We All Have A Role

“I will ask the Father and He will give you another Paraclete to be with you always.”

John 14:16

When a person assumes political office, their predecessor hands over to them in a ceremonial fashion the symbols of the office. They give things like gavels and account books as a way of saying, the office with all its rewards and responsibilities is now yours. Likewise in sports when one team wins over the championship team, the old champions pass the trophy along to the new champions. The trophy symbolizes both the honor of winning and the responsibility to maintain high ideals of sportsmanship.

When Jesus handed his mission over to his disciples, it was much more than symbolic. Jesus actually takes up residence in those who accept his call to be Christian: “Jesus answered: anyone who loves me will be true to my word, and my Father will love him, we will come to him and make our dwelling place with him.” (John 14:23).

Jesus goes beyond giving the disciples a symbol that will remind them of their responsibilities. He actually gives the power to do what is asked. Yet, do the disciples really understand what Jesus was doing? Do they comprehend the implications of this transfer of mission? Do we?

How many times have we heard a dynamic speaker who exhorts us to act against hunger or write letters in support of bills that will end hunger? How many times have we thought to ourselves, how wonderful this speaker is, I could listen to him/her all day. How much have we applauded in support of such speakers?

In some sense, such speakers try to transfer their mission to us. They cannot carry it out alone. Without help they will fail. Yet, what do we do besides applaud and feel good about hearing a satisfying speech? Do we join in taking action or does it all end when the applauds stop?

Jesus cannot complete his mission alone either. Jesus is not some great magician in the sky who could solve all problems. Jesus is not Santa Clause who comes to make us happy. We make ourselves and others happy by doing what is right and by working to make the human community a better place.

Poverty is the traditional word used to describe the condition where access to money or resources are insufficient. Economic justice conveys much more about the underlying causes and systemic reasons for the existence of poverty. In our complex economic society, structural arrangements often perpetuate the wealth of some while hampering the economic opportunity of others.

For the prophets of the Old Testament, justice was synonymous with righteousness. Justice meant right relationships, the presence of harmony and integrity between people and nations. For us, economic justice implies right relationships in our system of production and consumption of goods and services.
While God wills us to flourish in substantive ways, one admonition usually escapes us. We are to prosper as communities, peoples and nations not as individuals. Our affluent society has transformed the collective prosperity gospel into an individual get rich one.

“Prosperity gained at the expense of other people, other communities, or God’s creation as a whole is not really prosperity at all. It is an illusion,” writes Gerald Schlabach. When we singularly accumulate riches in isolation or when our community and nation accrues wealth without our third world partners, our lifestyles are a surcharge on the lives of others. When one person’s excessive consumption of material goods dictates that another person lives below the minimum standard of decency, the principle of economic justice is violated.

We all have a role to play to bring about a more Just and Peaceful world. Besides ourselves we have the gift of the Paraclete. “I will ask the Father and he will give you another Paraclete to be with you always; the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot accept, since it neither sees him nor recognizes him; but you can recognize him because he remains with you and will be within you.” John 14:16-17

Protect SNAP

The Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP, or food stamps) is facing cuts on at least two different fronts over the next year. The new Ryan budget includes $135 billion cuts to the program over the next ten years. But even if Ryan’s proposed cuts do not make it into a final budget deal, SNAP funding will automatically decline in early 2014, thanks to the expiration of a stimulus package provision which increased food stamp money.

Once that provision expires, the Congressional Budget Office (CBO) estimates the average food stamp recipient will go from receiving about $134 a month to $130. Furthermore, “CBO expects spending to fall by about 9% between 2014 and 2022.” The Ryan plan, in contrast, would cut the program by a little over 17% over roughly the same time frame.

Current food stamp spending is not enough to support the needs of SNAP recipients. The current average payment of about $134 per month leaves food stamp recipients to make do on less than $4.50 a day. According to Timothy Smeeding, director of University Madison-Wisconsin’s Institute for Research on Poverty, nearly all of that money gets used up in the first half of the month, after which “business picks up at food pantries and soup kitchens.”

Nonetheless some media outlets (like The Wall Street Journal and Fox Business) and conservative politicians (like Paul Ryan and Alabama Senator Jeff Sessions) have sought to portray food stamp spending as lavish or indulgent.

In a March 18 piece, Washington Post columnist Charles Lane asks: “Why should food stamps pay for junk food?” Though Lane says he "blame the consumers, in the sense that their choices are entirely permissible under SNAP’s rules," he also calls for new regulations which would prevent food stamp recipients from spending their SNAP benefits on soda and other unhealthy food items.

“But even if SNAP paid only for healthy stuff, recipients would still be free to use their own cash for other products,” he writes. “The point is to increase the amount of real nutrition per taxpayer dollar.”

A food stamp recipient might reply: What cash? Lane makes the error of assuming that a SNAP
recipient’s unhealthy diet is entirely a matter of personal choice, rather than economic necessity. But as Boston College sociologist Lisa Dodson said, “meager” food stamp funding compels recipients to spend what few benefits they have on cheap, unhealthy food items—which in turn contributes to an obesity epidemic which breaks down along class lines.

“Cheap foods tend to be foods that make you obese,” said Dodson. “Cheap calories tend to be the ones that are high in fat, and we know now that obesity is becoming the major public health problem.”

If Lane wants the poor to eat healthier, restricting their access to food even further is unlikely to do the trick. Even if they cannot purchase soda with their benefits, food stamp recipients will be hard-pressed to afford a diet of fresh fruit and vegetables. In fact, it might do more good to increase SNAP benefits such that recipients can afford healthy food, rather than further constraining their options.

Families in Crisis
Many people think of hunger as an affliction that only affects underdeveloped countries or is typically the result of environmentally induced famine. However, for one in ten Americans, hunger is an everyday reality.

Right now, over 50 million Americans -- including nearly 17 million children -- are struggling with hunger. We all know and are in contact with people affected by hunger, even though we might not be aware of it.

Poverty is forcing millions of Americans into a hunger crisis. Their hunger emergency is defined by food insecurity, which is the lack of access to sufficient, safe and nutritious food to meet their dietary needs for an active and healthy life. Families find themselves buying cheaper and less nutritious food, or cutting entire meals out of their diet, just to make ends meet. Increasing over time, this pattern leads to chronic malnutrition, affecting children and families in profoundly destructive ways.

Hunger plays a pivotal role in perpetuating the cycle of poverty in the U.S., weakening families and systemically impairing the country's collective ability to reach its full potential. Hungry children are not able to play, engage, and learn like other children, and are therefore less likely to become productive adults. Compromised health can lead to both short- and long-term problems; children and the elderly are particularly vulnerable.

Both the commonplace demands of daily life and unexpected, dramatic events can easily push families below the poverty line. "Families are often forced to make the tradeoff between food and other expenses" explains Penn State University economic geographer Amy Glasmeier in her book, An Atlas of Poverty in America. "Healthcare is a particular problem. In poor, rural communities families often have no choice but to use the emergency room for routine health care. This is very expensive. Car repairs are another significant and unexpected expense. If the family car needs repair and it is the end of the month, when cash reserves are low, a family will have no choice but to reduce food intake to get the car back on the road in order to go to work."

The Hidden Poor
According to FeedingAmerica.org, food insecurity affects many segments of the American population, and exists in every county in the U.S., from a low of 5% in Steele Country, ND to a high of 37% in Holmes County, MS.

Children
The USDA estimates that 16.7 million children are living in food-insecure households. In 2011, households that had higher rates of food
insecurity than the national average included households with children (20.6%), especially households with children headed by single women (36.8%) or single men (24.9%), Black, non-Hispanic households (25.1%) and Hispanic households (26.2%).

Families
A frightening 14.7% of U.S. households experienced food insecurity during 2011. 50.1 million people lived in food-insecure households, including children, working adults, and seniors.

Seniors
8% of seniors (one million households) were food insecure in 2011. A study that examined the health and nutritional status of seniors found that food-insecure seniors had significantly lower intakes of vital nutrients in their diets when compared to their food-secure counterparts. In addition, food-insecure seniors were more likely to report fair/poor health status and had higher nutritional risk.

Solving Hunger
"Decades of research and experience with antipoverty programs have made it clear that poverty involves very complex, interrelated and sometimes intractable socioeconomic, family, and individual issues," states the website of the Institute for Research on Poverty."

Because the causes are so complicated, it is not surprising that the solutions are equally as difficult to implement. Improving education in poverty stricken areas and changing public policy both affect change, and providing a safety net for those individuals in immediate crisis are all important areas that must continue to be approached with staunch purpose.

One person or one idea alone cannot unravel the hunger crisis. We must continue to alleviate the immediate suffering of the hungry by sending food to families in need, but simultaneously we must move toward solutions that will end the poverty cycle. By banding together and supporting nonprofit relief organizations, we can work toward affecting change nationally while immediately providing enough for those who have too little.

ACTION
Contact your members of Congress and urge them to provide adequate funding for anti-hunger and anti-poverty programs such as: SNAP, WIC, the Earned Income Tax Credit and the Child Tax Credit.

Capitol Switch Board - 1-800-826-3688

"The test of our progress is not whether we add more to the abundance of those who have much; it is whether we provide enough for those who have too little."
— Franklin D. Roosevelt

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