



*Life before profit!*

### Yesterday

The Old Testament tells us that problems of access, management and use of water were a reality for Abraham and Sarah's descendants.

Genesis 29:1-8 tells us of Jacob's arrival at a well in the midst of the desert where there were three flocks of sheep waiting to be watered. Jacob suggested that the people from Haran water their flock right away. But they replied, "We cannot until all the flocks are gathered together, and the stone is rolled away from the mouth of the well."

What was this all about? A huge stone had been placed over the well, a stone that could only be moved if all of the shepherds helped out. Until all were present, none was able to draw water. It was an ingenious device for community control that ensured equal access and a fair sharing among all the herds. This passage in the Book of Genesis illustrates how one group of people were able to ensure that their well would not be exhausted by some to the detriment of others.



Senegal

### Today

The women in a desert area of Senegal, Western Africa, also have access to a well. Here again they must all go together, not only because the older women count on the younger women's help to fill their containers but because there is no pump. The well is so deep that at least three women are needed to pull up the long rope that reaches the water. However, access is not the most difficult problem

the women face. There is an issue of sharing. When the herdsmen arrive to water their animals, they empty the well and deprive not only these women but also the whole village of water, a resource supposedly available to all human kind.

Today as in Biblical days, the need for true community control over water access is vital.

### Yesterday

John 4:1-15 tells us the well-known story in which Jesus meets a Samaritan woman at "Jacob's well". He breaks the social rules of his day by asking her for a drink—a daring act for a Jewish man addressing a woman of a different religious and cultural tradition. His act is all the more shocking because the woman is at the well alone in the heat of midday, which tells us that she was of such low social status that she was not permitted to draw water in the cool of the early morning with the help of the rest of the women.

Discrimination blocked this woman's access to water, and this remains an all too-common situation today. Women, poor communities, and Indigenous people are among the world's people who face an especially difficult struggle for fair and equal access to drinking water. Too often they are denied a voice in how water is used, protected, and made accessible to all. The Samaritan woman likely experienced this on a daily basis.

Yet, Jesus ignores her supposed inferiority, and goes a step further by freely offering the woman "living water". He does so while sitting next to a well that symbolized Israel's connections to her ancestors. As in the days of those ancestors, access to a secure water source and the right to use it when needed was crucial to survival in Jesus' time.

### What does democracy have to do with faith?

Many people of faith, including Christians, seek to defend the environment and ensure fair and democratic community access to water for all. Water is more than a national or local issue; it is part of the common heritage of not only humanity but all creation. Water is God's sacred gift to all beings.

Why are we concerned about democratically-managed water services? Privatization of water is not an ethical response to a growing crisis about water access and pollution. This is not a solution that respects the integrity of creation; nor does it recognize water as a basic human right. It comes down to who is responsible for life. It is everyone's responsibility to ensure that water is accessed, managed and used democratically.



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*"For lack of water democracy, we are denied a democratic life."*

Indian activist and writer Vandana Shiva meeting with representatives of the local government of Harwar, India, asking them to stop damming the Ganges River.

In this desert land, water was and is a life and death matter. Then as now, there is no substitute for water. Jesus' offer of living water, which is open to the whole community and can be reached without a bucket or even a well, is a powerful promise of equal access to new life. If we understand water to be a sacred gift on which all life depends, Jesus could not have chosen a more powerful image. And he makes it clear that this gift is for all peoples.

## Today

About one third of the people living in Bangladesh's capital, Dhaka, live in and around huge slums which have no water service as these areas are "illegally" occupied. Over a number of years, pressure on the city's municipal council to privatize water services intensified. The city's workers formed a cooperative and were able to take over the management of the water services by demonstrating better results than the private sector. This cooperative showed itself to be very open to the initiatives of popular organizations. In the poor areas of the city, several local committees developed participatory,

accessible and lasting solutions as an alternative to privatized water services. Often run by women, these committees were elected by the community. In 2002, more than 150 public fountains were installed. These are now run by local, democratic committees. More than 100,000 individuals come to these water sources. Unfortunately, challenges remain: this number represents only 3% of the 3 million Dhaka citizens who do not have access to clean water.

## Democratic management of water resources

United Nations principles on governance can help us reflect on the

meaning of good governance and water. These include:

- ▶ Participation in decision-making
- ▶ Transparency
- ▶ Flexibility
- ▶ Consensus in reconciling interests that might compete with each other
- ▶ Equity, effectiveness and efficiency to satisfy needs
- ▶ The responsibilities of decision-makers and civil society interveners
- ▶ A strategic vision of sustainable development

By linking these principles to our faith understanding of water as God's gift to all creation, we can move towards participatory democracy and not limit ourselves to simply being "informed" or "consulted."

# Questions?

## From Reflection to Action

Use the following suggested questions to guide yourself or a small group through a discussion.

- 1 Reflecting on the Genesis story: what can the Biblical way of ensuring fair water distribution teach us about community water management today?**
- 2 In the John passage, the Samaritan woman is blocked from fair access to water by discrimination. What are some modern-day equivalents for your area? For our world?**

**3 The Canadian churches are involved in a campaign for access to clean water for all. Reflecting on Jesus' promise of a "spring of living water gushing up to eternal life", discuss:**

- ▶ What gifts can people of faith offer to democratic and community-based decision-making on water?
- ▶ What can your faith community contribute to the struggle for access to clean water for all?

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For more information or to order material :

KAIROS is the justice and peace organization of eleven Canadian churches and church agencies, including DEVELOPMENT AND PEACE. DEVELOPMENT AND PEACE is the official international development agency of the Canadian Catholic Church and a member of KAIROS.



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