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HUNGER RELIEF

PROBLEM: Millions of Americans live with the threat of going hungry.

SOLUTION: Congregations and religious organizations provide food to the hungry, promote self-sufficiency, and lobby for public policies to relieve hunger.

Soon after Dave Harness began volunteering with National Christian Outreach, he and Tom Elliott, the founder of Outreach, were driving through eastern Kentucky to deliver donations to a shelter. Elliott suddenly pointed to a small mobile home with several broken windows and said, "There's a mother and four children living in there."

"This was early in April, so it was still very cold," Harness says. "Up to then, I didn't realize that there were people living in that kind of poverty." It was, he says now, "one of the most moving experiences I've ever had."

When Elliott died in 1998, Harness became president of the Indianapolis-based organization, which has two operations. The regional side collects food and goods to distribute in Appalachia once every two weeks. Locally, the Compassion Center at 2616 S. Shelby St., just south of Garfield Park, serves 150 to 200 meals each day. For Thanksgiving, it served more than 700 meals, and for Christmas, about 550. The Center is open daily from 10 a.m. to 3 p.m. and is staffed by about 25 volunteers, three or four each day.

The National Christian Outreach is an entirely independent Christian operation, with money and goods coming from local people. Harness appeals for donations seven times a week on his local radio program, "Christian Challenge," on WNTS (1590 AM). He attempts to convey to listeners the inspiration that led him to get involved in hunger and poverty relief.

"For years, I looked at these people as 'invisible,'" Harness says. "I didn't realize that there are people who are so poverty-stricken that they actually have nothing to eat for three or four days at a time. I've heard the arguments—that if they wanted to, they could get a job at McDonald's—but many of them are not capable of doing that. Some have the scars of war; we get Korean War and Vietnam veterans. And we see a lot of people with emotional and mental problems. Many are not capable of caring for themselves. But these people have souls and needs just like anyone else."

HUNGER IN THE MIDST OF PROSPERITY

Ironically, the prosperity of the last decade has not decreased the number of "invisible" people. Rather, it has made them easier to casually dismiss: with jobs so plentiful, does anyone really go hungry in America?

The problem is difficult to measure: surveys rely largely on self-reporting, and there is the matter of food quality. A person might take in enough calories to satisfy his or her immediate needs, but the nutritional value of those calories—so important to long-term health—might be in question. Despite these complications, there are some commonly accepted and widely cited statistics about hunger in America.

Ten percent of American households—about 30 million people—reportedly live with hunger or the risk of hunger regularly. About 4 percent actually go hungry; the other 6 percent resort to seeking emergency assistance or to eating food of little nutritional value. Indiana's statistics are close to the national averages: about 3 percent of households experience hunger, and about 8 percent are at risk of it.

Contrary to what we might expect in a period of economic growth, private relief agencies report that requests for emergency food assistance increased in the 1990s. From January 1998 to January 1999, for example, about three-fourths of Catholic Charities agencies reported an increase in requests for food; the average increase among the agencies was 38 percent.

The greater need is apparent to Dale Collie, as well. Collie is president of Lighthouse Ministries, which distributes food to agencies and missions throughout the country. Most are in the Midwest, and about 85 percent of them in Indiana. Lighthouse also operates a rescue shelter in Indianapolis, but food distribution has become an increasingly important part of its mission. Two years ago it distributed about 2 million pounds of food; last year it distributed 6 million pounds.

Collie estimates that the demand on Lighthouse has grown by about 15 percent in the past year, which means a larger demand on missions and food banks. "These organizations have a certain capacity," Collie says. "When they start coming back to us more frequently, it's not because they've expanded their operations."

At least two factors contribute to the increasing requests for assistance. First, the economy has created jobs, but many are minimum-wage and low-income jobs that pay too little to support a household. Consequently, many of those who seek help are the working poor, not the stereotypical homeless and unemployed. From a survey it conducted in 1997, America's Second Harvest reported that 39 percent of the people seeking aid from its agencies lived in households with at least one working member. (America's Second Harvest supports a nationwide network of more than 200 food banks.)

Public policy is a second reason. The federal welfare reform legislation of 1996 was designed to begin shifting poverty relief from the government to private charities. In the last half of the 1990s, participation in the federal government's Food Stamp Program dropped by about one-third—a far steeper drop than the decline in poverty. In Indiana, participation decreased by about one-fourth from 1996 to 2000.

With the government's retreat from its role, congregations have seen more of the hungry at their own doorsteps. Their growing role in relieving hunger has, in some cases, begun to shape their activities, such as at Tabernacle Presbyterian Church, described below. Other congregations and religious organizations are lobbying for changes to address the social, systemic roots of poverty and hunger. A review of these efforts follows Tabernacle Presbyterian's story.

Tabernacle Presbyterian Church

Tabernacle Presbyterian Church is part of a network of churches providing food to the hungry in the Mapleton-Fall Creek neighborhood. Its soup kitchen is open on days when the soup kitchen at nearby North United Methodist Church is closed. On Sunday, when neither is open, another neighborhood—Trinity Episcopal—distributes food.

All three churches are part of the Mid-North Church Council, a coalition of well-to-do, established congregations in the poor near-northeast neighborhood. Supplementing the work of individual congregations, the Council supports its own food pantry in the Raphael Health Center across the street from Tabernacle. The Council's pantry is open from 9 a.m. to noon on Mondays, Wednesdays, and Fridays. Tabernacle's soup kitchen is open the same days, from 11 a.m. to 1 p.m.

From the startup of Tabernacle's soup kitchen in the mid-1980s until two years ago, there was nothing unusual about it. People seeking help walked down a set of stairs to the church's lower level and stood in line, waiting for food to be handed to them across a half-door separating them from the kitchen. Once they received their food, they had no choice but to turn around and leave, because there was nowhere to sit down and eat.

But when Ian Hookfin became Tabernacle's director of neighborhood ministries in the fall of 1998, he

suggested unlocking the door to the rest of the building. “This church has evolved,” Hookfin says. “This isn’t sacred ground, and it’s cold outside. Let them come in and sit down. Then, let’s go a step further and teach them something. This is a church full of professional people—lawyers and doctors. It’s robbery to be gifted with so much skill and knowledge and wisdom and keep it all to yourself.”

What began as a simple food giveaway has become something more—a sort of church within a church. Each day that it is open, the soup kitchen distributes between 350 and 450 bowls of soup. (About 100 to 150 people are served; most people eat more than one bowl of soup.) Some still take their bowls of soup—they’re given up to five, plus a bag of food donated by local groceries—and eat them elsewhere. But others eat their lunch inside as part of a group. They are given as much soup as they care to eat, and they can take a bag of groceries when they leave. Contrary to the policy in many congregations, they are allowed to return any day that the kitchen is open.

The people who come to Tabernacle for lunch come primarily from the neighborhood, and they come regularly, which has led Hookfin to begin a Thursday-evening service for them. He thinks of this service as similar to the church’s three services on Sunday mornings; like each of those (communion, contemporary, and traditional), it is designed to appeal to a particular group.

“There’s that cultural difference yet—Tabernacle being predominately white and the neighborhood being 90 percent black,” said Hookfin, who is African American. “With the Thursday service, we’re trying to meet the needs of the people in our neighborhood and give them a service that’s more culturally sensitive. Of course, we hope that at some point they’ll feel comfortable worshipping at any of the services.”

Attendance averages about 40. The services follow roughly the same pattern as Tabernacle’s other services, but are less liturgical. Also, a meal is served. Hookfin considers the message delivered in these services as the long-term solution to the widespread hunger and poverty he sees around him every day.

“What would the greatest success be?” he asks. “To open our soup kitchen and have nobody here. Why? Because people are self-sufficient, they’re out working, and their life is just great. But you’ve got to teach people how to be self-sufficient, how to not need someone else’s soup. These are broken lives. Being a church, it’s incumbent on us to teach people to be self-sufficient by trusting in God. Are churches teaching people how to not be dependent? That’s what we have to be doing.”

ADVOCATING FOR REFORM

Tabernacle’s approach to hunger is a common one. Across the city, dozens of congregations of all faiths and denominations—in addition to missions and various independent religious agencies—stock food pantries with basic items to help people in need, or they open their kitchens and offer free meals. In that way, they are on the front lines of the fight against hunger.

But there are other avenues of response. Hookfin emphasizes that hunger is fundamentally a spiritual problem: “It’s not the food so much that they’re in need of,” he says of the people who come to Tabernacle seeking help. “It’s a greater problem that you’ve got to explore and approach from a spiritual perspective.” Like many others, he emphasizes spiritual transformation as the solution to hunger.

An alternative view emphasizes the economic roots of hunger. It advocates lobby for reforms that will put more money in the hands of the poor through tax codes, minimum wage laws, and other legislation. They are less interested in evangelizing than in advocating for public policy and in creating economic opportunity to help poor people become self-sufficient.

The two methods are not mutually exclusive. While Hookfin emphasizes the spiritual side of the problem, the Mid-North Church Council that Tabernacle belongs to has historically been a voice for the other perspective. “Thirty years ago, the Mid-North Church Council took positions corporately, as a group of churches,” says Dave Metzger, also a member of Tabernacle and professor emeritus at the School of Social Work at Indiana University-Purdue University Indianapolis. “The churches said, ‘We’re not going to run out to the suburbs. We’re going to stay put and fight racism and “classism” in the neighborhood.’ And they did. I can remember when all we had to do was get up on Sunday morning and say, ‘We’re going to have a march this afternoon,’ and all of us marched. The model that I want to see Tab do more, and the faith community do

more, is advocating for changes in public policy and the way we distribute wages and jobs and so forth. A handout is a fine thing, but it's better that we get the businesses up and down Meridian Street to pay people a decent wage."

Mazon

Most efforts at changing policy are regional or national. By pooling the resources of numerous congregations, national organizations support causes and reforms that would be too great for an individual congregation to underwrite.

Mazon is an example. "A Jewish response to hunger," as its slogan goes, Mazon ("food" in Hebrew) works through 800 partnering congregations, with about 45,000 people donating to it annually. In 1985, its first year, Mazon awarded \$20,000 in grants to relief projects. Last year, it awarded about 250 grants totaling \$3 million. It has grown by connecting its efforts to Jewish holidays and ritual celebrations. "The concept is for Jews to remember the needy at their own time of joy," said Mary Krasn, Mazon's director of communications.

For example, on holidays that Jews traditionally observe by fasting, Mazon asks that they donate what they would have spent for food that day; for other holidays, it asks that people donate what it would cost them to feed one more person at their table. For rituals such as the bar and bat mitzvah, it asks that they donate 3 percent of the total cost of the celebration.

Mazon focuses primarily on hunger in the United States, and it supports some projects that give food to the poor. But "you can't food-bank your way to ending hunger—that's a strong philosophy for us," Krasn said. Consequently, most of the organization's efforts take one of two forms: lobbying to make public relief more widely accessible to those who need it, and supporting projects that encourage economic development and self-sufficiency in poor communities.

Bread for the World

Bread for the World is the best-known Christian organization with a similar mission; it focuses on both international and domestic hunger. Its goal is to cut the problem in half by 2015.

Bread for the World has about 2,000 church partners and 45,000 individual members. Its strategy is to effect change by mobilizing these partners and members as lobbyists. Each year, it chooses a theme and then mails an information kit that argues its stance on the issue, encourages people to contact their legislators about it, and offers examples of effective letters. Last year's theme, "A Fair Share," focused on lobbying Congress to strengthen the federal Food Stamp Program and to raise the minimum wage. This year its focus is on hunger in Africa.

"Bread for the World understands that our use of resources is a stewardship issue, and that our citizenship is an important resource," said Mariah Priggen, regional organizer for Indiana, Illinois, and Missouri. "Through our letters, we can educate members of Congress and move them to be better stewards of our national resources."

GOING NATIONAL, STAYING LOCAL

In addition, several denominational programs operate nationally, such as the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America's World Hunger Appeal. Every year, the ELCA Appeal mails information packets to ELCA congregations. They include a "Hunger Guide for Congregations," with ideas on addressing the problem and educating others, along with stories about some of the Appeal's efforts. A recent brochure told of a housing project in Chicago whose residents were able, with the Appeal's help, to build indoor "aquaculture systems" in which to raise fish as food.

The common thread in these organizations is their grassroots character. The Souper Bowl of Caring, for instance, began in 1990 with a Presbyterian youth group in South Carolina. That year, on the same Sunday as the NFL's Super Bowl, members of 22 congregations were asked to donate one dollar and a can of soup, which were then distributed to relief organizations. This year, more than 12,000 congregations were expected to participate, representing a wide variety of denominations and faiths.

The ELCA World Hunger Appeal, a partner in the Souper Bowl of Caring, also puts grassroots activism to work. It is attempting to increase its hunger-relief funding to \$25 million by 2004, up from \$16 million this year. A key component is to recruit one person in each of the 11,000 ELCA congregations to serve as a liaison.

“Local congregations are vital,” says Patricia J. Larsen, associate director of the Appeal. “We depend on the people at the synod and congregational level to increase awareness and raise funds. We simply don’t have the staff to do it on our own.”

POINTS TO REMEMBER:

- An estimated 10 percent of American households, or about 30 million people, live with hunger or the risk of hunger.
- Relief agencies report an increase in requests for emergency assistance in the recent past.
- A significant percentage of the people seeking assistance are the “working poor,” not the homeless and unemployed.
- Congregations and religious organizations respond to the hunger problem by providing food, by aiding programs to help people become independent, and by political lobbying.
- Hunger is sometimes cast as the result of spiritual problems, and sometimes as the result of economic inequalities. Those who emphasize the latter are most likely to engage in lobbying efforts to change public policy.
- Most efforts at structural change are sponsored by national organizations, but these organizations depend heavily on the contributions of people working through local congregations.

CONTACTS & RESOURCES:

Bread for the World
50 F Street, NW
Suite 500, Washington, DC 20001
(202) 639-9400 or 1-800-82-BREAD
www.bread.org

ELCA World Hunger Appeal
8765 West Higgins Rd.
Chicago, IL 60631
(800) 638-3522, ext. 2764
www.elca.org/co/hunger

Lighthouse Ministries, Inc.
P.O. Box 441368
Indianapolis, IN 46244-1368
(317) 636-0301

Mazon
12401 Wilshire Blvd., Suite 303
Los Angeles, CA 90025-1015
(310) 442-0020
www.mazon.org

National Christian Outreach
P.O. Box 33032

Indianapolis, IN 46203
(317) 784-3786

Tabernacle Presbyterian Church
418 E. 34th St.
Indianapolis, IN 46205
(317) 923-5458
www.tabpres.org

Internet

America's Second Harvest
www.secondharvest.org

The statistics on hunger in this piece were drawn from this Web site and from Bread for the World's site. The "Facts and Figures on Hunger" section is particularly helpful; go to it by clicking on the "Who's Hungry in America" link listed on the home page. Noteworthy as well is the "Hunger Study" section, which gives the results of an extensive 1997 survey of the people Second Harvest served in its food banks. Results are broken down by age, ethnicity, education, and other categories.

Center on Hunger, Poverty, and Nutrition Policy
<http://hunger.tufts.edu>

This center, based at Tufts University, is dedicated to promoting "policies which improve the lives and developmental capacities of low-income children and families in the nation." Its Web site lists statistics on hunger in America and has links to several relevant publications, some of which are available online.

Hunger News and Hope
<http://www.seedspublishers.org/hnh>

This quarterly publication, a joint effort of several Christian denominations, is available online. It includes statistics on hunger nationally and internationally, updates on legislation affecting the problem, and profiles of congregational programs designed to relieve it.

Presbyterian Hunger Program
www.pcusa.org/pcusa/wmd/hunger

One good way to begin research on the problem of hunger is to go directly to the PHP's site index (add / siteindex.html to the above address). The index has an alphabetical listing of links to numerous relevant pages and sites; these include, for example, links to information on the problem of hunger internationally, to a page of information on what the Bible says about food and hunger, and to case studies of congregational programs.

The Souper Bowl of Caring
www.souperbowl.org

In the weeks preceding the Souper Bowl, this site posts running totals of participating congregations and the amount of pledges received.

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