



## World Hunger: The Necessity of Advocacy

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“The kind of fasting I want is this: Remove the chains of oppression and the yoke of injustice, and let the oppressed go free. Share your food with the hungry and open your homes to the homeless and poor.” (Isaiah 58:67, TEV)

A cartoon shows a European interviewing a poor African boy near a mud hut. “And just what exactly causes hunger?” the man asks, thrusting the microphone towards the boy. “No food,” the boy responds, pointing to his empty bowl.

In early 1988, the TV showed a European newsman interviewing a beleaguered African man in a refugee feeding camp in war-torn Mozambique. The man responds to the journalist’s question with these words. “You want us to have food? Then stop the war!”

How simple and how complex the reality of world hunger is! It is as simple as filling a child’s bowl with food. It’s as complex as waging peace and stopping a war that has raged for years and involves international politics and economics, as well as racism and tribalism.

Accordingly, the World Hunger Program of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America is both simple and complex in its ministry. Internationally and in the U.S., the Hunger Program works to assist hungry people. It’s as simple as that. But offering assistance involves a complex mixture of emergency relief and short- and long-term development among poor people (84% of Hunger Appeal funds). It also involves education, advocacy, and stewardship efforts among us non-poor Americans (16% of funds).

The ELCA Hunger program chooses this both/and, multi-dimensional response because of four major factors:

1. *The witness of our world.* Hungry people know what they need. And sometimes they need food, sometimes peace, sometimes tree plantings, sometimes community organizing, sometimes debt relief. Sometimes they need mercy. More often, they need justice.

2. *The witness of our partners.* All our major denominational partners support some kind of hunger advocacy.

All agree that relief is not enough. Necessary though it is, it’s a band-aid response. Long-term solutions must include development, education, advocacy, and stewardship. Only to do relief is to consign poor people to permanent poverty. Hunger is not only a food problem. It’s a problem of sin, of injustice, of greed.

Bread for the World president, Art Simon, says, ‘We do not claim that our [advocacy] proposals are inarguably correct. There are plenty of reasons for humility, none for arrogance. We are free to fail. We are not free to do nothing’ (*Christian Faith and Public Policy, No Grounds for Divorce* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987] 64, viii).

Emergency relief is today an important, but secondary part of Lutheran World Relief’s total work. Short- and long-term development is the Core of LWR’s effort. Of twelve vignettes that LWR provided to the ELCA Hunger Program in 1988, two spoke of direct relief work. Ten stories spoke of reforestation, biogas fuel, small business loans for women, legal aid for coal miners, water well development, community organizing, and literacy classes. These are not relief efforts. But these efforts help poor people more than relief food can.

“Advocacy takes its place along with relief, self-help development aid and the proclamation of the biblical message as key aspects of the church’s overseas outreach,” says LWR board chairman, Robert Marshall (The LWR 1987 Annual Report).

3. *The witness of our church (the ELCA)*. The three predecessor bodies to the ELCA all used a portion of hunger monies for education and advocacy and stewardship. The 1987 ELCA Constituting Convention thus adopted the following five objectives for the church’s Hunger Program: (a) to provide relief and development assistance; (b) to foster education of the members of this church; (c) to advocate policies and actions for social and economic justice relating to hunger; (d) to encourage members to practice responsible stewardship; and (e) to facilitate listening.

Individual Christians and national churches need to do advocacy. Bishop William Lazareth has written, “We conclude that it is neither valid nor necessary to make a choice between the Corporate witness of this church in the public arena and the effective exercise of concerned citizenship by its members. Both channels are needed if this church is to help provide society with moral and ethical guidance based on Christian insights” (cited in *By What Authority?*, Richard J. Niebanck [LCA publication, 1977] 44-45).

4. *The witness of our Bible*. Scripture speaks loudly of God’s mercy and justice towards poor people. *Cry Justice! The Bible on Hunger and Poverty* (ed. by Ronald J. Sider [New York: Paulist, 1980]) is a 220-page book of biblical quotations that highlight the prominence of God’s call to mercy and justice.

We are now in the year of Luke in our three-year lectionary. Dare we listen to Luke as we ask how best to assist hungry people? Relief is apart of Luke’s picture, but advocacy and stewardship and education are also prominent features.

And Luke leans on Isaiah, who trumpets mercy and justice as necessary responses to hunger by the people of God. So we end where we started. Let us heed the biblical witness!

## **World Hunger: The Danger of Advocacy**

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Does the “corporate church” rightly respond to world hunger with advocacy as well as relief?

The Christian’s role in public policy, indeed in all areas of life, is uniquely and

individually imposed by virtue of one's baptism. Christian involvement in public issues of hunger, homelessness, law enforcement, welfare reform, national security, and other questions comes as a vocational response to the fact of being a called, gathered, presumably enlightened Christian. It is a role the Christian herself engages because she is a shareholder in the priesthood all Christians exercise under the lordship of Jesus Christ.

Responsible citizenship, then, is one of the many baptismal duties Christians are enjoined to perform by virtue of nothing less than their baptism. Thus, a public role in the public life of society belongs to the essence of the church *qua* church.

But "church," in Lutheran theology, means something quite apart from "corporate church." Corporate in this sense refers to the denominational offices. These have little to do with Aunt Mary, who for seventy-five years has gathered around Word and Sacrament to sing hymns in praise of God out of her love for Christ and neighbor. Aunt Mary's role as a Christian advocate is not a role extending to the corporate church, nor may the corporate church presume to take that role from her, irrespective of the many synodical mandates said to do exactly that.

My reasoning rests upon the principle of Christian freedom, where each Christian is individually responsible to God and to conscience. When the various divisions, units, levels, and coalitions within a denomination begin to speak as "the Church" to issues of public policy, someone somewhere has, in effect been "de-Christianized" because they, in conscience and in a proper exercise of their Christian freedom, hold to a different partisanship. (Partisanship here is not limited to the romantic churnings of Republicans and Democrats. Partisanship means endorsement of one view in opposition to other views respecting an argument of public policy.)

Let us suppose—an instance not too farfetched—that the Governmental

Affairs Office of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, supported in part by World Hunger Appeal offerings, engages in an openly partisan act opposing U.S. policy in Central America. Let us further suppose the office even manages to secure endorsement by several synodical bishops. What does this mean? I am not arguing the merits of U.S. policy toward Central America. Nor am I raising a matter of competence—whether the ELCA government office has the professional skill, background, or socio-political expertise necessary to make reasoned foreign policy judgments. But I am asking about those members of the church, maybe even Aunt Mary, who support current U.S. policy quite to the contrary of anything the official corporate church may say on the matter. Might Aunt Mary and others interpret the action of that church office as support for a party or group or a policy which they themselves would never approve?

This, exactly, is the danger of corporate church involvement in partisan issues. The issue is "baptized"—in essence rendered a point of Christian faith—and the resources of the church are committed to a specifically partisan response in opposition to and in distinction from all other views. Partisan actions are divisive. Votes are taken, lines are drawn, friends and opponents marked. This, by the very nature of the word itself, is the consequence of partisan endeavor.

The body of Christ is torn by the partisan announcements and actions of her corporate officers. The tear may not be seen immediately, for the effect is accumulative. Yet it will in time sunder portions of the church.

Advocacy advocates will say, of course, they are doing no such thing. They are merely

offering, in the words of ELCA Bishop Herbert Chilstrom, “the church’s reverent ‘best guess’” (*Lutheran Forum* Dinner, Nov. 5, 1988, Mt. Vernon, New York). But I have yet to hear one ELCA bishop or divisional executive seriously address the effects of public partisanship in church life.

Yet there is something far more ominous in official advocacy on the part of church officers. And that has to do with the essence of governmental power. The power of state is ultimately a punitive, or coercive power. It is a power that fosters some things while proscribing others. It shapes society in certain directions by the force of its inherent authority. Power in a democratic society is diffused and limited. But it is power. And power—whether it is democratically selected or tyrannically imposed—power, to quote the axiom, corrupts.

By laying out legislative agendas—specifically endorsing this action or opposing that measure, working for the enactment or defeat of particular programs—the corporate church attempts to enlist the punitive power of the state in pursuit of social goals the church advocates. No matter how noble the cause, or how worthy the issue, official advocacy by official church offices explicitly seeks to wield a portion of this power.

Lutherans have historically said the world cannot legislate for the gospel, nor the gospel for the world. The ELCA, however, has decided to give it a try. In the end, this will mean nothing less than the spiritual corruption of Christ’s church. The church will increasingly lust for the politics of Babylon and increasingly become embroiled in its corrupting influence.