



Background Paper

BREAD FOR THE WORLD

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Engaging Your Church in Advocacy

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Bread for the World's strength is that it is a collective Christian voice urging our nation's decision makers to end hunger at home and abroad. We are stronger when we act together in Christ's name to help our neighbors, whether they live in the next house, the next state or the next continent.

Bread for the World's multitude of faithful members write letters to senators and representatives and contribute financial resources to our work. Together we win victories against hunger and poverty. Motivating and equipping new activists makes our impact even greater—it can literally multiply our efforts. For many of us, the logical place to look for others interested in fighting hunger is in our own congregations. Here are some lessons learned by those who are helping their churches become more deeply involved in advocacy.



Students at Aman Shanti Primary School in Hyderabad, India, take a break from their studies to eat a lunch provided by the school. U.S. assistance helps feed children around the world.

Connect with God: Help People Know Why We're Doing This Work

Once the “why” question is answered, the “how” question is not hard to get past.

— Randy Chang,
Grace Fellowship Church, San Francisco

God's grace in Jesus Christ shapes our lives. It moves us to reach out to others in love and seek justice where human dignity is at stake.

The Bible is clear. Love for God and neighbor requires both charity and justice. Randy Chang, who attends Grace Fellowship Church in San Francisco, put it this way: “Our calling is to be ambassadors of Christ, reflecting his heart and character in all that we do.” Grace Fellowship Church Associate Pastor Doug Lee said, “Our role is one of solidarity with brothers and sisters who may not have a voice. We practice our oneness in Christ. This is a different kind of politics, a kind of power that only the church can practice.”

Biblical prophets such as Micah urge us to both imagine and do justice. Moses spoke to the powers of his day. Jesus challenged religious and political authorities to provide for those on the margins of society.

Food is a basic need, and everyone, including our government, must do their part to end hunger. With the stroke of a pen, policies are made that redirect millions of dollars and affect millions of lives. We must make our voices heard in Congress so that our laws are more fair and compassionate to people in need.

Bread for the World works in a bipartisan way and enjoys the support of many different church bodies, so we can speak out across party, ideology and faith tradition lines. Pastor Dorisanne Cooper of Lake Shore Baptist Church in Waco, TX, concurred: “Addressing international poverty is the church's responsibility. We don't see it as partisan work. It's part of our attempt to follow Jesus' unmistakable call to care for the poor.”

Since Christian faith is our motivation for advocacy, it

makes sense to encourage our pastors to be active or to support them when they want to move the congregation into advocacy. As spiritual and community leaders, pastors can make a crucial difference in a congregation's commitment to justice.

Connect Your Community and the World: Help Your Congregation Understand the Issues

Charity and justice—both are necessary

Seasoned church advocates emphasize the importance of helping people in the congregation realize how advocacy makes sense in the context of their life experiences. Experienced, new and prospective activists alike need to connect advocacy to their local community, their personal relationships and the wider world.

Holly Baker, who attends Lake Side Baptist Church in Waco, said that Lake Side's most recent Offering of Letters took place in the context of other hunger-related activities, including a poverty-simulation experience for young people and opportunities to participate in food distribution programs run by the church.

Baker said that it had also been valuable to schedule a short series of seminars around the time of the Offering of Letters, enabling the congregation to "plunge deeper into local and global implications of the farm bill and hunger issues, because we discussed the topic for several weeks."

The congregation of the Lutheran Church of Honolulu, HI, participates in another type of direct experience—many have committed to fast one day per week during Lent and give the money that they would otherwise have spent on food to Bread for the World and other hunger causes.

Jon Singletary, director of Baylor University's Center for Family and Community Ministries, helped young people from Lake Shore Baptist move from thinking about international poverty to taking action. "What are the small things we can do here that could help make a difference there?" he asked the teenagers. "We could give them food for a week or a month or even a year. But what can we do in the long run?" The group came to believe that development assistance should enable people in poor countries to strengthen their local economies and create jobs that can lift families out of poverty.

From global to local and back again

Will Samson wrote *Justice in the Burbs* with his wife, Christian fiction writer Lisa Samson. "I believe that global justice must be linked to local justice," Samson said. "Of course we need to lobby our congressman about the farm bill and its effect on poverty in developing nations. But we

also need to think about food injustice right in our own communities. That might lead someone to start a community garden as a way to understand the complexities of hunger and food production."



Working with a community garden helps advocates understand hunger and the process of producing food.

USDA

Samson pointed out that when we see our personal fate, the fate of our community and the fate of the planet as inseparable, our consumer-driven, materialistic culture no longer makes sense. We realize that we have to change the way we live when we see so many people on our planet wondering where their next meal is coming from and whether the sale of their crops will cover their expenses and allow them to plant again.

Rev. Lee of Grace Fellowship Church also focused on personal connections. He noted, "As we write letters, increasingly what sustains our ability to care and pray and speak out is the fact that we have relationships with real people" who are affected by U.S. policies. "We are more connected with groups in Africa, people and congregations outside this country. It personalizes our advocacy efforts so it doesn't feel like we're just advocating some abstract national policy."

Randy Chang said that when we connect to the wider world, we are often compelled to examine our assumptions. He pointed out that when we are engaged in trying to save drowning people, at some point the conversation turns to asking why so many are drowning in the first place.

Connect with Resources and Strategies

Educate for action

Every winter, before members of First United Methodist Church in Birmingham, MI, plan the church's annual Offering of Letters, they prepare by attending a workshop in the Detroit area organized by their Bread for the World regional organizer, Larry Hollar. Such Bread for the World workshops are held across the country annually from February to May.

Holly Baker at Lake Side Baptist Church said that an Offering of Letters workshop that included outside speakers “gave a great perspective to letter-writing and hunger in general. It was helpful to have a Bread for the World staff member discuss the farm bill since it is a more complicated topic than a lot of the previous ones. We also heard from the educational director of a sustainable agriculture farm and the coordinator of a local community garden.”

Hunger for the Word is a three-volume lectionary series that can be a helpful resource for pastors and laypeople seeking to connect the Bible with hunger advocacy. The series explores the Lectionary—weekly Scripture readings used by many denominations and church bodies—with a focus on anti-hunger advocacy, social activism and political issues affecting marginalized people. Using insights, images and stories, this ecumenical resource offers themes to help in our struggle to understand and eliminate injustice. *Hunger for the Word* (Years A, B, and C) is edited by Larry Hollar and may be ordered from our Web site at www.bread.org or by calling 1-800-82-BREAD.

Many denominations provide resources on hunger, poverty and justice issues. Some Catholic congregations have used JustFaith, an intensive 30-week program that invites people to explore the biblical call to compassion and justice. The JustFaith course features readings, videos, lectures, discussions, prayers, retreats and hands-on experiences. Bread for the World has recently partnered with JustFaith to prepare an ecumenical version of the course that is now available. For more information, visit www.justfaith.org.

Take action to educate

Bread for the World members write personal letters and emails to Congress. We also meet with our representatives and senators to urge them to change policies and conditions

that allow hunger and poverty to persist.

Are letters to Congress effective? Some church members may feel that decisions in Washington are influenced mainly by special interests that are able to make big campaign contributions. But again and again, Bread for the World members have heard from members of Congress that the letters they received from constituents influenced specific votes or decisions. Research by the Congressional Management Foundation also confirms that advocacy is effective. Virtually all the Capitol Hill staff surveyed (96 percent) reported that if their member of Congress had not reached a firm decision on an issue, individualized letters would influence the member’s position.

For a checklist on how to write effective letters to members of Congress, see Bread for the World’s brochure “Advocacy 101,” which may be downloaded from our Web site at www.bread.org. Our Web site also provides links to denominational hunger resources and lists Bread for the World regional organizers and upcoming workshops.

Offer something for everyone

Rev. Doug Lee of Grace Fellowship Church said, “We think it’s very important to do an Offering of Letters or other advocacy work as a whole church. We don’t believe that there should be a few individuals or a group in the church—self-identified or otherwise—that people think of as ‘the activists.’ Writing letters is part of our worship service.”

Many church advocates agree with Rev. Lee that enabling and encouraging everyone to participate is crucial. As Kate Brennan Homiak, a member of Lake Shore Baptist Church, told the *Baptist Standard* of Texas, “Bread for the World’s letter-writing campaign encourages church members of all ages to get involved. Children who cannot even write yet, draw pictures to send to their representatives in Congress.



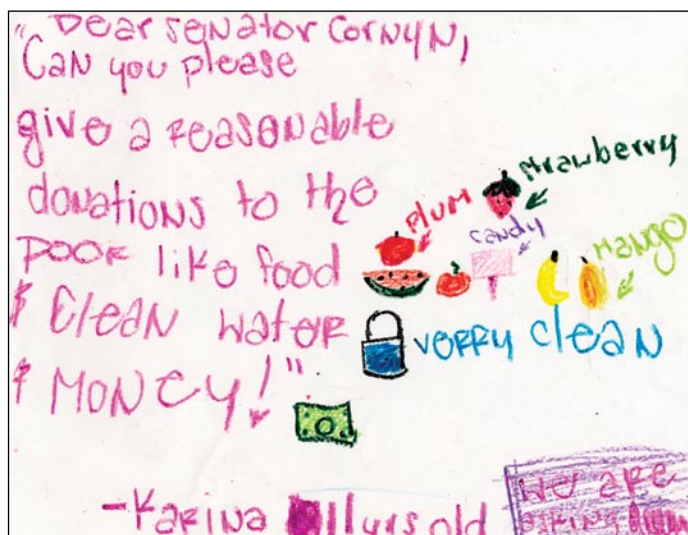
Advocates attended a Bread for the World workshop in Minneapolis, led by regional organizer Tammy Walhof (far left) to better understand the issues of extreme hunger and poverty.

Youth, alongside the adults, advocate through writing letters.”

Providing access to helpful information is vital. Richard Urban of St. Augustine Catholic Church in Washington, DC, has held events focused on the U.N. Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). Less than 5 percent of Americans are familiar with the MDGs, so St. Augustine activists needed to start with the knowledge people already had. St. Augustine participated in last year’s Stand Up event, in which more than 23 million people around the world called on national governments to end hunger and extreme poverty. Those who attended Stand Up were provided with a brochure, produced by Catholic Relief Services, that gave additional information on the MDGs and the Catholic Campaign Against Global Poverty.

Be organized and be creative

Any church advocate could tell you that thinking and planning in advance about how to reach your congregation is important. After all, you know your church best. First United Church in Birmingham, MI, has Offering of Letters publicity and follow-up well in hand: the Offering is announced ahead of time in the weekly church newsletter and from the pulpit. The Offering of Letters video is shown three times—during the coffee hour of the Sunday before the event, on the Sunday itself and on the following Sunday. Children’s letters are written on a different color of paper and included when—to get letters to their representatives quickly—members of First United’s hunger committee hand-carry the letters to the local offices of their members of Congress.



Kids in Texas and around the country can express their concerns to elected leaders.

At Lake Shore Baptist Church, some people write their letters at home and bring them in to be mailed together. The church has a display with upcoming hunger-related events, facts on hunger and poverty, places to get more information, and a basket for letters with the mailing date prominently displayed.

Home activity is also part of the plan at Grace Fellowship Church. Randy Chang said, “It has been our hope that conducting the Offering of Letters over two Sundays allows the intervening week to be a time of reflection and prayer with writing the letters at home.”

Essential Ingredients for Church Advocacy

- Connect with God
- Connect your Community and the World
- Connect Resources and Strategies:
 - Educate for action.
 - Take action to educate.
 - Offer something for everyone.
 - Be organized and be creative.

Additional Resources

Bread for the World has developed many print resources to help churches engage in advocacy for hungry people. Please check our Web site at www.bread.org to see what’s available. If you have questions about how to move your congregation to the next level of involvement in advocacy for hungry and poor people, your regional organizer will be happy to help.

We Can End Hunger in Our Time

Bread for the World has a remarkable record of success in Congress. Year after year, Bread for the World members have won far-reaching changes for hungry and poor people. The U.S. government has tripled funding for effective programs that help Africa and other poor parts of the world, and this would not have happened without the persistent advocacy of Bread for the World members. Bread for the World has also helped to strengthen the national nutrition programs, assisting millions of the families in this country who struggle to feed their children. Right now, Bread for the World is campaigning to reform the farm bill in ways that will support farm and rural families of modest means and, at the same time, open opportunity for farmers in poor countries. You and your church are a part of this response to God’s call to do justice.