MINUTE FOR MISSION (to accompany *The Heart You Need* insert)

The story you have in today's bulletin is about trying to get to a deep level of partnership with people. It's very easy when we listen to Jesus' last words to his disciples, "Feed my sheep," to hear that as a command to do for people what needs to be done. People are thirsty? Dig them a well. People are homeless or refugees? Build them a house. People are hungry? Feed them.

Yet, we've seen over and over that, while this may help the immediate situation and it certainly makes us feel better about it, it doesn't really get to the heart of the matter. To do that, we need to respect them and work with them as partners. When the three One Great Hour of Sharing programs saw the devastation after the wars in Sierra Leone and Liberia, it was natural to ask, "What can we do for the survivors?" But working with the councils of churches there, it became clear that a new kind of partnership was necessary.

That started with each program bringing its own experience and expertise and recognizing the others' strengths. Presbyterian Disaster Assistance knew how to patiently accompany communities through the immediate chaos left by wars and disasters to the long process of rebuilding. The Presbyterian Hunger Program knew how to train farmers in agricultural techniques that depended on good stewardship of their own resources rather than on international companies. And Self-Development of People had decades of experience working with community groups as they identified their goals and what they needed to get there, and then funding their first important steps. By joining these skills together with the councils' knowledge of which communities would most quickly benefit from the training, the West Africa Initiative was more effective than any of the programs would have been alone.

But it also meant understanding the gifts of the people and communities. Understandably wary of past Western attempts to help them, one community cited an African proverb that "you don't teach a lizard to climb a tree—it climbs by itself." Sure enough, the farmers in the region had traditional agricultural practices that took care of the land and didn't depend on expensive seeds, pesticide, and fertilizers. Seeing that the training respected these traditional methods, the farmers said, "You made the lizard want to climb the tree again."

Similarly, despite their civil wars, community values probably come more naturally to the people of West Africa than they do to us. One community chosen for the pilot project shared its training and its tools with two other communities. They had friendly competitions to see what approaches worked best so that everyone got the benefit of each other's experience. Given the history of Muslim/Christian relations in West Africa, Western visitors were astonished to see that in many communities in Sierra Leone, all meetings began with both Muslim and Christian prayers that all members of either faith joined in.

Perhaps that's what's remarkable about partnership—anyone truly giving themselves to such a relationship can find themselves transformed in unexpected ways. A group of former farmers stricken with river blindness finds that they can still grow food to feed their families. A collection of refugees displaced by the war joins a few surviving inhabitants to form a new community. A group of three church human development programs finds there are many new things they can learn about human possibility. One Great Hour of Sharing has always been about partnership and about transformation. But to participate in the transformation you have to join the partnership. For most of us that means giving generously to the offering. Today you have a chance to do that—don't let it pass by.