



Reaping Kernels of Hope

**One man's vision links farmers and city dwellers
in a joint effort to feed the hungry.**

MATT ENQUIST

Having spent his whole life involved with farming, Ray Baloun knows agriculture. He worked as a grain buyer for many years. So for a lifelong grain man, farming simply seemed like the obvious way to fight world hunger. And as a businessman who connected the producers with the consumers, Baloun saw an opportunity to get all kinds of people—farmers and city dwellers—working together to make a global impact.

Baloun, a member of Minnedosa Evangelical Covenant Church in Manitoba and of the Canada Conference board, is the founder of Kernels of Hope, a Canadian nonprofit organization that works to alleviate world hunger by soliciting farmers to donate land and time to the cause of feeding the hungry.

Kernels of Hope works by pair-



ing project supporters with farmers. Donors “purchase” acreage from farmers by covering the cost necessary to grow wheat on the land. The farmers donate the time needed to grow the crop on the designated portion of their land. When the wheat is harvested and sold, the proceeds are donated to World Relief Canada to be distributed in areas of need throughout the world.

“We rent the fields and pay the expenses and the farmer does the real work. Sometimes the farmers even donate some of the expenses. We

really couldn't do this without them,” says Baloun.

In 2005, the first year of the project, Kernels raised \$69,000 (all amounts are Canadian dollars). By the fourth year, it raised more than \$425,000 to send across the globe through World Relief Canada.

The funds raised from the sale of the crops go to the Canadian Foodgrains Bank, a partnership of Canadian church agencies, which seeks a Christian response to hunger. The mission of the Foodgrains Bank is to help Canadians “share resources with, support, and learn from hungry populations outside Canada.” World Relief Canada works with Kernels to choose the specific recipient of the proceeds. Donations in the past have gone to the Suakoko area of Liberia, providing tools, seed, and

Matt Enquist is a senior at North Park University and is serving as an intern in the Department of Communication.

“We sometimes get fooled into thinking we are either too busy or that our occupation does not provide opportunity for us to feed the poor...”

food to people who were returning home after civil wars. This year's crop will support people in South Aweil County of South Sudan.

“We choose the specific project that Kernels of Hope will support. It builds a relationship with the donors that means more than just a general charity,” says Baloun. “We can give real examples of what the money and grain will go toward and how many people it will help in each way. When you complete a project like we did in Liberia, you know we really have

would rent a field and invite interested people to pay the production costs of one acre each.”

The two men pitched the idea at the Canada Conference annual meeting in Norquay in the spring of 2005.

“We thought we might target thirty-eight acres for the first year,” recalls Baloun. “We promoted it during the annual meeting, and by the Saturday night banquet we had ‘sold’ thirty-eight acres!”

When people went back to their home churches, they spread the word.

babwe and Mali to witness the work the Canadian Foodgrains Bank was doing. “The people there were incredibly thankful for the help that is coming from Canadians,” he says. “They treated us with so much respect and warmth that we felt like both a part of their family and royalty at the same time. I was encouraged by the help that they were getting in growing better crops of their own and impressed by seeing that there was no wastage happening,” recalls Baloun.

The generosity of donors in North America has increased annually and is a continued source of excitement for Baloun. “The average donor or virtual farmer gives about \$200 annually. To me, that is huge. I get such wonderful comments from the virtual farmers. People are able to watch their investment literally grow every year and are able to make an incredible tangible difference to people they have never met,” he says. “We have found a way to connect urban people to the farm.”

Baloun is not the only one encouraged by the growth of the project. Farmers like Peterson have found the project rewarding on many levels.



Kernels of Hope farmers and sponsors gather in a field to pray for a bountiful harvest and for the recipients of the proceeds.

helped someone to help themselves.”

Proceeds from the sale of the harvest are matched four to one by the Canadian International Development Agency, a governmental agency of Canada.

“Four to one is a huge multiplier. For example, \$10,000 turns into \$50,000,” explains Baloun.

Last year's bountiful harvest was a far cry from the humble beginnings of a project that began with a lunch meeting and two friends scrawling notes excitedly on napkins.

“We began writing down a plan on serviettes at lunch and by 2 p.m. we had a plan,” says Baloun of his meeting with Jeff Anderson, superintendent of the Canada Conference of the Evangelical Covenant Church. “We

More sponsors contacted Baloun, and he quickly sold all fifty-five acres available to be farmed for the project. He kept everyone updated throughout the year on the progress of the crops. “We were creating virtual farmers across the country!” he exclaims.

While Baloun was recruiting sponsors, farmer Dale Peterson was ready to do the hard work in the fields. Peterson, who is a member of Norquay Covenant Church in Saskatchewan, planted all fifty-five acres that Kernels farmed that year.

“When Ray presented the idea, we were pleased to be involved because of God's care for us. We realize God also has expectations of those to whom he has given much,” says Peterson.

In 2007 Baloun traveled to Zim-



“There is a blessing that is hard to put into words when you can do what you love and fit into God's plan. I would say it is humbling to see God work through such an everyday event for me as farming,” says Peterson. “We sometimes get fooled into thinking we are either too busy or that our occupation does not provide opportu-

nity for us to feed the poor or clothe the naked in Jesus' name."

It is this connection between the city dweller and the Canadian farmer that Baloun believes has given Kernels such a dynamic opportunity for success. He points out that more conventional growing projects are often very localized. Farmers share equipment and solicit donations or discounts from local suppliers to keep costs down.

But Kernels has been able to expand its donor base by forming a team that expands across North America.

Wilma Peterson got involved with Kernels when her nephew Dale committed to seeding fifty-five acres of wheat that first year. As a result, Wilma, a longtime Covenanter, decided to get involved as a virtual farmer from her home in Oregon. "Like most people, I like to make

good investments, and where could I get a better return?" she asks. Each year she purchases three acres in honor of her three brothers.



Kernels of Hope founder Ray Baloun and his wife, Gail

Baloun recently started a blog (www.kernelsof-hope.blogspot.com) to lengthen the reach of the project. He describes his role as primarily that of facilitator, working to bring together the urban donor and the rural farmer, the Canadian and the Sudanese. "I do most of the work on my computer. It's sort of like hobby farming for me!" he says.

While Baloun maintains a modest approach to his role in the project, donors like Wilma understand the importance of his leadership. "He is a dedicated believer who understands people and their needs. He has the energy, enthusiasm, and leadership skills to make his dream become a reality," she says.

The growth of Kernels of Hope over the last four years is showing no signs of slowing down with preparations for the 2009 season well underway. "I don't know what to expect this year for growth. I do know it is hard to put a limit on God," says Baloun. He hopes to see the project take off across denominational lines as well, being replicated in other churches and in new places.

"There is a miracle of life happening here," says Baloun. "Jesus said whatever we have done for the least of them we have done for him. This project helps in tangible, immediate ways. But even more important, I think it creates awareness of the needs out there in the world. It makes the world a little bit smaller and it makes it a little bit better."

For information on how to become a virtual farmer or start a similar ministry, contact the Canada Conference office at (204) 269-3437. Online donations can be made at canadacovenant.org. ■