

# Woman of Vision

How Marilee Pierce Dunker embodies the heart of World Vision

**I**T WAS A 30-HOUR JOURNEY ACROSS the world in a less-than-comfortable coach seat. To while away the time, Marilee Pierce Dunker conversed with the gentleman next to her. Hours into the flight, Dunker confessed that her father, Bob Pierce, was the founder of World Vision. The man turned, “Your *father* founded this multi-billion dollar organisation? Why are you sitting back here with me?!”

She laughed, “Because I’m with World Vision! This is where we sit!”

Marilee Pierce Dunker’s role as ambassador of World Vision never quite leaves her. Whether she’s on stage in front of an audience, or in a plane playing Twenty Questions with a stranger, she is a flag bearer of World Vision – an appointment she embraces wholeheartedly.

But this was not realised for a long time, in spite of the unique fact that both she and the charity were ‘born’ the same year.

“I always compared it to being siblings,” she says. “We grew up and went our separate ways, and once in a while we’d reconnect. [My husband and I] of course sponsored children, but never expected the circle to come back.”

The circle did return at World Vision’s 50th anniversary celebration, where she watched a video that followed World Vision throughout the years.

“Honestly, that was the first time in 35 years that I really saw what World Vision was doing. I had followed them but I did not understand what God had done in this ministry until this video. And it really overwhelmed me. Then the Lord just spoke to my heart and said, ‘Why aren’t you here?’”

At that time, Dunker was an ‘empty-nester’ searching for her next season of life. Realising that this was God’s call and with her husband’s agreement, she wrote to the President of World Vision,

BY CHARMAIN SIM

Richard Stearns, offering to pour coffee and answer phones.

## THE VISIONARY STORYTELLER

Fifteen years on, Dunker has travelled to some 40 countries visiting the ‘places of deepest poverty’ and spoken at countless events. Because of the scope and scale of the work across 100 countries, often there is little understanding of World Vision’s impact on poverty. As ambassador, Dunker helps give insight into that, particularly through stories of personal encounters.

“There’re a lot of things that we have to hear with our hearts, not just with our minds, and stories do that,” she says. “You tell me that 27,000 die every day from

magnetism is not because she’s a good storyteller. It is because her belief in the work is equal to her compassion. Having grown up with the beginnings of World Vision, and then seeing it with new eyes, she can recognise the totality of what the work was, should be, and is. There is no lip service here.

She states, “St Francis of Assisi said, ‘Preach the word and share the gospel at all times. When necessary, use words.’ At World Vision, you have people who believe that we live out the gospel by giving love first, unconditionally. John 3:16 says, ‘God so loved the world that he *gave*.’ God gave first, therefore World Vision gives first. We demonstrate the love of God; He will do the work in people’s hearts. We can’t transform anyone, but we can show what a transformed life looks like. And of course, whenever it’s appropriate and welcome, we share the gospel wholeheartedly.”

## KEEPER OF ACCOUNTABILITY

As well-known as World Vision is (it is the largest NGO in the world, Christian or otherwise), criticism is unavoidable, such as questions on the use of child sponsorship funds. To the pointing fingers, Dunker is almost fiercely protective – not because it’s ‘family business’, but because she knows firsthand the good work done.

“We’ve been doing it for 65 years. We’ve learned the hard lessons, and have become experts at what we do. The truth of it is many people come to World Vision, including governments and other NGOs. They ask, ‘How do we do this?’ because we’re usually the first ones in.”

She continues, “You will always find something to point to and say, ‘That’s not perfect.’ I’m not going to say World Vision does everything perfectly, because that would not be true. But we do *everything* with *all* of our hearts. My dad used to say, ‘If you’re going to do something in Jesus’ name, you do it better than anyone else,

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preventable diseases, that half the world’s population is in poverty – that’s too big for me. I don’t get that. But you tell me of a grandmother in Ethiopia who’s starving, holding her dying grandchild in her arms, looking at *you* and saying, ‘Can you *help* me?’ Then I suddenly understand. Stories are a way of taking universal truths and making them personal.”

Dunker has a way of transporting one to the scene, witnessing for oneself both the destitution before, and hope and joy after. Her deeply-rooted compassion is intensely evident in the inflections of her voice, and there is barely a dry eye in the room whenever she speaks. Yet, her



Marilee Pierce Dunker, ambassador of World Vision and advocate for women's and children's issues.

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World Vision has a policy that overheads should cost no more than 20% of each sponsored dollar. Thus at least 80% is guaranteed to go directly to work on the ground. Dunker further explains that the money invested into a child is not for the moment, but for life.

“It’s a full development strategy that has to do with five fingers – water, food security, healthcare, education and micro-enterprise. All of that is around the palm – the gospel of Jesus Christ. Sponsorship is as deep as it can go. The investment that we’re making is extreme.”

Investing in the wellbeing of children has implications for communities, too. Dunker tells of a village in India where 80% of the children were bonded into labour seven days a week, an enslavement that would last their entire lives. Upon learning of this, World Vision offered to buy *all* the children out of labour (USD 25 per child) as well as equip the villagers for better and sustainable standards of living.

Some eight years later, Dunker visited the village and found all the children in school, and mothers creating co-ops and

doing businesses together. The villagers were immensely grateful, and one woman came to her saying, “Before World Vision came, our children were not the only ones in slavery. We were enslaved to fear and hopelessness, alone in the darkness. But then World Vision came and brought the light. Now I have friends, a business, a life. I’m happy and so are my children. None of this would have happened if it had not been for World Vision.”

Sometimes, community transformation can go as far as policy change. It took World Vision 12 years of lobbying and of educating villagers, but Kenya now has a law against female genital mutilation.

“It still happens in remote places,” Dunker says. “It’s a cultural thing and it takes time to change people’s minds. But it will change and is changing. So what World Vision does is hugely significant on many levels.”

### INHERITOR OF A LEGACY

Dunker is married to Bob Dunker, a former pastor who went into Christian radio; and has two daughters and three grandchildren. And though she misses her family, whom she calls, “The most

important part of my life,” she soldiers on in advocacy, especially for women and children.

“What else would I do? I love the fact that God allows me to be useful. I remember telling the Lord, “Lord, I’m just too old for this.” He spoke so clearly back, ‘No. You’re finally old enough.’”

It is said that her father Bob Pierce functioned “from a broken heart”, and Dunker discovered that she’s more like her father than realised. With that, Dunker recognises the other job on her plate – nurturing the legacy of her father.

“My heart right now is to keep our staff encouraged to keep their eyes on Jesus, and to keep doing what we’re doing for the right reason. And to let them know how much they’re appreciated. When you are pouring out everything you have, you need to know that God’s not the only one who notices.

“I encourage our staff and the next generation of leaders in the body of Christ to make sure that this work continues. I’m so grateful for them. The day will come when I’ll wear out, but not yet. This is life-giving for me. It’s life-giving to give to other people. So I love it.” 🙌