



## Soft Power

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*“Is a foreign aid program really necessary? Why should we not lay down this burden...? The answer is that there is no escaping our obligations: our moral obligations as a wise leader and good neighbor ... To fail to meet those obligations now would be disastrous...”*

*President John F. Kennedy, March 1961*

[Special Message to the Congress on Foreign Aid](#)

The opening question that President Kennedy posed to Congress in 1961 was a provocative one, but it was just the start of a longer argument he would make. In fact, he was thoroughly convinced that foreign aid from the United States to “less developed nations” was vitally important. Congress ultimately agreed with him. Thus began USAID, the US Agency for International Development.

Two decades later, a political scientist at Harvard, Joseph Nye, would refer to such aid from the United States as an element of “soft power.” Soft power is the idea that promoting values like human rights, democracy, and peace by investing in countries that are economically and politically fragile can bear more fruit in the long term than the use of military might or economic sanctions. The careful cultivation of relationships through diplomacy, and aid that enables a country to overcome its biggest obstacles to stability, has its own unique power.

Today, the United States is all but abandoning the use of such soft power. Budget cuts to the State Department have disrupted diplomatic efforts; the closure of many embassies and consulates around the world is proposed. USAID, which represented a mere 1.2% of total federal spending, has been nearly eliminated by

the Trump administration's Department of Government Efficiency (DOGE).

The consequences of these cuts are devastating for many around the world. Critical health care for pregnant women, vulnerable newborns, and persons living with HIV will end. Feeding programs for the severely malnourished will stall. Humanitarian responses to places reeling from natural disasters and violent conflicts will diminish. Our investments in the things that make for peace are being eviscerated.

As a person of faith, the callousness of these decisions makes me ill. I cannot comprehend such a complete lack of compassion, the utter dismissal of any positive contribution to the well-being of others around the world. Many of our elected leaders love to trot out the Bible when it's convenient and fling claims of faith when they believe it will serve their political futures. But these decisions bear no resemblance to faith-informed leadership.

The Christian faith demands compassion and generosity. Jesus commanded us to love our neighbor and demonstrated that our neighbor is not simply the person that is like us or near us but is in fact the stranger, the foreigner, the suffering. He made it clear that God's favor rests with those who see another's need and meet it, while God's judgment is reserved for those who don't: "for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me" (Matthew 25:35–36, NRSVUE).

Authentic Christianity is rooted in our own version of "soft power." It moves us to invest in people and build relationships. It recognizes empathy as a strength and virtue. It extends extravagant love and uncommon mercy. It desires justice and peace for all. It does not grow weary in doing what is right.

President Kennedy was correct in 1961. Our country has a moral obligation to be a wise leader and good neighbor in the world. Failing to meet that obligation now is disastrous for us all.

*Global Ministries has 250 partners in nearly 90 countries around the world. Read about the impacts of current U.S. foreign policy and cuts to*

USAID on our partners [here](#).

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

The Rev. Shari Prestemon serves as the Acting Associate General Minister and Co-Executive of Global Ministries in the national setting of the United Church of Christ.

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