



Living in God's amazing grace

# EVANGELICAL LUTHERAN CHURCH IN AMERICA

## ISSUE BRIEF

### DOMESTIC HUNGER

#### ELCA Policy Base

The Scriptures declare thematically God's special concern for the poor and oppressed, describe the ministry of Jesus as "good news for the poor" (Luke 4:18-19), and assert that the nations will be judged based upon our efforts to feed the hungry (Matthew 25; James 2). The prophet Isaiah tells us that if we offer food to the hungry and satisfy the needs of the afflicted, then our light shall rise in the darkness (50:10).

The ELCA social statement on economic life, *Sufficient, Sustainable Livelihood for All*, reminds us that "the kingdom of God he [Jesus] proclaimed became real through concrete acts of justice: feeding people, freeing them from various forms of bondage, embracing those excluded by the systems of his day, and calling his followers to a life of faithfulness to God."

The 2005 ELCA Churchwide Assembly in Orlando passed a World Hunger Memorial declaring ending hunger to be a core mission of this church and reflecting language about poverty and nutrition in the ELCA's aforementioned social statement on economic life. Additionally, Lutherans have a long-standing public record of making a difference in the lives of hungry people through the ELCA World Hunger Appeal and charter involvement in Bread for the World.

#### Background

Hunger is a reality for many U.S. residents. The U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) reported that in 2005, 35.1 million people lived in households considered to be food insecure, meaning people who are hungry or on the edge of hunger. Of those 35.1 million, 22.7 million were adults (10.4 percent of all U.S. adults) and 12.4 million were children (16.9 percent of all U.S. children). The number of people in the worst-off households (previously called "food insecure with hunger" and now called "very low food security" households) rose in 2005, from 10.7 to 10.8 million.

The food insecurity faced by many Americans is reflected in our church food pantries and food banks. According to the United States Conference of Mayors, emergency food requests in 2006 increased an average of 7 percent in 24 cities, including San Francisco, Boston, Chicago, Detroit and Nashville. Forty-eight percent of requests for food came from children and their parents; 37 percent of requests for food came from people with jobs. Additionally, among members of the America's Second Harvest network, 65 percent of pantries, 61 percent of kitchens, and 52 percent of shelters reported that there had been an increase since 2001 in the number of clients who come to their emergency food program sites.

While many churches participate in charitable feeding programs to meet this vast need locally, federal nutrition programs are often the first response our nation has against hunger, reaching millions of Americans that qualify for assistance. The largest of these programs is Food Assistance,



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also known as Food Stamps. According to the USDA, on average, about 26.7 million people living in 11.7 million households received food assistance each month in fiscal year 2006. The Food Assistance Program has been dramatically improved and currently stands at a 25-year-high of 96 percent accuracy rate for payments—meaning 96 percent of the people who receive assistance receive the correct amount. However, the reality for many people who participate in the Food Assistance Program is that the average benefit of \$1 per-person, per-meal puts many healthy food choices out of reach, and Food Stamps typically last only about two and a half weeks out of any given month. In addition, the Center on Budget and Policy Priorities points out that the purchasing power of most households' food assistance benefits erodes in value each year.

### Sample Questions to Ask Your Candidates

- ✓ What efforts have you personally been involved with to serve the poor and hungry? What impact, if any, have these experiences had on you? How will that effect how you care for the poor and hungry in America if you were to be elected?
  
- ✓ The U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) reported that in 2005, 35.1 million people lived in households considered to be food insecure, including 12.4 million children. What are your specific plans to address these hunger needs in our nation?
  
- ✓ In recent years, groups such as Catholic Charities USA have called the United States to set the goal of cutting in half the number of Americans living in poverty by 2020. If elected, what concrete steps would you take to accomplish such a goal?

### Sources

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