

OPINION

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Gordon Jackson: Bathroom combatants could learn from village

Gordon Jackson

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As the federal government and at least 11 states have now begun a legal battle over transgender bathrooms, I can imagine the villagers of Nyaera, in rural Kenya, sitting at the ringside, watching in bewilderment. Given their own bathroom problems, they couldn't begin to understand our fight over whether your birth certificate and the bathroom you're using are in alignment, or should be.

If we explained how we're addressing our distinctly First World problem of using the courts to figure out who gets to use which bathroom, these villagers couldn't begin to grasp what the fuss is about. And they'd be joined by the rest of the 54 percent of the world's population who, according to the World Health Organization, also lack basic sanitation. For all of them, their concern is much more basic: to secure access to *any* bathroom.

Then the villagers would probably ask, "Why can't they just talk to each other and sort this out?" And that's what their community meeting on May 19 was about. The 90-

minute event was facilitated by Gad Obuya, a community health assistant. About 40 villagers crowded into a rudimentary mud and brick hut, probably the size of your living room. After explaining the meeting's purpose, Obuya drew a rough outline of the village boundaries on the mud floor, using handfuls of fine ash to trace the lines. Next, someone from each of the village's 29 households wrote his or her family name on a piece of cardboard torn from a box, and Obuya placed it in the appropriate location on the map, showing everyone's place in the community.

Then came the crucial part. Those nine homes without a latrine were marked with a yellow blossom, plucked from a nearby tree. The flower enabled all to see at a glance where the remaining latrines were needed. Having learned how the health of all the villagers is endangered by defecating out in the open, and the implications for their community's water supply, they were easily persuaded to take action. The village appointed six people to a committee to oversee the building of the last nine latrines. Younger villagers pledged to help the elderly who couldn't easily construct their own.

Thanks to Obuya's role, the village had taken several significant steps, each of which holds a lesson for our leaders who are currently girding for battle over the transgender bathroom issue. First, they clarified the problem and the threat to community health. (By contrast, it seems that right now the two sides doing battle here at home struggle even to define the problem; one side sees it as a matter of rights, the other as a concern for children's and women's safety.) Then, the Nyaera villagers actually talked to each other, at times animatedly. They reached an amicable conclusion rather than talking past each other.

Even if it were somehow possible for all of us in this country to sit down together in a nationwide problem-solving session, we are so predisposed to resolving our differences in the courtroom that we wouldn't even try. People who taught us the now all-too-familiar adage that it takes a village to raise a child must feel sorry for us. They'd see that the problem we face isn't with our nation's toilets, it's with people who can't figure out how to use them without going to court.

And so, as we collectively flush millions of times a day, the showdowns in U.S. courtrooms over how to resolve the transgender bathroom issue will continue. As the lawyers of various sides of the great transgender-bathroom feud prepare their briefs, and organizations lined up on each side of the divide pay thousands of dollars to prepare friend-of-the-court arguments, we're indulging in a problem-solving luxury only a developed country can afford.

Meanwhile, Kenyans and others in developing nations will continue building one latrine at a time. And of this you can be sure: When the nine remaining latrines in Nyaera village are finished, nobody will be worrying about possible lawsuits; all the

village's latrines will be gender neutral.

Gordon Jackson, a retired journalism professor, serves on the board of Partnering for Progress, a Spokane nonprofit organization doing development work, including building latrines in rural Kenya, which he visited in May.

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