

# Sharing Our Bread

BY DAVID BECKMANN

God calls us not only to do acts of charity, but also to work for justice for people in need. Decisions by Congress or the President can influence poor and powerless people throughout the world, and that is why Bread for the World advocates in the halls of government for effective assistance to overcome hunger.

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**D**uring a recent trip to Uganda I met a young AIDS orphan named Deborah, who helped guide me through a Kampala slum. Her parents had fled to the city from a spell of violence in Rwanda. They died from AIDS when she was little, and she has no relatives in Kampala. Deborah is lucky if she gets one meal a day and has usually depended on the kindness of neighbors to give her a place to sleep on the floor. At fifteen years old, she now has several men friends who give her clothes, food, and a halfway decent place to sleep. Given the prevalence of AIDS, these relationships pose a great risk to her life.

Deborah is one of more than fourteen million children who have lost their mother or both parents to AIDS. Yet many more Africans still die from causes related to chronic undernutrition, a continual deficiency of calories or of one or more essential nutrients, than die from the dramatic plague of AIDS.

## **SHARING OUR BREAD**

We must respond to people such as Deborah with dire needs, for God is especially attentive to the prayers of people in want and on the margins of society—the orphan, the widow, and the immigrant. Our Lord fed the hungry crowds. Christians know this, so we set up food pantries in our churches, support soup kitchens, and send money to help feed hungry

people abroad. When people don't have something to eat, we must provide them with food.

What is our motivation for helping others? Perhaps we feel a little guilt and obligation, but guilt and obligation will not get us very far. The powerful motivation for Christians is that we recognize ourselves as people in need. We come to the Lord's Table because we are hungry for the bread of life. We know that we are sinful, our lives are broken, and we are alienated—from God and maybe from people in our own family. So, we gather and confess our sins and look to the Lord, who forgives us and fills us with new life and purpose. God feeds us, and we respond by sharing our bread with hungry people.

In our congregations we do much to care for hungry people directly, but we devote much less effort to addressing the root causes of hunger. People go hungry because they are poor and powerless. The causes of their poverty and powerlessness are many, including lack of education, violence, bigotry, climate, and the apathy of people who have more than enough.

#### **A VOCATION FOR JUSTICE**

We are not only called to acts of charity toward the poor; God also calls us to work for justice for people in need. This vocation echoes through the Hebrew Scriptures. God establishes a covenant with the people of Israel. As a member of this covenant community, each person is in relationship with every other person, including the poor among one's family, the resident aliens, and strangers. To nurture the gift of God's covenant with the community, the just person must be loyal to the responsibilities arising from these relationships.

The prophets remind the people to remain faithful to the covenant and true to the nature of their covenanting God:

who executes justice for the oppressed;  
 who gives food to the hungry.  
 The LORD sets the prisoners free;  
 the LORD opens the eyes of the blind.

*Psalms 146:7-8*

Through the prophets, Yahweh complains that Israel time and again has forgotten the One who gave them land and provisions. The people, who

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once were hungry and oppressed, now refuse to feed the hungry in their midst and have become their oppressors.

When ancient Israel was at the height of her economic and political power—not unlike the United States is today—God sent the shepherd Amos to call the nation to repentance. Amos railed against those who lived in luxury while the poor around them were crushed (Amos 4:1-3; 8:4-14)

Nations, as well as individuals, will be judged by the way they treat poor and vulnerable people:

How terrible it will be for those who make unfair laws,  
and those who write laws that make life hard for people.  
They are not fair to the poor,  
and they rob my people of their rights.  
They allow people to steal from widows  
and to take from orphans what really belongs to them.

*Isaiah 10:1-2 (NCV)†*

Jesus continues the prophetic tradition of justice by reaching out to those at the bottom of the social pyramid—poor people, women, Samaritans, lepers, children, prostitutes, and tax collectors. “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,” he proclaims in Nazareth, quoting from the prophecy of Isaiah, “because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor” (Luke 4:18-19). In the parable of the sheep and the goats, Jesus identifies himself with the hungry, the thirsty, the outcast, the naked, the sick, and the prisoner (Matthew 25:31-46). In poor people we encounter Jesus.

Jesus also confronts laws that marginalize Samaritans or keep lepers from being healed. Religious and political authorities were intertwined, so when Jesus challenges the Sabbath law, he challenges the law of the land.

Through his death and resurrection, Jesus gives us a fresh chance of forgiveness day after day. He offers a new covenant and way of life. Thus, those of us who are united with God through Jesus Christ must identify ourselves, as he did, with the poor, the hungry, and the oppressed.

### **WORKING TOGETHER AS CITIZENS**

Living today in a democracy, with a government “by the people,” we have a say in shaping the laws of our land. And because the United States is the world’s most powerful nation, American citizens can help shape decisions that influence hungry people throughout the world. A single decision by Congress or the President can either offset our individual contributions to charitable organizations, or multiply them many times over.

In Christ, we are fed. And Christ said that we can respond to his love by helping people like my Ugandan friend, Deborah. That is why I advocate in the halls of our government for effective assistance to help Africa overcome AIDS and hunger.

And that is why hundreds of thousands of Bread for the World members and others over the last thirty years have offered letters to God—notes that they've written to members of Congress on legislation that is important to hungry people in the United States and around the world. Many of their letters were written in worship services and collected in an "Offering of Letters." Their combined voices have moved members of Congress to win increases in nutrition programs such as the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC), to relieve the debt of poor countries, to appropriate money for battling the spread the AIDS, and to make international assistance programs more effective.

The new covenant makes all Christians into agents of love and justice, and calls us to look forward to the day when there will be "hunger no more" (Revelation 7:16).

#### **SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER READING**

Bread for the World is a nationwide Christian citizens movement seeking justice for the world's hungry people by lobbying American decision-makers and by engaging in research and education on policies related to hunger and development. To find out more about the "offering of letters" and other educational programs, visit Bread for the World's website at [www.bread.org](http://www.bread.org).

BWF believes "Hunger is one problem we can actually solve. But churches and charities can't do it all—we must get our government to do its part." To request a free twelve-page booklet, *What You Can Do to End Hunger*, write Bread for the World, 50 F Street, NW, Suite 500, Washington, DC 20001, or phone toll-free (800) 82-BREAD.

#### **NOTE**

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