

EXODUS *from* HUNGER

We Are Called to Change
the Politics of Hunger

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INTRODUCTION

I visited an exceptionally poor area of Mozambique in East Africa last year. Our first stop was Mtimbe, a settlement of about forty families on the shore of Lake Nyasa—many miles from the nearest road. They had no electricity or running water, and no shops—just mud houses with thatched roofs.

I was traveling with Dave Miner, a grassroots leader of Bread for the World from Indianapolis who serves as chair of our board. Bread for the World urges the U.S. government to do its part to overcome hunger. I've served as Bread's president for twenty years.

We had flown in a one-engine airplane from the capital of Malawi to a dirt airfield on an island in Lake Nyasa. Waiting for us were Rebecca Vander Meulen, a former Bread for the World policy analyst, and six of her Mozambican colleagues. They have developed what they call Life Teams in the Anglican churches of northern Mozambique to help communities deal with AIDS.

We climbed into a big wooden boat for the trip from the island to Mtimbe. About fifty local people waited for us on shore, singing a praise song, clapping, and moving with the music. The Africans in our boat knew the song and joined in as we neared the shore. Martin, one of Rebecca's colleagues, stood up in the boat as we got close. Smiling eagerly, he shouted out the song and pumped his arms to the rhythm. When the boat touched land, he jumped out to hug his Mtimbe friends.

Our hosts pulled our luggage from the boat and led us toward the settlement, singing and dancing their way up the hill. They carried the luggage on their heads, and Dave and I chuckled to see my big black briefcase, which is usually at home in Washington, DC, making its way up the path on an African woman's head.

The crowd stopped outside Mtimbe's mud-brick church, and Pedro Kumpila, leader of the local Life Team, formally welcomed us. Rebecca thanked the people for their hospitality and then posed a serious question. She asked the crowd to tell these American visitors how they had improved their lives in Mtimbe. People paused as they thought about that question.

Someone expressed gratitude for peace. Mtimbe was repeatedly savaged during Mozambique's sixteen years of civil war. Pedro later told us that he once had to watch soldiers smash a baby in one of the wooden mortars women use to pound cassava. All of Mtimbe's residents had to flee repeatedly to neighboring countries and live as refugees for years at a time.

The woman carrying my briefcase spoke about Mtimbe's school. They didn't have a school ten years ago, but nearly all of Mtimbe's children—even the AIDS orphans—are now learning to read and write.

Pedro noted that people in the community who are infected with HIV and AIDS can now get lifesaving

medications. Some neighbors who had been at death's door are taking care of their children, farming, and teaching others about AIDS.

A few people in Mtimbe even have cell phones, which connect with a tower across the lake. Cell phones are a big convenience in a place without roads or motor vehicles.

Mtimbe still faces huge challenges. Each family relies mainly on a little cassava field: if the cassava fails, the family goes hungry. Due to turmoil in the global economy, the prices of corn and rice are high, and the government doesn't have the funds to bring electricity to the provincial capital as planned.

As the sun went down, we met with the entire community. We explained that we were visiting to learn about development in Mtimbe, and the chief and other local leaders introduced themselves. We travelers then retired to Pedro's mud-brick home for supper, which was chicken and a huge lump of gooey cassava. Later in the evening, I struggled to bathe myself in a thatched bathhouse, fumbling with my flashlight and the bucket of water I'd been given. Pedro and his family stayed elsewhere that night so that Dave and I could sleep up off the ground on their wooden beds.

I climbed into the bed and tucked in the mosquito net. As I relaxed and reflected on the past few hours, I was deeply moved by the achievements and hope of the people of Mtimbe. They are among the poorest people on earth, but they are making strides toward a better life.

I was also struck by the U.S. government's impact in this remote place. The U.S. Central Intelligence Agency had a hand in Mozambique's civil war, U.S. ethanol subsidies contribute to high grain prices even in Mtimbe, and Mozambique's government has to delay investment plans because of the financial crisis that started on our Wall Street.

On the other hand, U.S. support for the reduction of Mozambique's debts helped finance schools across the

country, including in Mtimbe, and the United States funds most of the AIDS medications in Mozambique. Bread for the World's members in the United States helped the people of Mtimbe by urging the U.S. Congress to support debt relief and development assistance for poor countries.

After visiting several other settlements over the next few days, Rebecca and her colleagues took us back across the lake to the island airstrip. Dave, Rebecca, the pilot, and I climbed into another little airplane.

The plane accelerated up the dirt runway, started to lift off, but then dropped back to the ground. It veered off the airstrip at sixty miles an hour and bounced violently across a field. The plane stirred up large stones, and one smashed the window next to my face. There was a construction site at the end of the runway, and if our plane had traveled straight ahead for one more second, we would have died instantly.

A couple weeks later, on a jet headed back toward Washington, DC, I had another chance to reflect. This brush with death made it very clear to me that I should spend the rest of my life helping spiritually grounded Americans push our government to make a bigger effort to reduce poverty. It is possible to overcome hunger and poverty in our time. The progress that people in Mtimbe have made illustrates this, and if a poor country like Mozambique can reduce hunger and poverty, it's certainly also possible in a relatively wealthy country such as the United States. I'm convinced that the binding constraint is political will, and that stronger leadership from the U.S. government is crucial. I'm also convinced that God is present in this struggle, and that people of faith and conscience should do our part, partly by changing U.S. politics on hunger and poverty issues.

Please don't put this book down without deciding to do something to help build a stronger political constituency

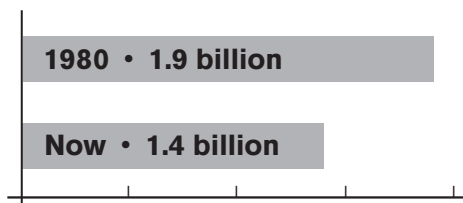
for U.S. policies to provide help and opportunity for hungry and poor people.

Progress against Hunger and Poverty

Hundreds of thousands of communities in developing countries have, like Mtimbe, achieved improvements in their lives. The world has made progress against hunger and poverty over the last several decades.

According to the World Bank, the number of people living in extreme poverty in developing countries—those living on less than \$1.25 a day—dropped from 1.9 billion in 1980 to 1.4 billion in 2005.¹ The fraction of the population living in extreme poverty dropped from one-half to one-quarter! The global economic crisis of 2008–2009 slowed progress against poverty, but the number of people in poverty is still below 1.4 billion.

Figure 1 **People in Extreme Poverty**

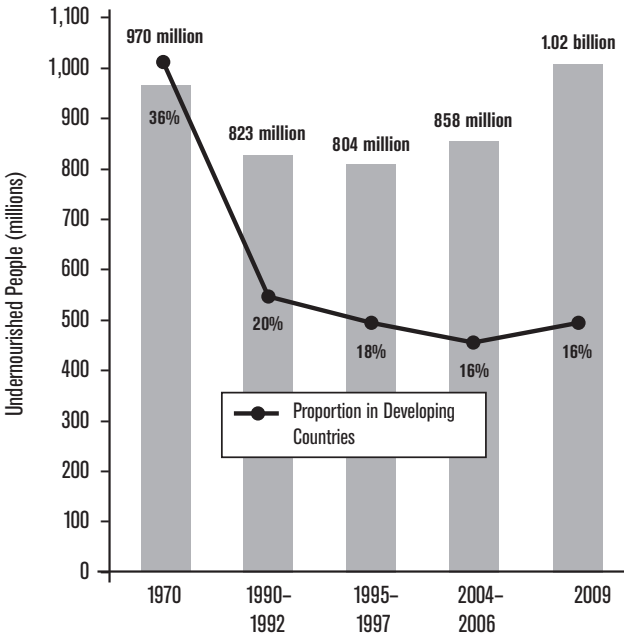


The U.N. Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) maintains the world’s official estimates on undernutrition, and those numbers tell a more complicated story. The number of undernourished people in developing countries declined from nearly 1 billion in 1970 to about 800 million in the mid-1990s.

But the number of undernourished people climbed gradually over the last decade—and then spiked in 2008–2009. Poor people in developing countries typically spend more than two-thirds of their total income on a staple grain such as rice or wheat, so a surge in grain prices caused a spike in hunger. The global economic slowdown also pushed more people into hunger. The estimated number of undernourished people jumped to more than 1 billion in 2009.

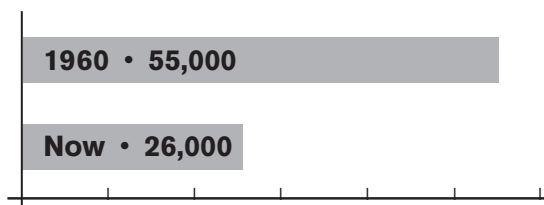
Yet that number probably declined in 2010. And even in 2009, the *fraction* of the population in developing countries that was undernourished was less than one-sixth—down from more than one-third in 1970.²

Figure 2 **Undernutrition**



Improvements in health and education have been unambiguous and dramatic. Twenty-six thousand children in developing countries die every day from preventable causes, but that tragic number has dropped from fifty-five thousand daily in 1960.³ The ongoing carnage is terrible, but the improvement even more remarkable.

Figure 3 Preventable Child Deaths per Day



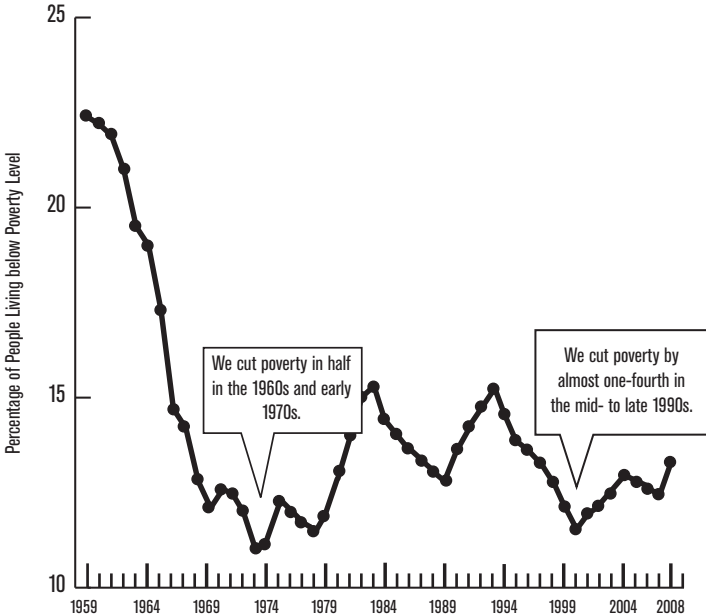
These global trends over recent decades show that dramatic progress against poverty, hunger, and disease is possible. At a U.N. Summit in 2000 all the nations of the world agreed on the Millennium Development Goals to reduce poverty and related ills. The first Millennium Goal is to cut poverty and hunger in half by 2015. Most developing countries are making significant progress on most of the Millennium Development Goals.

Many Americans have come to think that poverty is just a fact of life. They help food banks provide groceries to needy families, but don't expect to see a reduction in the number of hungry people. Experience has shaped these attitudes: in recent decades, our richly blessed nation has not been as successful in reducing hunger and poverty as many other countries.

But the United States dramatically reduced poverty in the 1960s and early 1970s. During those years the United States cut poverty in half. The economy was growing, and unemployment was low. During this period the nation also

expanded antipoverty programs. In the mid- to late 1990s, we cut poverty by almost a fourth—again, partly because of government programs.

Figure 4 **Poverty in the United States**



But economic slumps take their toll, and our nation’s political commitment to hungry and poor people has fluctuated. Thus, the percentage of people who are living below the poverty line in the United States was about the same in 2008 as in 1970,⁴ and recession has since then driven millions more into poverty.

Still, looking back over fifty years, the United States has been able to reduce poverty when the economy was strong and when we made a national effort.

This Is God at Work

I have come to see this generation's struggle against hunger and poverty as a great exodus in our own time. It is like the Lord's deliverance of the Hebrew people from slavery in Egypt on a much larger scale, and God did not send Moses to Pharaoh's court to take up a collection of canned goods and blankets. God sent Moses to Pharaoh with a political challenge: to let Hebrew slaves go free. Moses then led the Hebrew slaves in a great escape across the Red Sea and through a long wilderness journey toward the promised land.

Most spiritually alert people are thoughtful about what God is doing in our individual lives, but often less attentive to God's saving presence in world history. Yet the defining revelation of God in the Old Testament is the exodus from Egypt, and the prophets discerned the presence of God throughout the turbulent history of Israel and Judah. The New Testament then announces that God changed the course of history through the death and resurrection of Jesus and his disciples' mission to the world.

We can recognize God's continuing presence in the world's recent progress against hunger and poverty. When mothers in Central America can't feed their babies, they pray. If they are able to work their way out of hunger so that their children can eat and even go to school, many of these mothers remember to thank God. Those of us who are able to see the scale of progress against hunger and poverty worldwide should thank God for a massive liberation.

As God struggles to overcome hunger and poverty in our generation, God invites us to do our part. We can and should help people in need directly, but one of the most powerful ways to help is also the most neglected: citizen activism.

Why Politics?

Most people keep their distance from politics. All of us are preoccupied with our personal lives. Some people struggle with serious personal problems and really can't devote much attention to public affairs, but more of us just find it easier to focus on ourselves and those closest to us. Many don't bother to pay much attention to what's happening in the wider world.

Americans also tend to have a low opinion of government. We think government programs are inefficient; many people think government is too big and intrusive, and we don't trust politicians. Trust in government usually goes down when the economy is sour, and only 22 percent of Americans now trust the government in Washington. Sixty-six percent of Americans now think that middle-class people get less attention from government than they should; that figure has climbed over the last fifteen years.⁵

Most churches in this country encourage people to help poor people directly and through charities, but say little about changing laws and structures that keep people poor—even though the God of the Bible insists on just laws and is concerned about the behavior of nations as well as individuals.

When I speak in churches, I ask people how they help hungry people. Typically, almost everybody contributes to food charities. Nearly all the religious congregations in the country collect food, maintain food pantries, or support soup kitchens. Some of their members volunteer at food charities. In many congregations, donated food is brought forward to the altar every Sunday morning.

Since the early 1980s the United States has developed a massive system of charitable feeding, and the U.S. religious community has been a driving force. Religious

congregations have responded to high unemployment by again expanding their collection of food for people in need. Food banks and food charities now distribute an estimated \$5 billion worth of groceries every year. This is a wonderful demonstration of concern, and food charities provide urgently needed help to many people.

But when I ask people in churches whether they have ever contacted an elected official about the national nutrition programs, such as food stamps and school lunches, only a few people raise their hands. Yet all the food provided by all the charities in the country amounts to about 6 percent of the amount of food that poor people receive from federal food programs such as school lunches and food stamps.⁶

In August 2010, Congress passed a bill to provide financial aid to the states. They decided to pay for it partly by cutting \$12 billion from future food stamp benefits. That one, quick decision by Congress took away from needy people more food than all the charities in the country can mobilize in two years. But few of the millions of people who contribute to food charities even noticed.

Charitable programs are important to hungry people, but it is impossible to food-bank our way to the end of hunger in America. If we want to make serious progress against hunger, we also need to make our government an active and effective part of the solution.

The national nutrition programs also show that inefficient government programs can be improved. The food stamp program once had a reputation for waste and abuse, but the Clinton and George W. Bush administrations both worked to address those problems. Groups of concerned citizens encouraged the process from outside. The food stamp program, now called the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), has become a model of effectiveness. Instead of food stamps, recipients receive

a debit card, which makes it easier to track how benefits are spent.

Americans also give generously to charities that work in poor countries. We give more to poor people in developing countries through charitable channels than people in the other industrialized countries (such as Canada, the European nations, and Japan).

But U.S. government programs of development assistance are bigger than all of our international charities combined, and U.S. official development assistance amounts to only two-tenths of 1 percent of our national income—less than the other industrialized countries give.⁷ So we're generous in a relatively small way, but less generous when it comes to the most important flow of assistance to developing countries.

People who want to overcome hunger and poverty should definitely support international charities. They work directly with poor communities and help them in ways that official programs cannot. But it's also important to support strong and effective U.S. government assistance to developing countries. The U.S. government can do some things charities cannot do. For example, it can help developing-country governments do a better job in providing public services like schools and rural roads. The U.S. government's decisions and international leadership on trade policies and questions of war and peace also have a big impact on poor people around the world. So in order to achieve the dramatic progress against hunger and poverty that is possible, we must influence how the U.S. government deploys its massive resources and power.

In their pastoral letter *A Place at the Table*, the U.S. Catholic bishops imagined society as a table at which everyone should be welcome and have enough. They described four sets of actors—families and individuals, community

organizations and faith-based institutions, the marketplace and businesses, and government—as four legs of the table.⁸

We need all four legs to provide a table at which everyone in our country—and around the world—can eat and be satisfied. Progress against hunger and poverty depends mainly on what families and individuals do for themselves. Community organizations and faith-based institutions provide vital, personal help to people who are struggling. What poor and near-poor people most need is good jobs, so well-managed businesses and a strong economy are important. But government policies and programs are also essential, and government is the wobbliest leg of the table. Our government does much less and is less effective than it should be, partly because so many of our citizens fail to do their part in the political process.

The U.S. federal government is especially important, because it establishes the framework within which individuals, charities, businesses, and state and local governments make their contributions. The U.S. government also affects the prospects of hungry and poor people worldwide.

**The binding
constraint on
progress against
hunger and poverty
is political will.**

About This Book

This book is designed to help spiritually grounded people be effective leaders in achieving changes through U.S. politics that would dramatically reduce hunger and poverty in our country and around the world.

The recent setback for millions of hungry people makes this action urgent, and the current political environment

makes big changes for the better possible—but only if there is a significant and sustained increase in activism among people of faith and conscience.

Chapters 1–3 discuss the damage that hunger and poverty do, the global recession, the prospect of overcoming hunger and poverty over the coming decades, and what we can learn from countries that have reduced poverty.

Chapter 4 reviews what the Bible teaches about God moving in history with a special concern for poor people. Whatever we believe about God, doing our part to help people in need is crucial to our spiritual integrity. Christians are motivated by the love of God that we experience in Jesus.

Chapter 5 makes the case that a stronger national effort to reduce poverty would be good for the United States. Our nation faces big problems, and getting more serious about justice for poor people would help to maintain the extraordinary security we have long enjoyed.

Chapters 6–7 argue from the experience of Bread for the World and from some encouraging developments in U.S. politics that we have a real chance to get the U.S. government to do more to reduce hunger and poverty. Chapter 8 argues that we are at a pivot point in the history of hunger and poverty, outlines an agenda for policy change, and calls for increased activism among people of faith and conscience.

Chapters 9–11 are about how God has drawn me into this work and how you can get more effectively involved. We need God's help and loving presence.

This book draws together economic analysis, insights from the Bible, and political experience. They are all part of the movement to overcome hunger. I am an economist, a Christian pastor, and an activist, and these pages share what I've learned from all these perspectives.

This book is supported by an interactive Web site, www.exodusfromhunger.org, and I hope you will use it to share your experiences, plans, and ideas. The Web site also provides additional resources, including a study guide for groups who want to read this book together.

In an era of historic possibilities to reduce economic misery, our nation—the world’s superpower—can either assume the role of pharaoh or open opportunity to hungry and poor people within its borders and around the world. Throughout history, most superpowers have assumed the role of pharaoh, oblivious to movements of history until the old political order is eventually overthrown. Yet the United States has always had high ideals, and people of faith can rouse our nation to contribute actively to the great exodus from hunger that is under way. Big changes for hungry and poor people depend on committed people across the country—people like you and me. God is calling us to change the politics of hunger.

I want to acknowledge the tens of thousands of people who make up Bread for the World’s network: Bread members, activists, donors, church leaders, board, and staff. This book grows out of our experience together as Bread for the World. All the royalties from this book will go to Bread for the World.

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