

Mighty wings to the rescue



A new secular UK charity is poised to transform how the aviation industry supports life-saving humanitarian flights, as well as raise the profile of this vital sector where aviation is a force for good around the globe. **TIM ROBINSON** FRAeS reports.

Every day, millions of people around the world depend on life-saving humanitarian aviation, delivering critical aid, food and medicine to those in need in remote places after natural and human-made disasters. This aerial lifeline is, for many people, the difference between life and death with operators, such as Mission Aviation Fellowship (MAF), Mercy Air and others flying around the clock, often in atrocious weather, to the most dangerous airstrips in the world.

Yet, despite the longstanding work of MAF (which this year turns 80 years old and with more than 120 aircraft – see 'Delivering Hope,' *AEROSPACE* April 2026), these life-saving flights, involving small aircraft which bring vital aid to remote regions, rather incredibly, have until now, flown under the radar of many experienced aerospace professionals.

Industry veteran, and Director of Aviascia,

Rachel Gardner-Poole OBE FRAeS, was inspired by humanitarian aviation at a very young age: "The whole thing that inspired me into aviation was when I was six years old and I heard about MAF. At age six I really wanted to fly for MAF." She recalls working as an adult for MAF UK: "I went out and spoke to many senior aviation stakeholders and 80% of them had never heard of MAF or had no idea that humanitarian aviation existed to that extent but everyone was very inspired. People were just bowled over."

In parallel with demand for life-saving aid exceeding supply, the past two decades have seen a massive expansion in corporate social responsibility (CSR) projects and funding among many large aerospace OEMs, airlines and organisations, with executives keen to demonstrate their social credentials – whether it is funding STEM, outreach scholarships, flying training, sustainability schemes or

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more – and searching for charities that can link good work to aviation and aerospace. Yet, despite this very obvious match between aviation and life-saving relief flights, many companies have shied away from directly funding humanitarian aviation.

Says Gardner-Poole: “When I asked ‘could your company support this?’, virtually all of them said, ‘well, no, because it is faith-based.’ The big corporates were absolutely ‘we cannot support anything faith or politically-based.’” With its religious roots, MAF as the biggest humanitarian operator, along with others such as Mercy Air, have thus been locked out of support by many corporate and institutional organisations – despite their faith activities being a tiny fraction of their overall operations. Thus, large portions of the corporate aviation sector, airlines, institutional donors, aerospace primes and industry foundations cannot direct funding to faith-based organisations, either due to their own policies on religious neutrality or legal restrictions on how charitable grants can be deployed. She goes on: “So it was this and ‘how do we create greater awareness of humanitarian flying and the need for it?’ It was those two things that inspired Aviation for Good.”

Aviation angels assemble

Formed some 18 months ago, Aviation for Good is a new UK charity that aims to address these two challenges – of structural obstacles to corporate funding of humanitarian aviation, and also to help raise the profile of life-saving work – by allocating funds from companies to help channel grants to organisations using light aircraft to deliver medical assistance, disaster relief and essential supplies to communities that cannot be reached by other means.

With an experienced board of trustees that includes Gardner-Poole as Chair, Dave Lees, Chief Executive Officer of Bristol Airport; James McMicking, Chief Strategy Officer at ZeroAvia; Kerissa Khan FRAeS, former President of the Royal Aeronautical Society; Iain McDermott-Paine, former Director at NATS; Cathy Hinton, aerospace and defence leader

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at QinetiQ; Wg Cdr Al Mundy, an RAF pilot; and Anna Beck, a seasoned international non-profit leader, the board had its first meeting on 22 May as it works to set up a fundraising strategy and campaign and announce its first partner organisations.

However, much work has already taken place under the hood, with a groundswell of support for the concept gaining momentum across the industry. More than 50 senior figures across the aerospace sector contributed through feedback sessions over the past 18 months, helping to shape the mission, values and operating model before a single grant has been made. That consultative foundation has produced something unusual: a charity that the aviation industry has, in a meaningful sense, already helped to design and shape and aimed at being a ‘force for good.’

However, it is important to remember that Aviation for Good is not setting itself up to be an operator itself, nor is it competing with existing humanitarian aviation charities. Says Gardner-Poole: “The last thing we are going to do is be a competitor. So if people want to give to MAF, brilliant. If people want to give to Mercy Air or Aviation Without Borders, brilliant. We are about trying to raise awareness and create campaigns that will really appeal to the aviation industry in particular.”

With this tailored, secular approach to fundraising aimed at overcoming structural barriers to donations, a veteran team of trustees and growing awareness, Aviation for Good is set to potentially unlock significant amounts of extra untapped financial support for the most desperate and needy people around the globe – who rely on aircraft. It is set to give an example of how powerful the aerospace sector can be, when it comes together for a single cause – saving lives.

In a time when aviation is sometimes only seen with negative connotations by the mainstream media, whether it is related to climate change or conflict, Aviation for Good is set to play a valuable service by raising awareness and highlighting the unsung stories of how every day, aviation saves lives around the world.

▼ Mercy Air was involved in flood relief efforts in Mozambique during January 2026.

