

Church wanted to give his four children some sense of the needs in other countries. So in 2008, he took his family to Ethiopia and Kenya, where they witnessed firsthand the hardship caused by the shortage of fresh, clean water.

The experience had a profound impact on Church and his family. And it inspired him to embark on his next business venture—the Nika Water Company.

Nika, which is based in San Diego, markets a premium brand of bottled water. It is sold primarily in California, through retailers such as Whole Foods, and in restaurants and convenience stores. Nika is a for-profit business, but, as Church points out, it is a for-profit business built on a “social entrepreneurial” model in which the company strives to earn a profit in order to contribute that money to a cause. Nika’s mission, inspired by Church’s experiences in Africa, is to bring clean water to people who don’t have access to it.

“We donate 100 percent of our profits back to the cause,” he says. “It’s a hybrid model, merging the worlds of the for-profit enterprise and the nonprofit enterprise.”

Although Church doesn’t take a salary himself, he manages a paid staff of seven, which is engaged primarily in sales and marketing. In three years, Nika has grown to \$1 million in annual revenues, and in that time the organization has been able to donate approximately \$350,000 to support the development of water projects in seven countries. The money goes largely to two nongovernmental organizations (NGOs)—Toronto-based Free the Children and San Diego-based Project Concern International.

The NGOs plan and build the water systems, and, perhaps most importantly, they share Church’s belief in a “hand-up” rather than “handout” model of philanthropy.

“We work with communities,” he says, “to build the water systems, to inform people about the benefits of clean water and to educate them on what they can do with their free time now that they have water coming into their villages. We’ve learned through our projects that it only costs \$20 to bring clean water to someone for a lifetime. So these problems are solvable if we think outside the box and think about different economic models.”

Church compares Nika to endeavors such as TOMS Shoes, which donates a pair of shoes to a needy child for



every pair sold, and Newman’s Own Inc., which donates after-tax profits to charitable causes.

“As you get more businesses like Nika and TOMS Shoes and Newman’s Own, then all of a sudden you’ve got a sea of businesses that are giving back,” Church says. “It doesn’t have to be 100 percent. It can be 10 percent, 20 percent, 50 percent or whatever. But when you get all of these businesses giving back, then I think we can really solve some of society’s most challenging problems.”

SOME COMPANIES prefer to keep their contributions and sponsorships close to home, in tightly focused projects that employees can rally behind. In Alaska, for example, there’s no bigger event than the Iditarod Trail Sled Dog Race held each March. It’s also one of the largest volunteer efforts in the state. One of the race’s principal sponsors is Anchorage-based GCI, the state’s largest telecommunications company. During the nine-plus-day race, dozens of GCI volunteers help with communications services linking nearly 30 remote checkpoints along the 1,049-mile race route with the race headquarters in Wasilla, Alaska.

Education is another area of focus for GCI, whose largest single contribution included an estimated \$30 million in fiber optic capacity to the University of Alaska, to be used in research and education programs. GCI Vice President David Morris notes that, like many companies, leveraging operation expenditures rather than capital expenditures makes sense for a company with existing services to offer.

On a more grassroots level, the company is the title sponsor of the GCI Alaska Academic Decathlon, a statewide all-academic team competition for high

Led by CEO and cofounder Jeff Church, Nika Water has changed lives by bringing clean water to more than 7,000 people.