

WENDY

Scattering seeds with needle and thread

BY GRACE FOX


Wendy Hagar's dining room doubles as a sewing factory. For approximately 30 hours per week, volunteers of all ages surround her table. Some trace and cut patterns. Others hunch over a half dozen sergers and sewing machines, transforming mountains of fabric and fleece into practical gifts for the world's needy.

The workers stop snipping and stitching to sip coffee and nibble on doughnuts, but only for a few minutes. Wendy's group has an assignment to complete: Sew and fill 8,277 gift bags within the next nine weeks. With 3,000 complete, they need a mere 5,277 more!

Hagar, 47, hates sewing. She laughs at the irony and marvels at what God has accomplished—the birthing of Sew on Fire Ministries, a nonprofit organization in Burlington, Ontario, that has ministered to people in 37 nations.

In February 2000 Hagar sat in church and listened to a missionary describe hardships faced by thousands of orphans and abandoned children in the former Soviet Union. She'd heard similar stories before, but this time they captured her attention and ignited an inner spark.

When the service ended, Hagar visited the missionary's display. The



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COURTESY OF WENDY HAGAR

HAGAR

spark fanned into a flame when she saw cloth bags containing handmade overalls and mitts for needy children. *I can make these*, she thought. Before the day ended, she'd promised to sew 100 baby overalls, 100 pairs of mitts, and sew and stuff 100 gift bags with 20 items each.

"Are you crazy?" a friend asked. "What are you doing?" her husband and two teens questioned. They knew she disliked sewing and reminded her of prior obligations—besides being a wife and mother, she fulfilled church obligations and worked nearly 40 hours per week for her denomination's women's ministries—but excitement gripped her.

The next morning she waited outside a fabric store for a half-hour before its scheduled opening. "How much do you want?" asked the sales clerk when Hagar plopped fabric bolts on the cutting table. "I'll buy it all," she said. She left the store with almost 200 yards of brightly colored cloth for bags. A week later, diaper flannel went on sale. Hagar purchased nearly 160 yards, dyed it burgundy, green, and blue, and began cutting overalls.

Hagar visited thrift shops and purchased dozens of nearly new baby T-shirts. When other customers asked why she bought so many, she explained, "They're going to orphanages!" Her enthusiasm spread like wildfire. "How

can we help?" they asked. Before long, teens, adults, and seniors from various denominations and secular organizations filled her home. Local newspapers ran her story. Strangers offered their assistance. Donations poured in. Within two weeks, mounds of



COURTESY OF WENDY HAGAR

Wendy with husband Jeff and children Matthew and Sarah

material jammed the Hagar's spare bedroom. Bubble gum, balloons, and candy filled the family room. Pencils, pens, crayons, coloring books, writing pads, shampoo, soaps, and other items dominated another five rooms. Boxes of tissue and other donations commandeered the garage. And two individuals gave \$1000 each to cover her expenses.

"As word spread, people phoned and said, 'I think your project is amazing,' then they'd give me a Scripture promise," says Hagar. "But criticism came, too. 'How do you know the needy will receive the bags? What difference will the bags make?'"

"I struggled with those issues until I discovered Deuteronomy

15:11. It says, 'For the poor shall never cease out of the land: therefore I command thee, saying, Thou shalt open thine hand wide unto thy brother, to thy poor, and to thy needy, in thy land.'

"I realized that the poor, many of whom are our spiritual brothers and sisters, will always be among us and that helping them isn't optional. God commands it—the Bible contains 2,300 references to the widows, the orphans, and the poor. I realized, too, that I can't touch every life but I can make a difference for those I hear about."

Hagar dedicated herself to pursuing what she felt God had called her to do. The ministry exploded, leaving supplies scattered throughout her house. All the while, Hagar's husband, Jeff, and two grown children, Matthew and Sarah, remained supportive and patient despite the growing number of boxes and mountains of material. When representatives from a well-known Canadian ministry visited her home and offered free storage in a 5,000-square-foot warehouse, Hagar gratefully accepted.

Since its beginning, Hagar and her volunteers have sewn and stuffed more than 35,000 gift bags with quality items for orphaned children, single moms, widows, seniors, and the homeless. Determined to use resources wisely, Hagar values donations, scouts for discounts, and scrounges for good deals at thrift stores and garage sales. A friend buys from distributors and bank-

ruptcy sales. She customizes each bag's contents according to the age, gender, and specific country needs.

For example, a man's bag includes work gloves, wool socks, a razor, a baseball cap, personal hygiene items, and a set of new or nearly new clothing. A single mom or senior woman receives toiletries, hair accessories, a new nightie, a sewing kit, slippers, an afghan, and a piece of jewelry. Children receive 20 items including toiletries, toys, clothing, candy, and school supplies. Bags destined for cold climates hold hats, mitts, and scarves.

When Hagar's daughter learned that Guatemalan infants are sometimes wrapped in newspaper because their parents can't afford blankets, Sew on Fire volunteers spent two months stitching 300 baby quilts from fabric remnants. Layettes include 10 items—newborn-sized clothes, a blanket, a rattle, and personal care items for both babe and mother.

"Sometimes these bags are the answer to someone's prayers," says Hagar. "We want them to be a turning point in people's lives. We want folks to feel overwhelmingly loved through them."

People from countries including Tibet, Kosovo, Uganda, Peru, Sudan, India, and Israel have received gift bags via short-term missionary teams from 46 churches and mission organizations. Missionaries carry two 70-pound hockey duffel bags stuffed with approximately 50 gift bags each.

As a missions outreach pastor, Darryl Hawbolt has delivered Sew on Fire bags to four countries. On a recent trip to Guatemala, his team conducted Vacation Bible School programs in schools and feeding centers. Afterward, his team hand-distributed approximately 850 bags, beginning with the families of the children to whom they had ministered.

"Just like North American mothers, these moms long to give good things to their children, but they don't have the means. When we give them a child's bag, they're thrilled. And their kids express gratitude and grin from ear to ear," says Hawbolt.

"The people we see in these countries have nothing, not even the basics we take for granted, like soap and shampoo. Their faces show sheer joy when we present the gifts. We've seen ladies break down and cry and hug the women on our team. Often they ask, 'Why would you do this? Why would you come here and give me a gift when you don't even know me?'"

Area pastors and missionaries act as translators for the short-



PHOTOS COURTESY OF WENDY HAGAR

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termers. They answer the people's questions and distribute Bibles whenever possible.

"Pastors say the gifts provide an ice-breaker that opens opportunities for them to enter people's homes and lay the foundation for future friendships and evangelism," Hawbolt says.

"Because each short-term team ministers through a local church or organization, recipients associate the gifts with the church," says Hagar. "It's an effective partnership that helps strengthen the church's ministry to the community."

The same principle applies in

North America. Two women ministering in downtown Vancouver recently used Sew on Fire gift bags as a tool to demonstrate God's love to street people. When a Toronto church hosted a Valentine weekend for the city's homeless, the congregation presented 120 guests with bags including socks, hats, mitts, hot chocolate, and a palm-sized chocolate heart.

In 2000, Canadian media broadcast a story from Sheshatshui, Labrador—a native village of 1,600 residents described as “a lost people with no resources.” In one home, 13 children and their parents shared three bedrooms. Children as young as six were addicted to sniffing gasoline and were dying. The village's desperate chief issued a statement saying, “Saving the Innu will take so much more than a new treatment center and a pile of federal money.”

Eager to express God's love to the Innu, Hagar responded by collecting new items—shoes, clothing, skates, and even basketballs for the village children and

youth. She filled 60 new backpacks and sent them with a church team that held a summer camp ministry for Sheshatshui's children.

Hagar's passion has ignited support across Canada. During a recent visit to her sister's Alberta home, she told her sister's friends about Sew on Fire and showed sample gift bags. As a result, she received 10 speaking engagements and media coverage. Donations began appearing on her sister's doorstep.

“Her home has been taken over just like mine was,” says Hagar. “In less than a year, she sent more than 3,000 bags to seven countries.

“I tell people that helping the world's needy in this way isn't church. It's not religion. It's just what Jesus would do. It's practical, tangible truth.”

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Daily Bible Readings

- ☐ **Sunday, May 8** *Read: 1 Kings 16–18*
- ☐ **Monday, May 9** *Read: 1 Kings 19–20*
- ☐ **Tuesday, May 10** *Read: 1 Kings 21–22*
- ☐ **Wednesday, May 11** *Read: 2 Kings 1–3*
- ☐ **Thursday, May 12** *Read: 2 Kings 4–5*
- ☐ **Friday, May 13** *Read: 2 Kings 6–8*
- ☐ **Saturday, May 14** *Read: 2 Kings 9–11*