

The Will to Resolve the Challenge of Hunger

By Reverend J. Herbert Nelson, II

“I was hungry and you gave me food.” (Matthew 25:35a)

We engage the SNAP/Food Stamp Challenge as Presbyterians to claim the biblical truth that God has given us enough. Our waste and greed is the source of scarcity for many in our nation and world. More importantly, our neighbors’ plight is connected to our willingness to love our brothers, sisters, and their children enough to become advocates for food justice. I encourage congregational leaders and members to join in with Stated Clerk Gradye Parsons, Moderator Neal Presa, and Executive Director Linda Valentine by raising a consciousness in your own community through participating in the SNAP/Food Stamp Challenge at whatever level is possible for you and your community.

Feeding the Hungry is a Faith Value

The SNAP/Food Stamp Challenge is an opportunity to stress the importance of our biblical mandate as Christians to ensure that hungry people of the world, including those in our own nation, are foremost in our thoughts, our ministry, and our advocacy. Today, we are failing God in our efforts to feed hungry people. Around the globe, 870 million people suffer from chronic hunger, which means they do not have enough food to eat to lead active healthy lives.ⁱ At home in the United States, 14.5 percent of households are “food insecure.” In other words, they have trouble putting food on the table.ⁱⁱ Indeed, with 12 percent of the world’s population facing chronic hunger and 15 percent of the U.S. population living in poverty,ⁱⁱⁱ we are indeed failing our biblical mandate to feed the hungry and care for the “least of these.” (Matthew 25:40).

Our covenant relationship with one another as human beings requires us to care for one another. Indeed, as Jesus explains, we are each called to feed the hungry, give drink to the thirsty, welcome the stranger, clothe the naked, care for the sick, and visit those who are in prison (Matthew 25:35-36). This is a feature of our covenant lives together. But these commandments are not only personal commandments. They are a calling to us as a society. The specific call to provide food for the hungry, which is recorded through the scriptures, is a symbol of both faithful responsibility to God and love for our neighbors.

The Biblical Call to the Church and the Nation

A Nation Plans Ahead for Times of Want. In Genesis 41, we read the story of Egypt setting aside food in the seven “fat” years in order to prepare for the seven “lean” years and the possibility of a famine. Not only does this story describe God’s call to a nation to feed the hungry, but is perhaps the earliest evidence of a nationwide food policy where a surplus is built up and contributed to in times of plenty in order to spend it down in times of want. (Genesis 41:28-57)

A Communal Commitment to Direct Food Aid. Likewise, in Leviticus 19:9, landowning Israelites are instructed to leave the harvest at the edges of their fields as well as the gleanings, so that those who are in need might collect what remains, thereby ensuring adequate food for those who were in need. This was not an individual act of charity, but rather a communal commitment to the common good and a requirement that those who owned land (i.e. wealthy) would contribute to the good of those who were less fortunate. We read in the Book of Ruth how this system worked in practice. Ruth and Naomi had no food and no means of earning a living, as they had no male relative to provide for them, so Ruth

went to Boaz's field to glean enough food for Naomi and herself. This system made it possible for poor and destitute families to put food on the table.

Jesus Feeds People in His Ministry. In all four Gospels, we find the story of Jesus feeding the five thousand. In John, Phillip questions the disciples' ability to provide for so many and in the other three Gospels, the disciples want to send the crowds away to buy their own food. But Jesus quiets them all, providing amply for the large crowd, so that everyone who ate felt full. This is another response to hunger in the Bible, the very real call to each of us, individually and as a community, to ensure that everyone has enough food to eat (Matthew 14:13-21, Mark 6:30-44, Luke 9:10-17, John 6:1-15). And as discussed above, later in Matthew Jesus names feeding hungry people as a priority of our faith as he outlines practical steps for meeting the mandates of the Kingdom of God (Matthew 25:31-46).

The Early Church Community Alleviates Poverty and Hunger. One of many examples of the early church engaging in anti-hunger ministry is in Acts 11:28-30, where the first Church in Antioch, the place the name "Christians" emerged as a label for those who believed in the Jesus Christ, responded to a famine in Judea by sending relief, each according to his own ability, to alleviate the suffering and hunger. This is an excellent example of the collective commitment of the early church to hold resources in the common for the good of those who are most in need.

Food is a source of sustenance and represents a basic life sustaining provision. More importantly, feeding the hungry represents an ethical approach to God's desire for forming community among people-kind.

Our Christian Commitment to Address Hunger

Our Christian commitment to addressing and raising awareness regarding the pervasive nature of hunger in the United States and abroad is the basis for the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) engagement in the SNAP/Food Stamp Challenge. Through the efforts of our denominational leaders and others, we are signaling to our nation that hunger is a significant issue that cannot be ignored.

God has provided enough for all persons to eat nutritious meals; however, our global food systems -- patterns of food distribution and trade -- are unjust. World agriculture today produces 17 percent more calories per person than it did 30 years ago, despite a 70 percent population increase. So it is not that there is not enough food for the 780 million chronically hungry people around the globe, it is that we do not distribute the food so that it reaches all of the hungry people.^{iv} The same thing is true in the United States -- there is plenty of food, but it is either not affordable or accessible to all the people who need it.

As people of faith, our morality as citizens of a divine covenant requires us to focus on fair distribution of the abundance that God gives to us. In so doing, we must acknowledge that food distribution in the United States is unfair in its affordability and accessibility, particularly among the poor.

The Paradox of Hunger in a Land of Plenty

I attended a forum on the 75th Anniversary of the Fair Labor Standards Act held at the White House.^v At that event we heard from minimum wage workers (\$7.25 per hour or about \$15,000 per year) that feeding their families nutritious meals was not a possibility. The reason given was that the cost of primary bills, like housing, transportation, and utilities, whose costs could not be squeezed or negotiated, left little room in the budget for purchasing nutritious foods for their families. These low-wage workers with families spoke of shopping at corner markets that did not provide fresh vegetables and fruit. Instead, they could only afford sale items that are heavy on starch, salt, and sugar. Some presenters spoke of their family

having to skip meals while waiting for payday. Indeed, because of various patterns including “feast or famine” mindsets, food deserts,^{vi} lack of transportation, and the prevalence of convenience food in low-income neighborhoods, nutritious food is often more expensive to buy for low-income people than for higher income neighbors, both as a percentage of their income and in actual dollars.^{vii}

In a recent workshop, I challenged a group of middle to upper-income Presbyterians to construct a budget on \$15,000 per year. Interestingly, food and healthcare were the items that faced the deepest cuts in order to make ends meet. One gentleman said, “My greatest learning is that I cannot make it on \$15,000 per year.”

In this nation of abundance, we are experiencing poor children going to bed hungry – more than one in five children.^{viii} Both the health of parents and children are compromised when food choices are limited. The travesty in each of these instances is that persons can work all day, every day and still not make enough money to meet all essential expenses and still purchase food for their families or eat healthy, nutritious meals.

But the word “poor” is not used in the Washington, D.C., political environment, where we most need to be talking about these issues. Politicians consider use of the word “poor” to be bad messaging. Instead, we hear collective priorities around supporting the middle class, because the images of middle class people are more respectable and not as badly perceived as poor people. The term “middle class” suggests some level of achievement while “poor” is often associated with laziness, lack of education, usury, and other negative stereotypes. But Jesus did not say that he came to bring good news to the middle class. Jesus often spoke of the poor in his attempt to restore the hopes of those broken by the winds of injustice and demonization. Indeed, a review of the Gospels shows that he speaks of those who are poor over 400 times.

We, as followers of Jesus, must reclaim the use of the word “poor” in our efforts to free those persons disenfranchised by the political and economic systems of our time. I believe the Church has to restore its own integrity by challenging the notion that poor people are in this condition by their own fault. Many poor people are trapped in a cycle of poverty that affects generations of the same family. Children who grow up poor are more likely to become poor adults than their wealthier or middle class counterparts.^{ix} Still other poor people were middle class before the economic downturn, but have now fallen into an undefined category between middle class and poor. These persons are living in middle class neighborhoods with their houses underwater, poor credit, high debt, and less than a paycheck away from losing everything. ***The SNAP/Food Stamp Challenge is not intended to exclude those members of middle class who have fallen into the doldrums of despair. Nor is this effort designed to exploit those living in poverty. Instead it is a tool to educate and strengthen the recognition that there is a systemic injustice in the use and distribution of God’s resources at various socio-economic levels. This injustice is morally, spiritually, and ethically wrong, not to mention corrosive to the soul of our nation.***

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ⁱ Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations. REDUCING POVERTY AND HUNGER: THE CRITICAL ROLE OF FINANCING FOR FOOD, AGRICULTURE. <http://www.fao.org/docrep/003/y6265e/y6265e03.htm>

ⁱⁱ USDA Economic Research Service. Household Food Security in the United States in 2012. Published September 2013. <http://www.ers.usda.gov/publications/err-economic-research-report/err155.aspx#.UjnKv2SgmSw>

ⁱⁱⁱ U.S. Census Bureau. Income, Poverty, and Health Insurance Coverage in the United States: 2013. Published September 2013. <http://www.census.gov/prod/2013pubs/p60-245.pdf>.

^{iv} Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations. REDUCING POVERTY AND HUNGER: THE CRITICAL ROLE OF FINANCING FOR FOOD, AGRICULTURE. <http://www.fao.org/docrep/003/y6265e/y6265e03.htm>

^v The Fair Labor Standards Act (FLSA) establishes minimum wage, overtime pay, recordkeeping, and youth employment standards affecting employees in the private sector and in Federal, State, and local governments. The law was originally enacted in 1938, when it banned oppressive child labor, set the minimum hourly wage at 25 cents, and the maximum workweek at 44 hours. Over the years, the FLSA has been modified and updated to include more workers and more protections for those workers. U.S. Department of Labor. <http://www.dol.gov/oasam/programs/history/flsa1938.htm>

^{vi} “Food deserts” are defined as urban neighborhoods and rural towns without ready access to fresh, healthy, and affordable food. Instead of supermarkets and grocery stores, these communities may have no food access or are served only by fast food restaurants and convenience stores that offer few healthy, affordable food options. USDA Agricultural Marketing Service. <http://apps.ams.usda.gov/fooddeserts/foodDeserts.aspx>

^{vii} Food Research and Action Center. Why Low-Income and Food Insecure People are Vulnerable to Overweight and Obesity. <http://frac.org/initiatives/hunger-and-obesity/why-are-low-income-and-food-insecure-people-vulnerable-to-obesity/>

^{viii} Share our Strength. No Kid Hungry Campaign. <http://www.nokidhungry.org/problem/overview>

^{ix} National Center for Children in Poverty. Mailman School of Public Health, Columbia University. Child Poverty and Intergenerational Mobility. December 2009. http://www.nccp.org/publications/pub_911.html