



Bread for the World: What Pastors and Christians Need to Know about Hunger Today

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The Lord Almighty will prepare a feast of rich food for all peoples.

—Isaiah 25:6 (NIV)

When she lost her job, Barbie Izquierdo found the task of feeding her two children nearly impossible. Work was scarce in her North Philadelphia neighborhood, affordable grocery stores distant. She was often unable to buy enough food for her toddler daughter, her infant son, and herself. On the hardest days, Barbie thought, “I literally have nothing left. What do I give them?” Some days, she skipped meals to make sure that her children ate. “After I sat both of my children at the table, I would go into another room,” said Barbie. “I never wanted my children to notice the difference between what they were eating, and what I was eating.”¹

Muna Thapa was a young mother in western Nepal raising her eighteen-month-old son, Aakash, on her own while her husband sought work in Malaysia. Muna became alarmed that, despite her love and attention, Aakash weighed only 15 pounds, the normal weight of a six-month-old. In a country in which

¹Editor’s note: For more information regarding the people, data, organizations, and citations included in this article, contact Bread for the World (see <http://www.bread.org>).

Worldwide, hunger is retreating. Still, a staggering number of people live in perpetual hunger. Jesus and the prophets call us to respond, and together we can make a difference. But concerted action is required. Donating one can of food at a time, be it ever so useful, will not be sufficient to meet the crisis.

two-thirds of young children are underweight, Aakash was extremely malnourished and at risk of not surviving until his second birthday. Fortunately, Muna was able to bring her son to the Nutrition Rehabilitation Home, a feeding center in Dhangai, Nepal, run by the Rural Women's Development and Unity Centre. Aakash was put on an emergency food regimen. He gained two pounds within a month and regained interest in playing. His life is no longer at risk.

Barbie and Muna may live a world apart, but each regularly faces hunger and worries about its effects on her children. Young lives are the hardest hit by hunger. Worldwide, not only are children more likely to be hungry, they are also likely to bear the consequences of childhood circumstances throughout their lives. Whether born in the United States or Nepal, a child who does not receive enough nourishment during her first thousand days of life—from pregnancy through her second birthday—rarely achieves all that she could. Malnourished children tend to have reduced cognitive abilities, shorter height, and decreased earning power later in life. Each year, 165 million children live with the effects of malnutrition. Three million die from it.

A staggering number of people of all ages live in perpetual hunger—900 million by the latest count. Think about that. Nearly a billion lives are being diminished or extinguished right now—in a world that has enough food for everyone. How can this be?

WE ARE ALL CALLED TO END HUNGER

For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat. I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink. I was a stranger and you invited me in. I needed clothes and you clothed me.

—Matthew 25:35–36 (NIV)

God's willingness to become one of us in the person of Jesus Christ is evidence of God's deep and abiding love for us. We understand God's love through Jesus: "We know love by this, that he laid down his life for us—and we ought to lay down our lives for one another" (1 John 3:16). Scripture shows us that Jesus was compassionate to all people, especially the widow, the orphan, the stranger, the hungry, the poor—those most vulnerable in society. Jesus loved all people, rich and poor, and actively cared for those in need. In Scripture, Jesus invites potential disciples to "follow" him, making it clear that discipleship entails action—particularly service (Matt 20:26–28). Jesus is not only our brother but also our model in living out our faith (James 2:14). We continue Christ's work when we "go and do likewise" (Luke 10:32–38).

God teaches us, through the prophets, that we are not to withhold nourishment from anyone (Isa 58:6–10)—not to harden our hearts, but to give to those who are poor with an open hand and an open heart (Deut 15:10). This admonition reflects the reality of people who often struggled to survive. Hunger is not an issue that divides *us* from *them*. Each of us needs a base of calories and nutrients to sus-

tain life. No exceptions. And each of us is vulnerable to the possibility of living in hunger's grip. A layoff, an injury, a drought—any of these could lead us to hunger, to joining the ranks of “the least of these.”

From the dawn of creation, God has shared abundance with God's people. In the Old Testament, God provided by raining manna from heaven. In the Gospels, Jesus fed 5,000 people, turned water into wine, and filled the disciples' nets with a miraculous catch of fish. Jesus himself stated that he came to give life abundantly. When Jesus declared, “I am the bread of life” (John 6:35), he chose our foremost physical need to emphasize the primacy of his message.

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To describe the relationship between faith and works, James placed the sharing of sustenance at the center of his teaching: “If a brother or sister lacks food and one of you says, ‘go in peace,’ and yet do not supply their bodily needs, what is the good of that?” (James 2:15–16). James echoes Deuteronomy: “Give liberally and be ungrudging when you do so, for on this account the LORD your God will bless you” (Deut 15:10). Our calling is clear. How are we going to fulfill it?

GOVERNMENT PROGRAMS ARE CRUCIAL

You've been brought up never to be a charity case, never to have to ask for help, and all of a sudden you're in that position where you got nowhere else to go...and it's hard.

—John Lohmeier, *The Line*

John Lohmeier had been a Chicago-area bank executive before a series of setbacks left him without an income or savings—but three children to feed. “I never thought I'd be in that position,” John says. “I was a straight A student; I got a high ACT, graduated with high honors; everything was roses.” John knew that he had no choice but to persevere. While he once contributed to charity, he now counts on a local food bank for necessities. “It doesn't matter if you have to stand in line and feel bad about yourself,” John says, “you have to cross that line to be able to keep the lights on, to be able to keep feeding your kids.”

Whether because of unemployment, low wages, or disabilities, forty-eight million Americans find themselves living day to day with little certainty about how they will feed themselves. Each story is unique, but each shares the stress of living in one of the world's richest countries without enough food or money to make ends meet. “I just feel like I've aged so much,” says John, “it's like a constant kind

of throbbing in your mind of like, *What am I going to do?* I don't want to worry about this anymore."

Since the 2008 recession, poverty has risen in the United States, widening the gulf between the haves and the have-nots. During this time, food pantries and community kitchens have been crucial first responders for people in need. Fortunately, a network of food banks has developed across the country over the past thirty years, feeding countless people every day. Community members are extremely generous in their donations: food charities now distribute an estimated \$5 billion in food annually. It is not enough.

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Pastor Bob Wilson of Plateau Valley Assembly of God in Colbran, Colorado, exemplifies the kindness and charity of many religious congregations—but also just how overwhelming the hunger situation in America has become. Every week, Pastor Bob and his wife, Michaela, transport food from Food Bank of the Rockies to their small town to meet the increasing demand.

"Ten years ago or so when we started this, I remember driving into the food bank and being excited about filling [our] Suburban with 10 to 15 boxes of food and thinking we were really making a difference in our community," Pastor Bob recalls. "After a year and a half we bought a little single-axle trailer that we could put two pallets of food on. Now we're doing four pallets twice a week."

Despite the generosity of people like the Wilsons, churches can't possibly keep up with the demands of their communities. Given the staggering need, it's no surprise that all charitable donations combined account for only 5 percent of the total food delivered to hungry people in the United States. The federal government provides the rest through programs like the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP, formerly the Food Stamp Program) and school lunches.

Over the past five years, the number of Americans enrolled in SNAP has nearly doubled.² This rise shows how well federal programs can function. While unemployment and poverty have been at thirty-year highs, the number of hungry people in the United States has not risen. When families like Barbie's face hard times, SNAP helps them stretch their resources. And contrary to some rhetoric, programs like SNAP are almost always temporary solutions to families with obvi-

²See <http://money.msn.com/now/post.aspx?post=e9caf453-75ca-4ad6-ae9d-9b991cd6702f> (accessed August 15, 2013).

ous need. The gross monthly income of a household receiving SNAP is \$731, and the number of months that they receive the benefits is nine.³

These days, some politicians are using the federal deficit as an argument for cutting assistance to needy people. That approach ignores the achievements of the past century when our government has used its legislative power to give people a hand up—especially when times are tough.

In the early twentieth century, after parents demanded it, high school was made free for all children. This resulted in the United States having the most educated workforce in the world. When the United States staggered with high unemployment and displacement because of the Depression and Dust Bowl, the federal government responded with direct relief and benefit programs. The Surplus Commodities Program, launched in 1936, is the precursor of the current SNAP program. In 1964, President Lyndon Johnson launched the War on Poverty, as the U.S. poverty rate hovered at 19 percent. Programs like Head Start; the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC); and Job Corp reduced that number to 11 percent by 1973.

However, by the 1980s, our nation's commitment to the hungry and poor had waned. The most current census numbers puts the poverty rate today at 15 percent,⁴ one of the highest in the industrialized world, and the highest since the War on Poverty. Without serious intervention, it is likely to stay there. If our sense of moral responsibility isn't enough to spur effective action, policymakers and citizens must also consider the high cost of letting hunger continue. In 2011, a team of economists from Brandeis University estimated that hunger is costing the United States \$167.5 billion a year because of its effects on health, education, and economic productivity.⁵

In Scripture, God calls us into community and sets the expectation that leaders (whether they are kings, pharaohs, or governments) should care for their people. Therefore, we also reflect Christ's love by challenging individuals and institutions that have the power to change laws and structures that keep people vulnerable. As God's hands and feet in the world, we work toward a beloved community in which every person has an equal opportunity to thrive.

Additionally, Scripture speaks to the role and responsibility of leaders in caring for poor people (Jer 22). In the New Testament, Jesus warns that nations will be held accountable and judged for the ways they have treated the least among them (Matt 25:31–46). Romans 13 suggests that our leaders are servants for the good, whether or not they acknowledge that their authority comes from God. As Paul exercised his power as a Roman citizen, so too can Christians advocate for government to justly protect its people (Acts 21–26).

³See <https://www.insideharvesters.org/Agency/Announcement/Announcement.asp?Id=71> (accessed August 15, 2013).

⁴See <http://www.census.gov/hhes/www/poverty/about/overview/> (accessed August 15, 2013).

⁵See <http://www.takepart.com/article/2013/02/05/americans-all-pay-hunger-among-our-ranks> (accessed August 15, 2013).

HUNGER IS RETREATING, WORLDWIDE

We have more development success stories than ever before. The transformative impact of the [Millennium Development Goals] is undeniable....But...the clock is ticking, with much more to do.

—United Nations Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon⁶

While food insecurity in the United States is on the rise, extreme poverty around the world has declined significantly in recent decades.

In 2009, I visited Mtimbe, Mozambique, a settlement of about forty mud houses with thatched roofs on the shore of Lake Nyasa—many miles from the nearest road. Fifteen years ago, Mtimbe was so exceptionally poor that the community didn't have a school, and medicines for HIV/AIDS were unattainable. When I visited, families were still struggling to survive on small cassava farms, and electricity was a distant dream, but things had marginally improved in many ways, largely through support from the United States. The reduction of Mozambique's debts helped finance schools across the country including one in Mtimbe, and the United States funds most of the AIDS medications in Mozambique. The community of Mtimbe is by no means stable or prosperous, but now there is hope that someday it could be.

International goals have built public support and galvanized leadership toward ending hunger and extreme poverty. In 2000, the United Nations adopted Millennium Development Goals (MDG) to track progress in key indicators of health and well-being.⁷ Governments, nongovernmental organizations, and individuals around the world have proven remarkably successful at mobilizing efforts around the MDGs, with remarkable reductions in hunger, poverty, and disease. During the 2000s, more people escaped poverty than during any other decade in history. More importantly, progress occurred in every major region of the world. The goal to halve the proportion of people living in poverty (since 1990) has been met, ahead of the 2015 deadline. That goal could not have been met without a concerted global effort and leadership from all countries, including the United States, which launched the three-year Feed the Future initiative to invest in country-driven agriculture and food security programs.⁸

In September 2010, during the United Nations General Assembly, the United States and Ireland announced the 1,000 Days Partnerships to draw attention to the dire effects of poor maternal and child nutrition. The announcement coincided with the launch of the Scaling Up Nutrition (SUN) Movement, a global effort to mobilize collective action on nutrition. Through the 1,000 Days Partnerships and the SUN Movement, maternal and child nutrition has taken a more prominent place in international development. In 2012, the World Health Organization

⁶See <http://www.un.org/en/globalissues/briefingpapers/mdgs/quotes.shtml> (accessed August 15, 2013).

⁷For more information regarding MDG, see <http://www.un.org/en/globalissues/briefingpapers/mdgs/quotes.shtml> (accessed August 15, 2013).

⁸See <http://www.feedthefuture.gov> (accessed August 15, 2013).

passed a resolution that included six nutrition targets, including on stunting and wasting. The 2012 G8 summit and the Child Survival Call to Action also included nutrition as a key component of new food security and maternal and child health commitments.⁹

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All of these commitments and programs hold great promise, particularly with the renewed effort to empower civil society with the tools to develop self-sustaining agricultural and food distribution systems within each country. The Rural Women's Development and Unity Centre that is bringing nutrition to Dhangai is an example of how U.S. poverty-focused development assistance (PFDA) can support local efforts to feed hungry people. The Nepali nongovernmental organization is working with various partners, partially funded by PFDA, to change the future for children, who in turn will be better equipped to contribute to the national economy when they are grown.

We can virtually eradicate hunger by 2040 if world leaders continue to set goals and work together.

YOU HAVE A ROLE TO PLAY IN ENDING HUNGER

I know there will be people who don't understand what it's like to literally feel pain when you're hungry and have nowhere to turn, nowhere to go, and nothing to eat—but being able to go through all of that and still be able to stand as a person. I can still say that I got through it. That's why I do what I do, why I chose to share my story.

—Barbie Izquierdo, anti-hunger advocate

Barbie, the Philadelphia mother at the beginning of this essay, faced head-on the energy-sapping logistics of poverty—and the shame that society often assigns to those who lack resources.

During a cold Philadelphia winter, living in an unheated apartment that was often void of food, Barbie found her voice after she was approached by Marianne Chilton, a professor at the Drexel School of Public Health, who was investigating hunger and poverty. With encouragement from Marianne, Barbie became the first mother in Witnesses to Hunger, a group of mothers with firsthand experience living with hunger and poverty. With her peers, Barbie documented the poverty around her and participated in advocacy efforts, including a trip to the U.S. Congress to inform policy makers about the realities of hunger.

“I feel like America has this huge stigma of how families are supposed to eat

⁹See <http://mananutrition.org/a-promise-renewed-child-survival-call-to-action-2012-summit> (accessed August 15, 2013).

together at a table,” Barbie told Congress, “but they don’t talk about what it takes to get you there or what’s there when you’re actually at the table.”

Our proclamation of God’s love and our demonstrated concern for others are two sides of the same coin. We work to end hunger and poverty in our communities, in our country, and in other countries because we hear God’s word and see Jesus’ model of compassion and justice. We express and embody God’s reconciling love at all times and in all places.

The binding constraint is political will. But I’m convinced that God is present in this struggle, and that we, as people of faith and conscience, should do our part by changing U.S. politics on hunger and poverty issues. We can and should help people in need directly, but one of the most powerful ways to help is also the most neglected: citizen activism.

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Understandably, many faithful people feel unqualified to maneuver complex government systems, so they focus on helping poor people directly and through charities. But politics is the game we all must play if we want to see major reductions in the number of hungry people in the world. This moment calls for smart strategy, sacrificial effort, and prayer. Socially aware Christians have always helped drive social justice causes in the United States, and we won’t achieve the progress against hunger and poverty that is possible unless some Christian believers feel called to make urgent and lasting adjustments in their lives.

For people who know and love the Lord, awareness of God’s presence in the movement to overcome hunger and poverty adds a dimension of faith that most churchgoers miss. For faithful advocates, the life of faith becomes exciting and historic, bigger than our private lives. Reading the morning news becomes an extension of our morning prayers. Coverage of famine on the television engages us to action rather than invoking hopeless depression. Our involvement in politics becomes an adventure of faith.

And that adventure must culminate in effective change. On a large scale, major adjustments have to be made that can only be achieved at a government level. That’s why advocacy is so important. Here’s how you can help:

Get real about hunger

It’s hard to understand the depth of an issue like hunger unless you have lived with it or involve yourself with the people who do. Those of us who have plenty often get caught up in our own lives and in the lives of friends who also have plenty. Concentrations of poverty tend to be hidden away in regions or parts of our communities that better-off people seldom visit. We’re even further away from the se-

vere poverty of developing countries, making it fairly easy to ignore their painful day-to-day reality. So, get involved in your community and provide direct service to people in need. Connect with the people you meet with an open heart and open mind.

Read about hunger and poverty and talk about the issues openly and with insight. If you are able, consider going on a mission trip to a developing country. Only then can you appreciate the struggle and commit to the cause.

Shape your life to reflect your values

Try to live economically to free up both time and money that could be spent helping people in need. Eat consciously, with an eye toward the environment and ethical production. Saying a prayer of thanks every time you eat will help you remember to appreciate the food you have and remind you that there are people going without.

Make advocacy a regular activity

Giving canned goods to a local food pantry will provide some sustenance for some people in your community. But the problem is too large and systemic to be solved one can at a time. Find out who your members of Congress are and make it a regular activity to send them e-mails and letters—and even call. You can magnify your efforts by getting involved in large bipartisan groups like Bread for the World (bread.org), the ONE Campaign (one.org/us), RESULTS (results.org), and NETWORK (networklobby.org) that encourage Democrats and Republicans to work together for a common cause. Groups like Bread can provide specific background about current legislation so that you can be an informed and faithful advocate. Getting involved is easy once you have decided it is important.

Before you continue on to the next article, please say a prayer and decide the step you will take. You have a powerful and necessary role in change. Join us.

Almighty God, we pray for all the people who do not have enough to eat.

We ask you to rescue them.

Come quickly, and use us.

We pray in the powerful name of Jesus. Amen. ⊕

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