and while we can work very hard, bringing all we have to its service, we cannot control entirely the rate of that growth. We should therefore be reluctant to set timebound targets, especially because providence so often means that things – more wonderful than any plan we would have dared to write down – tend to happen! We need to remain free to respond also to new pressing needs of our brothers and sisters – to emergency situations and humanitarian disasters – and also to new opportunities that open up unexpectedly which allow us to advance our mission. Our planning must support a flexible response to these things, recognising that we do not have full sight of a divine masterplan.

Our belief in divine providence also provides us with a deep sense of hope and optimism – a belief that God will never be outdone in generosity, that when we do this work with pure motives and with all our hearts, nor will he let down the children we serve. This means that our decision-making is marked by a certain confidence and boldness: at times we will make choices that other organisations, those that are not built on a belief in divine providence, would not make.

Our vision statement also derives from this attitude. We are so bold as to envisage a day when every child in this world might eat a daily meal in their place of education because God, in His providence and love for each of them, would like this to be accomplished and he has the resources at His disposal to see it happen. The fact that He has invited us to be co-workers in achieving this is at once a mystery and reason for deep gratitude.



## Forgive us for the times when we take more than our share of the bread that belongs to all

Many people who have more than they need desire to share some of their surplus with those who lack even the most basic things. Some see this as a simple practice of justice; a duty borne from a belief that all human beings have a right to the basic necessities of life and that every child has a right to the food they require to live and grow. For them, not to share would be an act of injustice, almost an act of theft. Others are compelled simply by a burning compassion for the suffering child, to practice charity. To resist this urge would be demeaning to them and would make them feel less fully human and less joyful. It is therefore natural for man, to seek forgiveness for the times we chose not to share.

However, the overwhelming and enduring experience of Mary's Meals is of the innate goodness of people. This mission was born only because of an incredible outpouring of goodness in response to a little plea on behalf of suffering people. It has continued to grow in the years since because that torrent of charity, in the form of thousands of daily acts of love, has grown ever larger to become like a mighty river. For those of us who serve this mission on a daily basis, the depth and beauty of these acts of love can only prompt feelings of wonder and awe. Sometimes this wonderful river grows so big that our responsibility to guide it to the parched lands it seeks, can almost feel overwhelming. We can only work as hard as we can to build riverbanks, create dams and dig canals so that not a precious drop is lost.

It could be said that our mission is simply, about enabling good people to share with those in need, in a very effective way. Our approach to that task is founded on a profound respect for the innate goodness of people. Those of us who work for Mary's Meals as staff and in positions of responsibility are servants of those people who wish to share, more than we are their leaders. We are doing good for those people who share through Mary's Meals by enabling them to do so. Through their acts of sharing they also become more fully human and happy, just like the children they feed.

This leads us to respect very deeply those who support our work – every one of them, regardless of the value of their

gifts. And thankfully the bread that belongs to all is a very big loaf! There is enough food in this world for all of us to eat well, yet many millions of our brothers and sisters – because of their desperate poverty – cannot avail themselves of a piece big enough to meet even their most basic needs. Of course, if we can carry out our mission in a way that allows the loaf to grow even larger, we should. We do this, for example, by purchasing the food for our feeding programme from local farmers as much as possible, in a way that helps them become more productive. More fundamentally, by serving a meal that enables children to grow up healthy and to gain an education, we allow them and their children to become the 'bakers' of tomorrow – the people who will help create more prosperous communities and nations that no longer rely on outside aid.

However, the problem we are addressing is not a current global shortage of food. The problem we are addressing is abject poverty. And most certainly the problem is not the existence of too many children. Never! The problem is not their number but their poverty. We will not, therefore, support or collaborate in activities aimed at coercing people to have smaller families, rather we will respect always their right to freely choose to plan their families the way they wish to – and of course those choices become better informed when people have received the gift of education.

There are a multitude of different ways that people can share through Mary's Meals: dropping a coin in a collection box, giving up time to volunteer, bequeathing an estate in a will and so many others! By fasting, some choose to share in a very special way. While many fast for spiritual reasons, as people have done for centuries, a decision to eat less or nothing on particular days can also be a profound way to practise solidarity with the poor and hungry and can even be turned into a direct act of sharing by donating what has been saved, so that hungry children can eat.

It is no small responsibility to serve those who are choosing to share so generously and to ensure these acts of sharing are effective.

Let us help You fill the starving

with good things, not with scraps

from our table



The sharing of a meal around a table is one of the most powerful manifestations of what it means to be family, to be a community, to be friends, to be part of society. To think of people eating 'scraps from our table' is appalling in many ways, but perhaps especially because they can only be people who we choose not to invite to the table in the first place. The vision of Mary's Meals is that no one be excluded from the table. Every child in this world should be invited to the school dinner table and once there, they should never be served scraps.

When we share with those who have nothing, we never think their need makes them somehow inferior to us. They are our sisters and brothers who happen, at this moment, to need our help. Perhaps one day we will need theirs. Maybe we already do. At all times, the dignity of those we serve should be deeply respected and the way we serve them should reflect this. Our gifts are, at all times, freely given. They are never used to impose ideologies or coerce people in matters of faith, and we will never seek to judge those who seek our help.

And because we respect deeply the dignity and worth and potential of every human being (from conception to natural death) we seek not only to meet the immediate need of the hungry child for food (although that desire comes first) but we also seek ways to set that child free, so that they and their communities might escape dependence on aid. This desire and sincere respect for those who serve and eat our meals, shapes how we go about designing and implementing our school meal programmes. It is for this reason that we choose always to provide our meals in places of education. It is for this reason that our school meal programmes are owned first of all by the local community. It is for this reason we look for ways to help these communities and nations move to a place where

they can provide daily school meals to their children without requiring our help.

Those of us who support fundraising or who are in positions of responsibility need to avoid the great danger of ever losing sight of our own charitable intentions that led us to choose this mission. We need to check the authenticity of our motives in case we ever become more interested in achieving certain things than we are in the hungry child that we serve. Our own status or ambition are things, within Mary's Meals, that need to be managed carefully. It is one of the reasons why, for some of us, prayer is essential in striving to retain humility and purity of purpose. It is another reason why we should be careful about setting targets; we may find ourselves serving them rather than the child.

The desire to fill hungry children with good things, rather than scraps, goes to the heart of what we are. It guides our approach to what kind of meals we serve and how we serve them. Sometimes we need to make very difficult choices in this area. Should we serve larger, more nutritious meals for the few or more modest servings for the many? Should we buy food from local producers when it is much more expensive than available imported food? How should we prioritise competing requests for help from different parts of the world when our limited resources mean we cannot say yes to all? These are just some examples of difficult decisions to be made and many times there is no right or wrong answer. It helps, though, when faced with these options and competing priorities to go back to the basics and think about our primary objectives.

To serve daily meals to hungry children in their places of education is our mission, and we choose those children

according to the greatest need. We wish to serve those suffering most acutely the effects of hunger, those who are most likely to miss school because of hunger, those who are marginalised and neglected and those who are not normally invited to the table. To do this means we cannot always choose the easiest option, the cheapest option, the option with least risk, the option which will be best in fulfilling a certain plan, created in a far-away office. It means we will sometimes serve meals in places where war and violence cause terror, and where our meals can even help bring peace.

And then, when we have made our choice to begin serving meals in certain communities, keeping our promise to them becomes paramount. Sometimes, we may see important opportunities to help local farmers by purchasing their produce, we may look at ways to begin handing responsibility for the funding and management of the project to a government or we might find ourselves in a strong position to influence political decision-making for the good of these communities. If we can do these, and other things that result in very important secondary benefits, we absolutely should strive to do so, but not at the expense of our primary purpose. Not if they should cause us ever to break our promise to those we serve. We must consider very carefully any risk these endeavours might pose with regard to our core obligations and responsibilities and we need to be very clear about our primary purpose. The promise we make of a daily meal is paramount.

This, unfortunately, still does not remove the reality of being faced with having to make difficult weighty decisions that have no clear right or wrong answer, but it can help. And so

can a realisation that we cannot do everything and are not responsible for everything. Our mission in the world's poorest communities is to do one thing and to do it very well. If we keep our promise of a daily meal to the children, we are doing something amazing, something crucial, something life-giving and transformative. But it is not everything and it will not solve every problem. While we might, for the best of reasons, also wish to serve those children a second and third daily meal, or build them a new school, or provide clean water for their village, this is not the work of Mary's Meals. We should not try to make ourselves responsible for all of it. It is not our promise. Other people and other organisations are called to those things and, when we see that, it will be for the greater benefit of the communities we serve, we should strive to collaborate meaningfully with those carrying out other missions connected to our own.

In these difficult things we can pray too for the gift of wisdom and right judgment. When we pray the first part of this particular phrase, we might also consider that we are using the same words that Mary the mother of Jesus spoke when she praised God in her famous prayer, the Magnificat, as the One who 'fills the starving with good things'. She took those words from an Old Testament psalm and, in doing so, she tells us much about her relationship with God and how, for her, He is the one 'who fills the starving with good things and sends the rich empty away'. The woman whose name we take for our work shows us, especially in that prayer, how to be truly humble and truly bold while being a spokesperson for the poor. We can only get better at serving Mary's Meals by trying to learn from her in that regard.





**Teach us how to share**

**what is not ours to keep**

At the most obvious level this phrase encourages us to become more generous in sharing the resources at our disposal. This is at the very heart of our mission. Perhaps, also, we need to be taught how to share in other less obvious ways too. Mary's Meals is a gift which none of us personally owns. Those of us who exercise positions of responsibility in Mary's Meals should never lose sight of the fact that, above all, we are servants of a much greater movement of people performing all of those little acts of love around the world. We should never be leaders who dominate and control in the wrong way. The health of the Mary's Meals movement rests on an attitude of solidarity and subsidiarity. While we need to be unified and in solidarity when it comes to the vision, mission and values that bring us together, we also need to be careful never to make decisions at levels higher or more centralised in the organisation than they need to be. Our preference should be to carry out tasks and make plans at a local level, unless it can be seen that, by allowing them to happen elsewhere, there is a clear advantage in terms of efficiency, expertise or global cohesion.

Sometimes we need to learn that power is not ours to keep. We need to look eagerly for opportunities to give it away, to delegate responsibly. And positions of authority that we may sometimes occupy are never permanent positions. While occupying them, we must be mindful that sooner or later it will be time to hand the role to someone else. Part of our leadership role, indeed one of the most important parts, is to think proactively about succession and to create circumstances in which that eventual transition can happen smoothly. When this happens well it can be the greatest sign of a job done efficiently and with the right attitude. Within Mary's Meals, the creation of little kingdoms of power that depend in the wrong way on certain individuals can cause immense damage, as can petty rivalries between individuals or groups.

It may also be true that, sometimes, some initiatives do indeed depend almost entirely on certain individuals with particular gifts. And it is also the case that at times strong robust leadership is needed in certain challenging circumstances. A lack of respect for leadership and the structures of decision-making within Mary's Meals can also be immensely damaging.

The desire to delegate and empower people and entities within Mary's Meals does not mean that we give all licence to exercise their own theories and opinions without regard for the policies and strategies set by (and for) the whole organisation. Because none of us has any particular right of ownership of Mary's Meals, all of us must respect the collective decision-making structures and ways of working that the whole family has agreed to.

Discerning carefully how to exercise our responsibility and when to give it away is challenging. So too is respecting and accepting rightfully-exercised authority, when we might personally disagree with a decision. By praying this phrase, we invite God to teach us how to be more self-aware when it comes to these important and difficult matters of authority and power. It is a great privilege to be a paid member of staff of Mary's Meals and a great responsibility too. Much is expected of us, a group small in number compared with the multitudes involved in the mission – far smaller than the number of unpaid volunteers on whom this work will always primarily depend. And so, we need to be people willing to work hard and ready to embrace the constant change inherent in an organisation that always seeks to grow and to do things better. We want that growth and have a desire to learn new ways.

Working as a paid member of staff for Mary's Meals will never be an easy, comfortable option, but these challenges should be faced in a supportive and kind environment. In this prayer we might also ask for the gifts of love and forgiveness. We should wish that all our teams should be marked by distinctive magnanimity. We should be quick to pardon and encourage. All of us will make mistakes – we should never create a culture where people are terrified of ever making one. And we should thank God that 'love covers a multitude of sins.'

This desire to share what is not ours to keep, extends also to our approach to stewardship of resources entrusted to Mary's Meals. We should never unnecessarily use funds to make our lives more comfortable or to boost our status at the expense of feeding more hungry children. Of course, sometimes, it is vital that we invest some of our resources to make the organisation





more effective and resilient and to help grow the movement. This careful use of resources can enable more people to become involved in our mission and ensure more children eat each day in their place of education. We should always be comfortable with 'full transparency' on how we spend funds, confident that we can explain each decision being made in the best interest of the children we serve and those still waiting. We need to balance carefully the desire to spend as large a proportion of funds as possible on serving meals with the responsibility that we also have to sustain and help grow this work. When in doubt, the simplicity of our mission, our trust in divine providence and the expectation of most of our supporters, should move us towards spending directly on the children today, rather than investing too much in a future about which none of us can be certain. This means for example that we will not hold unnecessarily large reserves of funds to cover all sorts of eventualities which may never come to pass. Instead, we think the best reserve policy for us is putting food in the stomachs of hungry children today. What future possible calamity could be worse than a child not eating today? Why would we prefer to allow that horrible certainty to happen rather than accepting the risk that some other dreadful thing may or may not happen in the future?

Of course, this emphasis on the needs of today must be balanced with certain responsibilities we have towards future generations. We must be mindful of our responsibility as current stewards of the world God created for us, choosing as much as possible to carry out this work in a way that avoids damaging the environment and making it an even harder place for people to live and thrive in in the future. We cannot take from our children's children what isn't ours to keep.

Our approach to salaries is also influenced by a desire to share what is not ours to keep. While we want to ensure that all who work on a paid basis for Mary's Meals receive at least a 'just wage' – one that allows them to support themselves and their families – we also want to ensure that the highest salaries never become something that contradict our approach to respecting those we serve and work with: those who share so generously, those who really do 'give until it hurts', those

who despite battling to provide for their own families volunteer to work many hours for our mission on an unpaid basis, and those we serve who lack even enough food to eat. None of us should ever expect to become wealthy by working for Mary's Meals. There are other more appropriate ways to do that, if that is our objective.

Of course, the concept of wealth is relative, with huge economic disparities across the geographies where Mary's Meals staff work. Finding ways to create consistency and limit the highest salaries is not easy. One way we accomplish this is to create ratios limiting the gap between highest and lowest salaries, which should result in our lowest and middle salaries being similar to those being paid for comparable jobs by other organisations, while our most senior roles will end up normally being paid less, sometimes considerably less, because of the constraint we are deliberately placing on these. This means that those with the experience and skills required to work in senior leadership roles of Mary Meals are often making a choice to forego the possibility of earning more elsewhere in order to serve this mission. By doing so they are demonstrating their vocation to this mission in a profound way and are even making a sacrifice (along with their family sometimes) to do so.

This approach to salaries is often one of the hardest of our values to adhere to. It is counter-cultural and so requires boldness. It sometimes means that good people cannot work for Mary's Meals because of certain financial responsibilities they have. It also makes it difficult at times to recruit people with the required skills and experience into our most senior roles. In this way, our trust in God's Providence will at times be tested and we will be required to exercise patience. It also, ultimately, results in us being served by staff leaders who have a very deep love of this mission and who demonstrate a profound vocational attitude. They are people who are able, not only to talk about our mission in the right way, but to live it in a manner that manifests solidarity with, and respect for, the hungry people they serve. They are leaders who are happy to break bread with their co-workers living in abject poverty, and to look them in the eye as they do.

**Clothe us with Your love**

**that we may complete each good work**

**You created us to do**



Already, it is clear that doing things the Mary's Meals way is not always easy. I know personally from many years of experience that it is much easier to write about it than it is to live it and that I very often fail miserably in living it. If someone who knows me, on reading this booklet, wishes to accuse me of hypocrisy, I can only plead guilty, many times over. And I can only thank many of those co-workers for their repeated patience and forgiveness and for the example many of them set.

This request of God to 'clothe us in His love', was one made by St Paul, but also one that many of us make on a regular basis. Everything we can ever say about the Mary's Meals way can be distilled down to one short sentence: Mary's Meals is a work of love. The beginning and end of it. This is also what makes ours a universal mission, for, as Mother Teresa once said, "love is a fruit always in season and in reach of every hand." By choosing to clothe ourselves in love each day, we become the most beautifully-dressed people who ever undertook a mission like this! People will want to join Mary's Meals just so they can dress like us!

One of the hallmarks of Mary's Meals is joy. It really is something very striking. When spending time with very disparate groups of people involved in very different aspects of our mission who live in very different situations, it is remarkable to see all of them exhibit a similar abundant joy. This joy is one of those beautiful garments of love. Humility, patience and peace are others.

The second half of this phrase expresses an incredible thought; that every little good thing we do was something God created us for! These words come from another letter of St Paul, in which he wrote: 'For we are God's handiwork, created in Christ Jesus, to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do.' So not only is each one of us who is called to this mission unique and precious, each individual good work we carry out is too! While some may look very similar and routine,

nothing we ever do in service of Mary's Meals will ever be repeated by someone else. No one else could have done it, if you had not. This is a mystery to be pondered and too deep for me to understand, never mind to explain, but what is clear is the preciousness of our choice to serve – to do something good. This understanding can only lead to a very deep respect of every one of our co-workers and to a belief that each one of them brings something new to this mission, something that would never be done in such a beautiful way by someone else. This is why it is an integral part of our mission to involve as many people as we can in this work and why we should respect each person deeply, regardless of their role or status or length of service or size of gift.

For the same reasons, while we are willing to employ technology and methodologies that allow us to communicate effectively with large numbers of supporters, we never lose sight of the fact that we are serving each of those people as individuals and therefore working for their benefit too. When we make decisions about the use of technology and methodologies, we should always make sure we think about it that way – our choices should reflect a desire to treat each person the way we would treat a dear friend, or as we ourselves would wish to be treated.

These good acts of ours, are what God created us for. It follows then that, when we take part in this mission, we become more fully human, more the person God created us to be – happier, more joyful and more peaceful. This work of encouraging people to support and of raising funds – what a noble work! Surely, every time we ask people for help, and thereby invite them into this mission, we are offering them treasure worth more than anything they could ever give!

This little work of simplicity, if we want it to, can help transform us into God's likeness and image.



## Place in our hearts Your compassion for each starving child

The work of Mary's Meals is a universal mission. We can see that all people of good will – regardless of creed, background and ethnicity – wish to see the hungry, impoverished child eat and gain an education. And so we might think this prayer request is not so urgently needed. And for the thousands of people who support our mission with freely given gifts, that might be true. However, that purity of purpose can be harder to retain when we become involved, on a daily basis, in the challenges and complexity of this work, especially when our tasks might seem far removed from the serving of a meal to a hungry child. We need to find ways to retain that purity of purpose and motive. It is crucial that we keep the child at the centre of this work always. What we do, we do for him or her: not to succeed against a particular plan, not to gain respect or promotion, not to prove our cleverness or creativeness, not to show we are better than someone else, not to gain promotion or embellish our CV and not, if we are a member of Mary's Meals staff, to just do our work in order to get paid. Of course, all of those things are not necessarily bad in their own right. It is healthy to wish for promotion, if that is because we believe that with greater responsibility we might better serve this mission. It is good to exercise our talents in pursuit of this mission and to let others see the gifts we bring. It is extremely useful, and often essential, to set goals and work to a plan in order for us to make progress in this work. It is right that we work to support ourselves and our families financially. As long as, ultimately, we do not forget for too long that all this is simply in service of the child. We cannot come back to that often enough. As leaders we have a duty to help people find ways to do this.

One of the best rewards we can give to those who work hard for this mission is to find ways to introduce them to the child that benefitted from their work or their gifts, even if they are on the other side of the planet. Sometimes it may even be possible to organise visits to those communities in which our meals are served. Much more often we need to seek more creative ways to bring the child close – telling their stories, speaking their words and giving voice to those in the communities who serve them directly.

We choose very carefully the language we use and our style of communication. We want to use words that reveal this as a

work of the heart; a mission which is about individual people more than it is about the big numbers and strategies. And so, stories – true stories – are our favourite way to express the beautiful things being done by those who share, and the wonderful changes that happen in the lives of those who eat our meals. We refrain from using language that portrays people in poverty as helpless victims, but instead we find ways to more accurately depict them as our respected co-workers, often playing a role much more important than those of us who write about them. Nor do we wish to tell stories aimed at making people feel guilty by concentrating on suffering and misery, though sometimes those realities have to be explained too. Stories of hope and joy which inspire and encourage are the ones we wish to tell. Those stories and all we communicate must also always be true, never exaggerated or deliberately misleading, but always authentic and accurate.

Not all our support comes from individuals carrying out little acts of love, although most of it certainly does. Sometimes we receive very significant funding from grant-making bodies and others who provide very large gifts, that help us keep our promise to large numbers of children and accelerate our efforts to serve many more of them. This kind of funding is to be welcomed as long as it is clearly aligned with our mission and does not seek to change us – our approach, our values and our particular way of working. When we do accept this kind of funding, we recognise that those kinds of organisations will often require us to use a particular kind of language and provide different types of information. This is good and indeed it is beneficial sometimes for us to think about our mission from a different perspective and to learn new ways of communicating, as long as this way of speaking does not begin to enter our general language in an inappropriate way. In the same way, we need to guard against using internal jargon when talking with the wider family or we will soon find that we are speaking only to ourselves.

We need then, to return repeatedly to the children we serve and our love for them. When we feel close to them, we cannot forget the purpose of our mission and the compassion that first set us on this path. And in each of those little ones who we serve, some of us might even want to try and recognise Jesus too.

# And use our little acts of love so that they starve no more



First of all, the word 'little' in this phrase is important. In one sense we must strive to find ways to keep this work of ours little, even as it grows globally. For our vision to be achieved, the little acts of love which comprise Mary's Meals do not, necessarily, have to become bigger acts, they just need to become even more numerous. We do not wish ever to create an unnecessarily large or prominent organisation, one that might even stifle or obscure the loving individual acts taking place. We shall only build one that is able to invite in as many people as possible to partake in this mission and to make each one of their acts of love effective. Those involved in this mission as staff or in positions of responsibility, will only ever comprise a very small part of this movement of love, and while our role is hugely important we are not responsible for solving every local problem, controlling a response to every local opportunity or coming up with every new idea. This is much, much bigger than us. It is important we recognise this and know how to be 'little'.

And it is our little acts that are at the heart of this phrase, reminding us that even while we pray for this mission and explore the spirit of Mary's Meals, this will always be at its heart a simple, practical work. Because we love the child, we want him or her to eat this day. Because we love the child, we want him or her to be set free from poverty forever. And so, we choose to do this in a very particular way, serving the meals always in a manner that helps children gain an education, that acts as a ladder out of poverty and dependence on aid. Thus, we help set the individual child free and, also, we help set communities and nations free too.

Mary's Meals is, then, mainly about doing, rather than talking, or theorising, or telling others they should be doing it. While many organisations that begin with simple, active initiatives to help those suffering evolve as they grow to become more focused on advocacy and lobbying for change, Mary's Meals will continue predominantly to be a simple, practical work. That is not to decry those carrying out good and important initiatives to bring about change in a different way from us. It is only to recognise that that is not our particular calling. Certainly, from time to time, we may see opportunities to influence and persuade for the good of those we serve, and we should take those opportunities if we happen to find ourselves in the right place at the right time. But we should be very careful not to forget that our work is to fill, each day, a plate or mug with food for the hungry child that we made a promise to.

To do this work well, and to keep getting better at keeping our promise, we need to collect data to help us understand the impact we are having and to find ways that might create even greater impact. For we are as much a learning organisation

today as we ever were, and we always will be. And that data we collect, and are happy to share, can also be the evidence, if any were needed, that allows others to learn how essential it is to provide every child with a daily meal in their place of education. By carrying out this simple work each day, very well, we will indeed eventually influence others to make this their priority too – a hugely significant by-product of keeping our promise and one that can play a crucial part in ensuring that one day we will no longer be needed in the communities we currently serve. We need to continually endeavour to seek ways to transfer responsibilities away from Mary's Meals to governments, as they find the resources that they require to do this with less help from us. Again, though, this must be done while keeping the child at the centre. We should never implement transition plans that mean children go hungry along the way.

Much patience is required as we seek the final fruit of our labour, leaving behind something wonderful that no longer needs our support. In most of the communities where we work, this is a long-term aspiration requiring generational change, especially because we choose to work in the very poorest communities, which often suffer instability and weak governments. The eventual transition away from Mary's Meals support, and our happy redundancy, will most likely come after many years of faithful service and acts of solidarity which require distant communities to walk together on very long journeys. These journeys will inevitably become difficult at times. These communities who journey together probably do not even speak the same language. They suffer huge imbalances of power and the risk of misunderstanding and hurting each other is high. Trust and mutual respect can break down unless we strive constantly to find ways to communicate and listen to each other. It is essential for responsibilities to be very clear from the outset and for us to resist the temptation, when things go wrong, to take on responsibilities that are not ours to take. The children who we serve belong more to the communities in which they live than they do to us, and so the primary responsibility for those children needs to rest always with their communities. We should never trample on that truth in our eagerness to make it work. If we do, we will do more harm than good.

Forgiveness might be required at times, on this long journey as well as stamina and determination because the zeal and energy that might have marked the beginning of the journey will surely fade after walking for several years. Unless, that is, we keep the children at the centre, for they will make it new, they will reinvigorate us afresh each day, so that we set out again each morning with a spring in our step and deep sense of gratitude for being invited along.



## Conclusion

I hope those seven short reflections might be of help. Each of them is just a start; a 'dipping in of the toes'. We might want to explore each of these themes more deeply as this work continues to unfold and I am sure there are other areas, not included here, to also consider. I hope that reading this might not in any way distract us from the practical mission that is Mary's Meals, rather, I hope it helps us get on with the daily work – the little acts of love, the particular tasks with which we are entrusted which will enable children to eat their 'daily bread'. These words are much less important than those vital tasks. I am sure there are many of our brothers and sisters, involved in this mission, who will never be able to read this, and yet who live it much more deeply and fully.

We opened this reflection with a prayer and then used that prayer to guide our journey, but rather than finishing with one too, we might instead ask ourselves if we could ever make this work itself a prayer? Maybe so. Maybe a very beautiful, life-transforming one. Not to replace the times of quiet we need with our God, but to add to them a beautiful offering of love, made manifest through each and everything we do in pursuit of this mission.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to be 'MFB'.

**Magnus MacFarlane-Barrow**  
Founder of Mary's Meals



mary's  
meals

a simple solution  
to world hunger