



**Food for Life Campaign
Ecumenical Advocacy Alliance
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“ . . . And if you spend yourselves in behalf of the hungry and satisfy the needs of the oppressed, then your light will rise in the darkness, and your night become like the noonday.” (Isaiah 58:10)

Faith and Food – Life in Two Dimensions

We are here today, at least in part, because of the challenge that has come to be known as the “global food crisis”. We share an interest in this issue because of our common identity as members of the church that is the body of Christ in the world. We have an interest in applying ourselves to this challenge as a matter of our religion. We are a community of faith and, as such, we continually strive to understand what our faith is and what it requires us to do. We are here to learn how we may express our faith through good work. We are moved by the many admonitions of our Lord that compel us to care for the hungry and the afflicted.

We note that others are concerned about the social and political effects of food scarcity. Increasing food prices and reduced food availability coupled with an expanding population and global climate change is resulting in some dire predictions for global hunger in this century. And, of course, the recent global financial meltdown has elevated all resource issues to a new level of dialogue and concern. The food issue is high on the agenda of agencies like the G20, the European Union and the United Nations. For those who have been fighting the food battle in various locations in the world and have observed the inefficiency resulting from fragmentation and competition, this may seem a good thing. But there are serious dangers emerging from the current tendency to treat food shortages and emergency aid as matters of cooperation between governments, rather than as concerns of private philanthropy or other non-government agencies. When issues of social benevolence become elements of government policy, cooperation may evolve into competition and benevolence into regulation and control. In competitive environments, as we know, someone usually loses and it is likely those who need assistance the most who will be the losers.

While this is not the place for a discussion on the economy and politics of food production, it is enough to say that faith communities with an interest in this problem should try to understand the world within which they seek to do their work. In Matthew’s gospel (10:16), we are warned of the dangers waiting for us in the world and advised that we “be as shrewd as snakes and as innocent as doves”. We would do well to keep such counsel.

As a community of faith, we know that motive matters. We are reminded in the book of Colossians that “Whatever you do, work at it with all your heart, as working for the Lord, not for men” (Col. 3:23). We are here, at least in part, to act from this motive with regard to the food needs of all people.

We are not unlike Noah or Isaiah or Jeremiah or Ezekiel, who were among those who were given a vision of the physical and spiritual waves of destruction coming and who were charged with responding either by issuing a warning or preparing a solution. And, in every case, they asked ‘why me?’ ‘What attributes do I have that can in any way stem the tide of such destructive forces?’ And in each case the answer was ‘because you have a motive for action that gives you the power. You do it for a reason that will work. You do it for the love of God. You do it because God has asked it of you and not as a matter of self-interest, no matter how altruistic that self-interest may appear.’ We are always and forever in memory of the promise “Come . . . take your inheritance . . . for I was hungry and you gave me something to eat” (Matt. 25:34-35).

So let us consider for a moment this issue of the relationship between the faith that establishes our motive and the activity of providing food for a world growing increasingly hungry.

When the two words “faith” and “food” are written or spoken together, it is sometimes in the context of a ritual acknowledgement of food as a gift of life and the giver of food as the source of life. All of the world’s faith traditions imbed in their literature and their practices an acknowledgment of the power of the relationship between faith and food. The Holy Scripture of the Christian faith offers numerous illustrations of the way in which these two words or concepts are conjoined. God, the Author of faith and the Source of all life informs us in so many ways that food is not just a need – it is a gift, an offering, and a blessing that either feeds our spiritual life of faith or emanates from it. Food is both the source of *physical* wellbeing and an expression of *spiritual* wellbeing.

Since the beginning of recorded history, it has been taught that food cannot be rightly offered or received without recognizing its connection to our spirituality. That is why we learn to either offer a blessing or ask for one when we are about to partake of food. This is a formal acknowledgment of the connection between our faith and our food.

In the activity of offering food to the hungry, the motivation of faith may be especially important when those in need are living in dire and threatening circumstances or when they are in competition with each other for scarce resources. The great need that is generated by hunger makes people vulnerable to manipulation and threat and drives communities into political disorder. In Christ’s ministry we find many examples of the danger that results when someone acts in the name of God to address the problems of people in need. He lived, as we do, in a world reeking of political intrigue and uncertainty. In the lives of people like Dietrich Bonhoeffer, we also observe the consequences of acting from the motive of faith. His life, as we remember, was a testament to the power of faith when political forces threaten the physical and spiritual

welfare of people. We learn from such lives that those who wish to follow Christ's example in service to others should at least be aware of the possible consequences.

With regard to the challenge before us, it might be helpful to note that faith and food are the same things happening in different dimensions. Both are about sowing and planting, birthing to new life, growing and nurturing to maturity. The dimension of food is physical or temporal. The dimension of faith is spiritual or mystical. Both are about life and living.

Given this understanding, we might ask if it is possible for faith and food to even exist without each other. Is spiritual existence necessary for physical existence? Would God continue to provide food in a world where no faith exists or, like the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah, would the rivers run dry, the soil turn to ash and human beings disappear from the face of the earth? The world seems to be diminishing in so many ways. But many strive in hope that the earth can be renewed or the damage to it at least contained. The world continues to exist though people are made mean and low by the toxins emitting from it, and many die from lack of available nourishment. Part of the lesson of Sodom and Gomorrah is the assurance from God that he will stay his wrath, even if only a few people of faith are found (Gen. 18 and 19). So while people of faith remain in this world there is still hope for the hungry and oppressed. Food may be produced and distributed for those who are hungry. The poisons with which we litter our world can be removed from the soil and filtered from the water. These things are possible because people of faith remain to answer the call to Isaiah, "who will go for us" (Isaiah 6:8). If we count ourselves among these people, we must remain steadfast, for we are also told, again in Isaiah, that "if you do not stand firm in your faith, you will not stand at all." (Isaiah 7:9)

Let us ask the question in reverse. Is our physical existence necessary to our spiritual existence? This question is profound for it addresses the very nature of human purpose. Is it necessary for human beings to exist in physical form to know God? And in the same way, was it necessary for God to exist in physical form for human beings to know spiritual fulfillment? If human beings desecrate the world to the extent that the production of food is no longer possible and people can no longer continue to live, can faith survive? We are told that man cannot live by bread alone, but is bread required to seek and maintain the faith from which salvation comes?

God became man in order to show human beings the secrets of finding immortality in a temporal, mortal world. He demonstrated that, through faith, we are able to overcome the limitations of our human condition. Yet even He was careful to nurture his body and provide for the physical nurturing of others. The great lessons of faith come to us because we have received the gift of life on the physical plane. Our temporary and limited lives are a gift of God that we are to appreciate and use in his service. The opportunity to find God and receive his grace in a world that is broken and unclean is only possible if a person has the ability to receive God's word and act on it. Giving food to those who need it is not just an altruistic act of mercy. It is an offering of the hope of salvation itself. For spiritual existence to be maintained, the physical existence of human beings must be nurtured. It is from the dimension of our physical being that we enter the dimension of

the spirit and return to a relationship with God. Gifts of food and water thus become the greatest of all gifts from one human being to another. The ability to produce food and make it available to others is among the highest of all skills and the most worthy of occupations, for they give people the opportunity to know the God who made them.

Is this what faith and food have to do with one another? Does the temporary nature of our physical existence, supported and sustained by food, really have a direct connection to the eternal nature of our spiritual existence, supported and sustained by faith? And will the answer to these questions assist in affirming our resolve to distribute food to the hungry?

Sometimes when people like us organize to do work in the world, we think of our work as “faith-based”. We would like others to know that what we do is work of faith. Work of faith, we are told, is “good work”. It seems clear that if we want to understand the relationship between faith and food, we must also understand the relationship between faith and work. For this, our battle cry is found in James 2:14-17 wherein we learn that faith is dead without work. And giving food and clothing to the needy is the example James uses to teach how work can make faith complete and alive.

Regardless of the reference one uses for the source of wisdom on this matter, it is clear that we are here to live and to advance our lives both physically and spiritually. Life is a thing of grand dimension. It can flower and bloom into great works of art and intellect. It was never meant to be the sweaty groveling for sustenance of a life mired in ignorance and poverty. Life was given to us to be beautiful and fulfilling. Our life in this world is certainly less than it was meant to be for all of us, faithful or not. For many in the throes of poverty and disease, it doesn't even come close.

Life is a gift that requires reciprocation to have meaning. We have life and we give life. That is why we exist. The message of God's intervention in this world through the life, death and resurrection of his son is that “you might have life and have it more abundantly” (John 10:10). Human beings have discarded or ruined much of what life was meant to be. As a result, numerous exhortations in Scripture encourage us to grow in the knowledge of life and in its practice and to offer that knowledge and those skills as a gift of love to others (Proverbs 22:9, 1 John 3:17, etc.).

It seems a paradox that the gift of life may sometimes come at the risk of death. Like Christ, we must sometimes face down the threats and ugliness of a world bent on self-destruction in order to offer even the most essential or basic elements of life to another person. There is no greater love than to risk one's own life so another might live (John 15:13). But receiving life and giving it back really is reciprocal and we are promised that “he who is willing to give up his life for my sake will save it” (Matt. 10:39, Luke 9:24, Mark 8:35).

The activity of living with faith in the temporal world is given meaning through its danger and difficulty. There is no higher work of faith than to risk one's life for another.

Because life is both a physical and spiritual pursuit, sometimes the risk to a physical life in the service of God is a genuine advancement in a spiritual life.

Supporting the physical lives of others through the gift of food or food production, especially people living in threatening political circumstances, can indeed be a difficult and dangerous pursuit. But we are bound to do it. It is our calling. It is the reason we are here. It is our ministry, and only those who have life in both dimensions can be consistent and effective in this ministry. We are people who not only have food - we have faith.

We may feel that we have burdened ourselves with a difficult task carrying forward this concern for the hungry and the oppressed. But what choice do we have? What charge has been given to us other than the command that we who have received life offer it without reservation to others? A cup of water to one who is thirsty, a serving of food to one who is hungry, a cloak to one who is naked, given with the blessing of God and the promise of his salvation. There is nothing else for us to do.

Amen

by John W. Ekstedt, retired Lutheran pastor and former professor and associate dean in the Faculty of Arts at Simon Fraser University, British Columbia, Canada