

A Double Autobiography—Art Simon and Bread for the World

Colleagues,

Long-retired Lutheran pastor Karl Boehmke (he just turned ninety) is the irrepressible activist for Bread for the World in our local congregation here in St. Louis. So it was a no-brainer in deciding who should review Art Simon's retrospective on his own life and the life of Bread for the World, which sprang from his heart and head now 35 years ago.

Peace and Joy!

Ed Schroeder

Review: THE RISING OF BREAD FOR THE WORLD:

The Outcry of Citizens Against Hunger.

**Arthur Simon,. Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 2009,
Paper. 168 pp.**

[\$11.53 @ Amazon]

My guess is that you who read this will already be well acquainted with BFW and much of the work it has accomplished. This remarkable organization, now 35 years old, has provided a challenge to Christian people who feel for the poor in our land and the many impoverished brothers and sisters of the world. Let me begin with the changes in my own thinking and experience over the years and then tie in to Art Simon's story.

At the close of World War II, many areas of Europe lay in rubble. People were literally starving to death. Church leaders in the U.S. said, we cannot let our brothers and sisters starve,

send food. So we sent food. At our little mission church in Washington, DC, every Sunday we packed an 11-pound box (postal limit then) with flour, powdered milk and other life-sustaining foods. Our particular boxes were directed to orphans in Paris, France, whom a tiny Lutheran congregation had gathered in from the streets to keep from starving to death.

Some church leaders at once saw the picture in larger scope, and said, we must work together to get more than 11 pounds to those in dire straits. Lutheran World Relief was founded, as one of a hundred such church relief agencies. Now we could send shiploads of grain and other commodities to people in extreme hunger. The grain was governmental surplus in the United States (to keep market prices under control); relief agencies were asked to pay the shipping costs. I remember saying, one dollar will deliver 580 pounds of food to our fellow beings who are hungry. All Christian church bodies had programs with similar objectives. I served on the LCMS Board of World Relief, which together with the other U.S. Lutheran bodies, constituted Lutheran World Relief. There had been a shift in our thinking and acting.

Then I recall Werner Kuntz of the Board of World Relief saying (this was the early 1960s), if the people of a village in India can be supplied with shovels to dig a village well, they could grow food which we are now sending them from half way around the world. The concept of Development was catching hold: teach a man to fish – or farm or market or whatever – and you have fed him for life. This concept of development has continued to catch on among the developed nations of the world, with a number of refinements. First, teaching one man to fish is not enough, it takes a village, literally, to sustain economic development. Second, what about the women, who in many underdeveloped places are the ones who must feed their children, send them to school and keep them healthy? Microfinance has entered the picture: lend a woman \$50 or \$100 and she will be able to start her own

business to support her family and contribute to the village – you will have fed her family for life. Sustainability has become the key. Much of this transitional thinking I was gaining from reading studies of Bread for the World – and here I am way ahead of the story! So, let me now go to Art Simon's book.

One critical ingredient was missing in all this – a connection between the efforts of the churches and the responsibility of government first to see that its own people are fed and then that the poor of the world are helped. Many Christians felt this lack of connection but also felt helpless to do anything about it. It would take someone called by God to understand and live within the problem, then with courage to address the problem, and finally with determination to rally church leaders, public officials and citizens to a new cause. *THE RISING OF BREAD FOR THE WORLD: The Outcry of Citizens Against Hunger*, is the story of the man, the call and the rallying that has taken place across 35 and more years. It is a thrilling story for those who, with Jesus, have a heart for the poor and eyes to see the heavenly kingdom in the rising of a loaf of bread.

Art Simon tells his own life story – tells it with modesty and candor. He asks no credit for his vision or leadership, but rather gives credit by name and accomplishment to the many others who became involved – I am impressed! He never dreamed of founding BFW, still the events of his life led him to the day when he mailed a mimeographed 2-page letter to friends, asking them: “Do you think we could start a movement to persuade our public officials to devote more of our resources to the poor and hungry?”

Begin at the very beginning: Brother Paul Simon (eventually to become senator from Illinois) and Art were born to Martin and Ruth Simon, missionaries to China, repatriated to the U.S. during rising tensions along the Yangtze. Martin became editor

of THE CHRISTIAN PARENT magazine for Concordia Publishing House. Paul, the older brother, went into journalism, and soon was editing a newspaper in Troy, IL., near St. Louis. Art considered following his brother into journalism, but then felt drawn toward pastoral ministry. He studied at Concordia Seminary, St. Louis, during which years he helped Paul in the nitty-gritty details of running for public offices in Illinois. This experience of the workings of the political world, as Paul continued up the political ladder, would prove invaluable.

Art started teaching at Concordia Teachers College, Chicago, then became pastor in Denver, CO. When a call came from Trinity Lutheran Church, New York City, it took but the challenge of a Brooklyn colleague, "Nobody wants to come to New York's Lower East Side," to convince Art that here was exactly where he needed to be. So he spent the developing years of his ministry among the poor of the tenements of New York's Lower East Side. Here he saw hunger day by day at first hand, in its cruelest forms, and did what he could to help as many as he could. He worked hand-in-hand with Christian leaders of other faiths who were doing exactly the same. Together they worked with community organizations who fought for better living conditions. When they tried to redevelop several blocks of tenements to improve housing circumstances, they learned how difficult it is to move political powers and processes.

Art began publishing books to make the plight of the poor visible to those whose way of life missed seeing it – BREAKING BREAD WITH THE HUNGRY and FACES OF POVERTY. Then, together with brother Paul, THE POLITICS OF WORLD HUNGER. He took part in the civil rights marches in Washington, DC, and Selma, AL.

Art came to this conclusion: "People construct their own picture of reality based on what they experience and want to believe. Widespread hunger and poverty are not part of that reality. Even

when confronted with hungry people and conditions of poverty, Americans on the whole simply cannot believe or imagine the suffering because they seldom see it; when they do, it is a threat to their comfort, so they choose not to think about it. Blocking poor people from our minds, however, may be a passive way of wishing they did not exist. . . .”

More and more he was being struck with the thought: “Christians need to be challenged to weigh in as citizens to help shape decisions of government that have huge bearing on hungry people.”

That was when his 2-page mimeographed letter went out to church leaders who might be interested in launching a movement to do just that. Response was mixed. It was principally the encouragement of Richard John Neuhaus, a neighboring pastor and proponent of Christian faith in the public square, that convinced him to go for it.

The project would be Christian and ecumenical from the word go. Art touched base with prominent leaders in all religious groups, Protestant Mainline, Evangelicals, Roman Catholics. Some gave their support, others were wary. Especially helpful was Eugene Carson Blake, retired General Secretary of the World Council of Churches. The going was never easy and the future of the movement never assured. The constituting articles would read:

“As Christians we affirm the right to food: the right of every man, woman and child on earth to a nutritionally adequate diet. This right is grounded in the value God places on human life and in the belief that the earth is the Lord’s and the fullness thereof.”

Those who joined the BFW movement would write letters to their congressional representatives, urging them to make the feeding

of the hungry not an afterthought, but an upfront policy of our nation. Each year one proposal would be put forth as the theme to be promoted. The themes changed as the times changed and the Cold War moved on toward its end. Always there was competition with military spending for dollars available; help for the poor can easily be cut, but dollars for war cannot.

BFW itself was never conceived of as a relief agency; it is a policy-influencing movement, working with and on behalf of a host of relief agencies. It seeks to educate people as to the existence and extent of poverty, and to make the reduction of poverty an integral part of our national priorities – poverty here in the United States and poverty abroad, especially lands bearing the scars of earlier exploitation by occupying powers.

There have been successes and there have been setbacks. One notable success was the Jubilee Debt Campaign of the year 2000. The World Bank and International Monetary Fund had been lending funds to developing nations to encourage their economies, but the interest payments on these loans became such a burden that any economic gain was never reaching the poor. BFW helped promote the biblical idea of Jubilee – cancellation of debts. Citizens responded to the call with enthusiasm and Congress passed resolutions making the cancellation possible. Children could now go to school, live in better houses, have food every day and health care when needed. There have been other such notable successes.

One notable setback: The end of the Cold War seemed to finally present opportunity for directing the vast sums spent on military matters toward the elimination of poverty. The Harvest of Peace resolution would have done that, but Iraq's subsequent incursion into Kuwait changed all that, and despite BFW's heroic campaigning, the Harvest Forgive Peace resolution never reached the floor of Congress. John Howard Yoder reminded BFW seminars

that what God requires of us is not success but faithfulness.

In 1991, Simon decided to retire from BFW. David Beckman, Seminex graduate, an economist from the World Bank, had the talents and experience needed to carry on the work. This he has done, and the picture continues to change. By the turn of the millennium, the number of hungry in the world had been reduced from 1.2 billion to 800 million. Since then, war and recession have pushed the number back up to the 1.2 billion mark – it is always the poor who bear the brunt of adversity.

Simon continues to write.

“I have long contended that Christians will become voices for the hungry if two conditions are met: first, they must be convinced that doing so is an important, God-pleasing way of loving others; second, they must see what a difference it makes for them. On both counts the case is becoming increasingly clear and is persuading a growing number of people.”

My thoughts: You will enjoy the first half of the book for its personal reflections and its introduction to church leaders of other denominations who have dreamed and worked as we have. The heart of the story is in the second half with its candid assessments of how hard it is to move both citizens and public officials to put our resources to work for the poor. My thinking has been challenged. Yours may be, too.

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