

Saving Lives With Letters: How the BSU Can Influence Hunger Policy

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“Someone who sits down and writes a letter about hunger ... almost literally has to be saving a life.” — Sen. Paul Simon.

In this country, a well-rounded hunger program needs to achieve a balance in several areas. It needs to provide emergency food as well as a self-help development component. It needs to respond to local needs as well as international needs. And it needs to involve both private contributions and public policy advocacy.

For a Baptist Student Union, Jesus' admonition to feed the hungry may call students to collect cans for local needs, raise money for a MANNA project, host prayer-and-education events for the student body, and write letters on legislation sponsored by Bread for the World.

Bread for the World, now entering its eleventh year, is a one-of-a-kind Christian effort to “speak up for the people who cannot speak for themselves” (Proverbs 31:8). BFW members do not hire a lobbyist to speak for them. Instead, by newsletter and by phone BFW keeps its members informed of legislation that will affect hunger here and abroad. Those 45,000 Christians are the lobbyists, and their calls and letters have made the difference in scores of close votes in Congress.

In the first century, such a ministry would have been impossible. It would have been ludicrous for Paul to have urged the Corinthians to contact their senators about the famine in Judea. He was writing to people who had no political clout! But we in the United States have a gift of citizenship that can mean the difference between hope and despair for millions. Our role model might be Isaiah, who could ask the King to meet him at the fuller's field to get results, or King Lemuel's mother

in Proverbs 31.

Some students may ask whether such advocacy blurs the line between church and state. This country has made careful distinctions to prevent the establishment of religion. But the Rev. Arthur Simon, Executive Director of BFW, says, "It has always been a heresy to separate faith and life." Jesus is Lord of our political views! BFW members let their representatives know that there is a Christian constituency that looks beyond simple self-interest, that believes this country should respond out of its abundance to feed hungry people.

Initiating hunger advocacy work on campus means different things in different places:

*At Louisiana College, Hector Llanes and Marshall Entekin approached BSU director John Moore with the suggestion that they form a campus BFW group. They ordered the BFW Campus Resource Kit, set some goals, and called a general meeting. Over twenty students, as well as three professors, attended. Their next meeting happened to fall on the day I called from the BFW national office to ask for phone calls to Congress on a bill to approve \$150 million in emergency food aid to Africa. They adjourned early to make calls to Rep. Gillis Long. Long voted for the bill.

*At Cumberland College, Jim Wilson found two students, Steve Scudder and Karen Goss, who were willing to lead a hunger group. The BSU provided funds to send Karen and Steve to Washington, D.C., for the BFW Campus Organizing Project. COP is a week-long saturation in hunger issues and campus organizing strategies. They returned ready to organize activities ranging from hunger hikes to letter-writing tables on campus.

*The BSU at Samford already had plans in place for a half-dozen fund-raising and awareness-raising events in 1984-85. The hunger committee simply worked through the schedule to find places to add the public-policy component. A letter-writing table in the campus center generated 132 letters in one afternoon on the Weiss bill to provide emergency relief to Africa. Postage

was provided from their world hunger fund.

On many campuses it proves easier to make the case for emergency food relief than it does for development efforts, but this year's major relief bill, the Food Assistance and African Agriculture Act, will include both. This year Africa is facing its most severe famine of the century, so unusual efforts are imperative.

For this reason, Bread for the World is organizing something new in 1985. February 26 will be designated as the date of a nationwide "Call to Action on the African Crisis." Resource materials will be available by January 1 to help hunger committees plan a variety of activities: presentations on the dimensions of the crisis, letter-writing drives, telephone banks, media coverage, dramas, films, and worship services to focus our concern for our brothers and sisters in Africa. Basic materials for planning the day are free: ask for the "Call to Action on the African Crisis Bulletin." Further background materials are available in the "Call to Action Kit" for \$4. Either may be ordered from:

Special Projects Team
Bread for the World
802 Rhode Island Avenue, NE
Washington, DC 20018
(202) 269-0200

February 26 was chosen partly because it falls in Black History Month, so a concern for the current situation in Africa would be appropriate then. By planning activities on scores of campuses on the same day, BFW hopes to generate media attention for the African relief bill the letters will support.

At this writing, BFW staff were negotiating dollar amounts for the relief bill. The bill's major components will be: an adequate level of food aid for 1986, improvements to streamline the famine response system, and money for long-term agricultural development. If Congress moves according to schedule, the bill will be introduced by February and will be facing key votes at the end of the month.

One of the advantages of working through BFW is

that its issues analysts have overseas experience and do their homework to learn which programs are most effective. Most U.S. foreign aid, far from helping hungry people, actually proves harmful. But the programs that do a good job deserve increased support. For example, when the Louisiana College group urged support of \$150 million for Africa, the money was to be administered through Title II of PL 480. In Africa most Title II food is administered by church agencies, which do a better job of distributing food to remote rural areas. In fact, this year Southern Baptist missionaries were asked to distribute Title II food in Mali and other countries.

BFW staff expertise has also proven effective in assessing long-range development efforts. Campuses which have already raised money for MANNA projects would probably be ready to write letters about development aid. For example, BFW members wrote this year to request a \$40 million increase for IFAD, the International Fund for Agricultural Development. All IFAD does is to help poor farmers in Asia and Africa. In Bangladesh, IFAD funds the Grameen Bank, a bank that loans only to people too poor to own land. Skeptics feared that the peasants would never repay the loans, but the repayment rate has exceeded 99%. Plans are being laid now to request more IFAD funding for Africa in 1985, since many countries there would need several years of assistance to help them rebuilt even if rains came tomorrow. IFAD will get the aid to the level of the rural village.

Although hunger is a sobering subject, BFW campus groups enjoy themselves as a people of hope should. They develop the optimism of a group that has "put feet to its faith" by taking on tasks large enough to be challenging but small enough to offer success. I hear success stories every day: "Forty people showed up to hear our speaker!" "The table on the quad generated 33 letters." "Our Third World Dinner gave people a new understanding of the problem." "Sen Huddleston said he would introduce the Africa transportation bill!"

There are several things you can do to start:

*Join BFW. For \$15 you get a free copy of Art Simon's newly-revised Bread for the World and the monthly newsletter. The newsletter always includes suggestions for timely letters to Congress or the Administration.

*Include letter-writing or phoning in your next hunger activity.

*Promote BFW memberships among students. Order the student membership brochure (which offers discount membership fees to students), the Southern Baptist version of the membership brochure (doesn't mention student fees, but quotes James Dunn, Andy Loving, Nathan Porter, and George Reed), or the membership poster (an attractive poster with tear-off cards).

*Write for the "Call to Action" materials mentioned above.

*Order the BFW Campus Resource Kit. (\$6.00). Assess the feasibility of forming a BFW group on campus, or of your hunger committee including BFW activities in its plans.

*Ask for the brochure on the Campus Organizing Project. These seminars train student leaders.

*Ask for the brochure on the BFW Speakers Bureau.

Students may dream that the Lord would entrust millions of dollars to them so that they could respond to people in need. But in fact most of them have been given the gift of citizenship and the means to buy a 20¢ stamp. They can give sacrificially through the Foreign Mission Board, and then they can give their gift of citizenship through BFW. Let's pray that the Lord will multiply their loaves.