

Bread for the World and the Promise of God

Crossings Conference, January 2010

I bring greetings from David Beckmann, my successor at Bread for the World, who has done an outstanding job of leading Bread. I thank God for him every day. I also want to thank, from the bottom of my heart, those of you who are members of Bread for the World. And for those who are not, I will do everything in my power to persuade you to join. In addition, I want to make the case for inviting and challenging people in the pews to become advocates for the hungry, not only because it's an effective way of helping hungry people, but also because it's a way of encouraging lay people to think of the whole of life as discipleship.

To do this I want (1) to show the link between the Gospel Promise and Bread for the World's mission; and (2) to demolish the myth that hunger is so massive and intractable that there's little or nothing we can do about it.

First: the link between the Gospel and Bread's mission. I am here to tell you of God's love for us in Jesus Christ. That is the Gospel. I am also here to urge you to help those who are hungry. That is God's law. These are two very different expressions of God's will. The inner connection between the two is love, because "love is the fulfillment of the law." God's redemptive love in Christ sets us free to act in love toward those who are poor and hungry.

That's putting it simply, and most believers get the connection—however timidly they may carry it out--when helping hungry people means some form of direct private assistance. But Bread for the World invites people to become advocates for hungry people in the political arena, which makes the story more complicated, and for many problematic.

For me the story of Bread for the World began at my baptism. My brother Paul and I soon learned from little on (1) that life is a gift from God, and was meant to be given back to God; and (2) that through the life, death and resurrection of Jesus we were reconciled to God, a monumental act of love that prompts us to love others and seek justice for them. My parents not only taught this; they lived it.

When I was 11 years old, a few weeks after Pearl Harbor all U.S. citizens of Japanese descent who lived on the West Coast were rounded up and put in prison camps. It was a highly popular but shameful action. My father was one of the few in Eugene, Oregon, who spoke out publicly against it, on the local radio station and in the newspaper. Today in Eugene, on the spot where many of those citizens were taken away, there is a memorial to them. Last summer my wife Shirley and I visited the memorial and saw my father's name on one of its stones with the simple inscription, "He spoke in protest. His courage inspired others."

Thanks to my parents, in the mid-1940s our family became active in what was then called the Lutheran Race Relations Association, a fledgling organization that called public attention to the cruelty of racial segregation and prejudice both within the church and in the nation.

I mention these examples of advocacy because they were rooted in the Gospel; they emerged from a promise-driven faith. They were also among the things that laid the foundation for my brother Paul's career in public service, and my own role in the founding of Bread for the World.

I became a pastor and spent most of my parish ministry on the Lower East Side of Manhattan, a crowded, economically poor section of New York City, where within one square mile a hundred thousand people lived in old tenements. I came there as a pastor to share the Gospel and gather a community of believers around Word and Sacrament. In doing so, in connecting with the lives of people and getting acquainted in the neighborhood, I ran into one emergency after another, and the harder I worked at it the farther behind I got. Our congregation did what it could to provide help. But we came to realize that much more than emergency aid was needed to enable people to escape the grip of hunger and poverty. My father used to say, "It's better to build a fence at the top of a cliff than to have an ambulance at the bottom"—and we were driving the ambulance. Bread for the World emerged as a way of building a fence. The initial spark for it was a lively Lenten evening discussion about hunger with a dozen of our members.

Churches everywhere were helping with emergency assistance—and rightfully so—but almost nothing was being done to challenge Christians to use their influence as citizens to bring about more effective national policies on hunger. So I gathered a group of 7 Catholics and 7 Protestants to consider how we might mobilize Christians, on the basis of their faith in Christ, to form a politically non-partisan outcry of citizens against hunger.

So 36 years ago Bread for the World was born and quickly became the nation's foremost citizens lobby on hunger. That wasn't hard, because we were the *only* citizens lobby on hunger. Please put the word "lobby" in quotation marks, because we do not wine and dine elected officials, contribute to political campaigns, endorse candidates, or seek financial advantages for ourselves. Instead we are ordinary citizens of conscience who send messages—letters, emails, phone calls, visits—urging Senators and Representatives in Congress to take action for poor and hungry people whom the political systems tends to ignore. Proverbs tells us, "Speak up for those who cannot speak for themselves." That's Bread for the World. As Martin Luther King often said, God did not ask Moses to take up a collection for the slaves in Egypt. He said to tell Pharaoh, "Let my people go!" Advocacy. Policy change. In I John 1 we read, "We have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous one." We who know Jesus as our advocate ought to be foremost among those who advocate for others.

Advocacy, of course, requires Bread to take positions on specific issues, and urge government action on them. That's the left-handed work of God. The actions urged are not divine prescriptions. God gives us a clear sense of direction regarding hunger and poverty, but not directives. God hasn't written the legislation. God gives people—leaders; citizens; us-- the assignment of figuring out how to make it happen, and that is the challenge Bread for the World has taken up.

God passionately wants justice for the downtrodden, so we know that letting millions of children go hungry in a land as prosperous as ours violates God's will. But God does not tell us that food stamps or the Earned Income Tax Credit are the ways to remove that injustice. So Bread has to weigh the evidence and make prudential judgments when

it decides to support those initiatives or seeks to improve and expand them.

Let me give you a few examples of how Bread works, and in so doing chip away at the myth that widespread hunger is inevitable.

Our first national campaign focused on a “**Right to Food**” resolution—a statement of principle--that we drafted and got introduced in Congress in 1975. When it was introduced Congress paid no attention—until the letters began coming in, first a trickle, then a flow, then an avalanche. The campaign caught on and became a rallying point for churches in many denominations, and within a year it passed both houses of Congress. It showed for the first time that ordinary citizens working together could have a significant impact in shaping national policy on hunger. It also put Bread for the World on the map and laid the foundation for subsequent legislative initiatives.

We followed that by getting two significant **grain reserves** enacted—one a farmer-owned reserve that helped stabilize the price and supply of grain; the other an emergency wheat reserve that has been tapped a dozen times over the years and has provided enough grain to feed 100 million people for a five month period. Neither action would have occurred without Bread’s initiative and messages to Congress from thousands of ordinary citizens.

In the mid-1980s UNICEF and the World Health Organization launched a children’s health revolution based on the discovery that a few simple inexpensive interventions could dramatically reduce the death rate among infants and young children in poor countries. Every day 40,000 young children died from malnutrition and disease—the equivalent of 100 jumbo jets, each with 400 little kids, crashing to the earth and leaving no survivors. One such crash every 14 minutes. So Bread proposed that we include in our foreign aid program a **Child Survival Fund** to help prevent some of those deaths. The campaign caught on, the letters flowed, and Congress made Child Survival part of our foreign aid. The last I saw, \$1.7 billion was being allocated each year for child survival and children’s health. The U.S. response triggered similar responses from other donor nations. As a result, today the number of children’s deaths have decreased to about 26,000 a day, still deplorably

high, but when you consider the population growth in those countries, we've cut the deaths by more than half. This year 5 million fewer kids will die than did a couple of decades ago. This happened to a large extent because folks like you were willing to send those messages. The late James P. Grant, director of UNICEF and international champion of Child Survival, called Bread for the World "the key citizen force in translating the idea of child survival into concrete action." It's clear that on average, each letter sent to a member of Congress in support of Child Survival has had the affect of saving literally dozens, and more likely hundreds of lives. Yet we are inclined to bury a precious talent God has given us by thinking, "What I do won't make any difference."

I don't mean to suggest that everything Bread touches turns into an easy victory. Not so. We've had to fight for every inch of gain, and we have had setbacks as well. We took a beating on the **food stamp program** in the 1980s and fought with only partial success to get some of those cuts restored. We lost a close fight on the **2008 farm bill** to reduce subsidies that enrich wealthy landowners while impoverishing many farmers in poor countries. And until recently we were unable to reverse the trend of shrinking **aid to help small-scale farmers abroad** produce more food. So we've taken our share of hits, but we've seen remarkable progress and evidence each year of the impact that citizens can have. We estimate a leveraging of \$100 in benefits for every dollar spent—a multiplying of the loaves and fishes.

I could give you many other illustrations—the **WIC** program that partly through Bread's work now offers a lifeline to 9 million infants, toddlers and pregnant and lactating mothers; **trade legislation** that has boosted opportunities for African countries; **Jubilee debt reduction** for some of the poorest countries which has enabled more than 20 million additional kids in Africa to attend school, and helps families in 33 countries produce more food, have better health care, and start or expand small enterprises. We worked in coalition with many others, of course, as we do in all of our campaigns. But debt reduction might not have gained U.S. support or happened on the scale that it did except for the thousands of Bread advocates, such as two young mothers in Birmingham who helped persuade their ultra conservative congressman, Spencer Bachus, to become a champion of debt forgiveness.

The Jubilee debt campaign demonstrated the critical mass of public support that is needed on a more sustained basis for ending widespread hunger. It shifted the political wind in our country. So when we, along with others, fought for more and better poverty-focused development aid to poor countries, the Bush administration and Congress gradually doubled it, and the expansion continues.

Let me comment on Bread's current agenda. For several years we have urged Congress to have the President initiate a government-wide study of U.S. global development policies. A few months ago the White House called David Beckmann to tell him that President Obama had just signed a directive to initiate that study. Meanwhile the administration has committed \$3.5 billion over three years in new money for **agricultural assistance to poor countries** and gotten the G-8 countries as a whole to commit \$20 billion. At the same time we are pushing legislation in the House and Senate that could pave the way for a complete **rewriting of our foreign aid program**—which hasn't been done since 1961.* In short, we have before us a rare opportunity to make our foreign aid much more effective in reducing hunger and poverty.

In addition we will have an Offering of Letters campaign to improve and expand the **Earned Income Tax Credit** for low-income workers, which already lifts more than four million families above the poverty line.

I'm only giving you a few snapshots of the whole story, but enough, I hope, to challenge the myth that hunger is inevitable, and that ordinary folks can't do much about it.

When I was a boy, President Roosevelt used to talk about two-thirds of the world being hungry. When Bread for the world began in 1974, it was about one-third. Today it is about one-sixth. That's true despite setbacks in the last couple of years as a result of the increase in food and energy prices and global recession. In one lifetime we have seen a huge exodus from hunger for most of the world's people. That is a historic achievement. I believe it is a work of God. And I believe that God is inviting us to participate in completing that exodus.

That's where we come in. Each of us can make a difference. You and your people can have a hand in making it happen. The opportunity is there. It is up to each one of us to seize it—to speak up. To remain silent is to cast a vote for the status quo, for accepting things as they are, for locking people into hunger. But if you and your people are willing to join others in expressing your convictions to members of Congress on key issues in a timely fashion, you can bring us closer to a nation and a world without widespread hunger.

You may disagree with what I've said and walk away. I would regret that, but respect it. But please do not say, "I agree," and then walk away and do nothing.

It's also essential that we encourage lay people in our congregations to become advocates for the hungry. People of the Promise, prompted by the Promise, can make a huge difference for hungry people in this way, and in doing so reflect the love of Christ.

It is also a way in which we can help people see their whole life, including the citizen-part of their life, as offered to God. Believers and unbelievers are hungering for a sense of purpose in life. That's why Rick Warren's *Purpose Driven Life* has caught the attention of millions. But many, perhaps most, even within the church do not get the connection between Promise and purpose. We need to offer a *Promise* driven life that makes our purpose clear. Otherwise the Promise is reduced to an after-life insurance policy that has little or no relevance to daily life now. Bread for the World is one way of helping people catch the connection.

*House bill 2139, The Initiating Foreign Assistance Reform Act of 2009 (Berman and Kirk) and Senate bill 1524, The Foreign Assistance Revitalization Act of 2009 (Kerry and Lugar).