

Interview with Paul Rodney Turner from FOOD FOR LIFE

It is quite impressive to learn that when the Tsunami hit, FOOD FOR LIFE (FFL) was able to serve more than one thousand “karma-free” vegan meals to people the very same day, in the middle of all the destruction. That fact alone shows what an established alert system, FFL’s flexible management and motivated helpers from all over the world are capable of.

The director of this well-oiled “food machine” is Australian-born Paul Turner who in 1994 came to the US to establish the headquarters for Food for Life. Paul answers Renato Pichler’s questions and explains how the charity functions and the secret of its success:

What do you mean by “karma-free” vegetarian meals?

The word *karma* comes from India. It literally means, “work” or “action,” and is often likened to the law of physics, wherein, for every action there is an equal and opposite reaction. Even in the bible, it is stated: “As you sow so shall you reap” – that’s karma! So a meal that is “karma-free” is a meal that has been prepared in such a way that it is free from any negative or sinful reaction. It is antiseptic, purified and thus nourishing to the body and soul. It is pure vegetarianism.

A “karma-free” diet is more than just refraining from meat, fish and eggs. It is wrong to think that simply by becoming a vegetarian one can avoid transgressing the laws of nature. Vegetables also have life. And so a truly “karma-free” meal combines the physical nourishment of a healthy plant-based diet with the spiritual nourishment that comes from acknowledging our dependency on God and Mother Earth.

Rooted in Hindu tradition, the spiritual dimension of pure vegetarianism has meaning for people of all faiths. Simply put, before we eat our food, we should offer it to God in thanks. Only then does the food become pure, “karma-free,” and spiritually nourishing. Hindus call this food prasada, or the mercy of God.

Is your food always vegetarian? Vegan?

Absolutely. We never serve anything but clean vegetarian or vegan meals. Our menus vary according to time, place and circumstance. They are usually cooked, but we also serve fresh fruits. Most of the time the meals are vegan, but some of our projects in India use yoghurt.

You obviously respect local tastes and traditions when you serve banana bread to people in Texas and rice in Sri Lanka.

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Who makes the decision about “menus”?

Our local staff makes these decisions. They know best. We always prepare our meals according to local taste.

Who is responsible for the procurement of ingredients?

This is typically done by our local emergency coordinator. In the case of the tsunami, however, our local staff were not very experienced in large scale food relief, so we had experienced chefs and relief workers fly in from Poland, Russia, India,

meals daily to earthquake survivors. The town of Udhampur was within the earthquake zone.

It seems that you distribute mainly cooked dishes. Would you consider also serving cold food, which may be easier to prepare and to distribute?

No, we also serve fresh fruits and salads whenever possible. In fact, all the food we served for the recent Hurricane Katrina relief in the US, was organic produce, much of which was fresh fruits supplied to us by an organisation called the Fruit Tree

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South Africa, US, Greece, and England.

Do you import ingredients and equipment or do you rather buy or rent pots and pans locally?

We always procure our ingredient and equipment locally. Usually we buy them at a discount from local markets or get donations directly from the Red Cross and the military, with whom we often coordinate in these disaster situations. You have to remember that we have projects everywhere, so we are never far away from any disaster. Right now we have a team of Krishna monks, joined by local volunteers and the military working from a temple in Udhampur, Northern India, who are serving thousands of

Planting Foundation (www.ftpf.org). But we generally prefer to serve hot food as it is safer and less prone to contamination.

How many meals do you distribute on average?

Food for Life projects around the world are currently serving on average about 180,000 meals daily. That is more than four meals every second of the day! We estimate that in the last 30 years Food for Life has served at least 150 million free meals to the needy.

It is obvious that your charity work is well organised. How is the “alert system” organised?

Well, we keep things simple - very little

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bureaucracy. When a disaster hits, our teams respond as soon as they can with the resources they have available. Food for Life Global is then alerted and we then mobilise financial and volunteer support as needed. The Food for Life Global office, web site and newsletter serves as the central coordination service.

How do you activate your helpers on such short notice?

Through the Internet, via ISKCON temples and the FFL volunteer mailing list.

In how many countries were you able to help?

Food for Life is currently active in over 50 countries. For the Tsunami, we had teams working in Sri Lanka, India, and Malaysia.

What are the main problems you encounter?

Lack of funds and emergency relief infrastructure. When disasters strike we often have to start from scratch. We simply do not have vehicles, boats, helicopters, communications systems and mobile kitchens that other much larger relief agencies have. Food for Life is a grass-roots operation. This has its pros and cons. For one thing, our simplicity enables us to be flexible and to respond fast; it also makes us incredibly cost-efficient. On average, a typical Food for Life meal only cost 15 cents. During a disaster, that cost is still only around 25 cents per meal. So we can feed a lot of people for very little money. One of the goals of Food for Life Global next year is to purchase emergency mobile kitchens -- large trucks with full cooking facilities and storage, and have them ready to go in various places around the world.

How well are you received by the national/local authorities?

The appreciation is there from the Non-profit sector and especially the vegetarian and animal rights organisations, unfortunately, most people are still unaware of our work. But in some places around the world, Food for Life has a very high profile. For example, our largest program in the world is in India and is called "Akshaya patra" which literally means "unlimited pot." The project was actually inaugurated by the India President and is continuing to get financial support from the Indian government (www.akshayapatra.org). That project

serves 90,000 lunches to poor school children everyday, visiting 300 schools around Bangalore. Food for Life certainly needs help with raising awareness of projects like these and so I appreciate the opportunity to speak with you today.

How is it possible to respect hygiene-rules?

This can be a challenge sometimes in disaster-relief situations, but it is not impossible. During times of disaster it is understood that you just have to do your best under the circumstances. But, Food for Life chefs always adhere to strict hygienic standards, because it is fundamental to our belief that food should be prepared in purity in order for it to be truly "karma-free." You may be interested to learn that our cooks do not even taste the food while they are preparing it. We always try to prepare the meals with purity of action and mind.

What is the relationship between the Hare-Krishna-movement (ISKCON) and the FFL? (who makes the final decisions)

Food for Life was started by Hare Krishna monks in India back in 1974 when they responded to flood victims in Bengal. Since then, the program has spread all over the world in various forms, including free food kitchens, mobile services, delivery to shelters and schools, schooling for poor children, environmental projects, cow protection, orphanages, housing and even free medical care. It is managed and operated by volunteers from many faiths, including members of ISKCON. Food for Life is non-sectarian and so anyone can participate. Food for Life is a separately registered charity from ISKCON.

Are other religions and communities allowed to participate in your charity work?

Yes, we welcome anyone, as long as they can respect our insistence that all the food we serve must be "karma-free." And of course, Food for Life now has many other charitable works aside from food relief. We recently had Christian volunteer art therapists' work with our children at our orphanage in Sri Lanka.

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For more information on Food for Life and their projects, check out the following links:

www.ffl.org

www.gokulam.org

www.houddini.com



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Can interested individuals join your crews as well?

What are the conditions?

Interested people are requested to sign up online at http://www.ffl.org/html/volunteer_registration.html. They also need to read our Volunteer handbook and sign a contractual agreement between themselves and Food for Life Global. Soon, the new FFL web site will have a Volunteer Matching service, where interested people can match their skills with volunteer opportunities from around the world.

How do you finance the interventions?

All the Food for Life projects are independently registered and independently financed by local individuals, corporations and sometimes government grants. Food for Life Global, although acting as the international headquarters, receives most of its financial support through online donations. Food for Life Global acts as the voice for FFL projects; the support system for management and guidance; the policy and standards authority for the program; the promotional arm; the disaster relief coordinator, and when possible, the financier for smaller projects and emergency relief efforts.

What support would you like from the public?

Thank you for asking. Food for Life Global is in the midst of a major push to expand and improve our services. One of the ways we want to facilitate that is to set up representative offices in other countries to help raise awareness, funds, and for coordinating emergency relief work. This requires people and money. Another way that the public can help is to become advocates for this noble cause. Most of the people involved in Food for Life are volunteers. Our people are doing such wonderful work all over the world, and there is so much need to do more. So we need help.

The slogan for Food for Life Global is "To Unite the World through Food." We believe very strongly that food

speaks all languages, and that by the proliferation of "karma-free" meals and by educating people on the benefits of a plant-based diet, we can rid the world of hunger and create positive consciousness for a better world. As long as there are slaughterhouses and factory farms, there will never be peace in the world. In order for people to give up a lower taste, they must experience a higher taste. So our method of creating positive change is by giving people practical experience. Please join us!

What is the COTTAGE program?

This is a wonderful project born out of the tsunami disaster. COTTAGE is a project intended to financially support the children of Gokulam – Bhaktivedanta Children's Home (a FFL project), to raise awareness about this happy orphanage and to provide the children with an artistic outlet enabling them to express themselves in a unique way. COTTAGE is an acronym for Children Of The Tsunami – Arts, Gifts and Education.

COTTAGE hopes to facilitate a mutually-beneficial relationship between the orphans of Gokulam (www.gokulam.org) and those who purchase the high-quality greeting cards designed with the art work of the children. The children are given various colorful art supplies and encouraged to be free as possible.

The generous individuals who support COTTAGE through purchasing the orphans' creative work will not only receive a wonderful gift, but will also know that they have helped make the lives of disadvantaged children more prosperous. Check out the web site at www.cottageyouth.org.

My last question is a personal one: with all your work for FFL, your own firm and last but not least your family – how do you manage to balance your impressive work-load?

Yes, it is a miracle. A blessing! I don't know how I do it. But that has always been my nature – to do many things at the same time. Even when I cook I do it. People are amazed to see me calmly cooking 8-10 preparations at the same time. But I should also mention that I work long hours and my wife, Rupal is very supportive.

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