



Paul Jeffrey / EAA

Food for Life

A Theological Paper



**Ecumenical Advocacy
Alliance**

Why should we care for the hungry?

Some theological grounding for EAA's Food for Life Campaign¹

Introduction

Each period of history has its own specific challenges which threaten to take humanity further away from the promise of the Kingdom of God rather than moving towards it. Doubtless, one of the most pressing challenges of our time is the very fact that the biblical promise of abundant life for all² is systematically denied for those suffering from food insecurity and abject poverty as a consequence of extreme greed and selfishness.³

Our ways to relate to nature and its nurturing capacities have broken off an otherwise delicately steady universal communion.⁴ From the perspective of Christian faith, this is a consequence of sin which means self-centeredness and being separated from God. But not only does it mean being separated from God but also from the fellowship of the body of Jesus Christ. This blatantly opposes the idea of the Eucharist and its foundations in the economy of sharing and a way of living so that all can eat.⁵ Hunger is thus the result of injustice, marginalization and oppression; and its consequences become devastating cataclysms for those already made worse off by global greed and exploitation.

There is something profoundly wrong with the current world order, for the human costs of wealth accumulation are unacceptably high, and therefore our actions ought

to bring about pangs of conscience in those able to make a difference. In this sense, our churches and faith-based organizations can actually instill transforming deeds by following Jesus' message of taking sides with the oppressed. This endeavor urges us to foster the "Spirituality of Liberation",⁶ that is to say the spiritual dimension of sharing and making our best efforts to prevent hunger from happening by promoting structural changes in society. Some theological traditions passed down to us a precious legacy of solidarity with the downtrodden. Christianity is understood, from this perspective, as a clear stance by those being oppressed and excluded such as the nearly one billion chronically hungry. The Kingdom of God becomes a social aspiration where justice and reciprocity are the core values to be realized here and now.

But what are the theological foundations for our concern about the hungry? How best could we convince religious and faith-based leaders to embrace a full commitment to the fight against hunger? Why should the world church work with *Food for Life*? This paper aims at shedding some light on the theological rationale behind our preoccupation for those suffering from hunger from a multiple perspective that includes environmental sustainability, justice and reconciliation.

Live abundantly

While the amount of food currently produced in the world is enough to feed everyone, we face transportation, distribution and, most importantly, serious access problems. If food is not produced in the proximity of the consumer, the cost of production and transportation makes it inaccessible to the poorest. On the other hand, each culture has its own eating habits, which entails a wealth of human diversity whose very existence is currently threatened by industrial agriculture and its monoculture-based production system. We must therefore take a stand with the small farmers, whose practices preserve plant diversity and culture.

When Jesus says "I came so that they may have life, and have it abundantly" (John 10:10), it's more than just the physical life he's talking about. He includes the spiritual and existential dimensions of life. Life in its fullness is something that is overflowing; there are no limits for this as there are no limits for the grace of God's love. This is reflected in John 6 where Jesus feeds the five thousand and later says "I am the bread of life".

When we talk about *Food for Life*, we too must include the fullness of life. The vision that the whole of humanity gets access to adequate, safe and nutritious food must be reached! The vision is also for everyone to get control over their own food supply, so it's about empowerment. Since there is enough food in the world to feed everyone, it's obvious that food insecurity is the result of injustice. Some take more than they need, at the expense of others. It is as though the meaning of "abundantly" has been interpreted to mean a life in material affluence for some, rather than as a vision of *Food for Life*, for all. When we talk about *Food for Life*, it's crucial that we, like Jesus, include both food for the body and food for the soul. The two are inextricably linked to each other. In our search for a just world, we have to deal with them both. How can we as a global community together live life to the full?

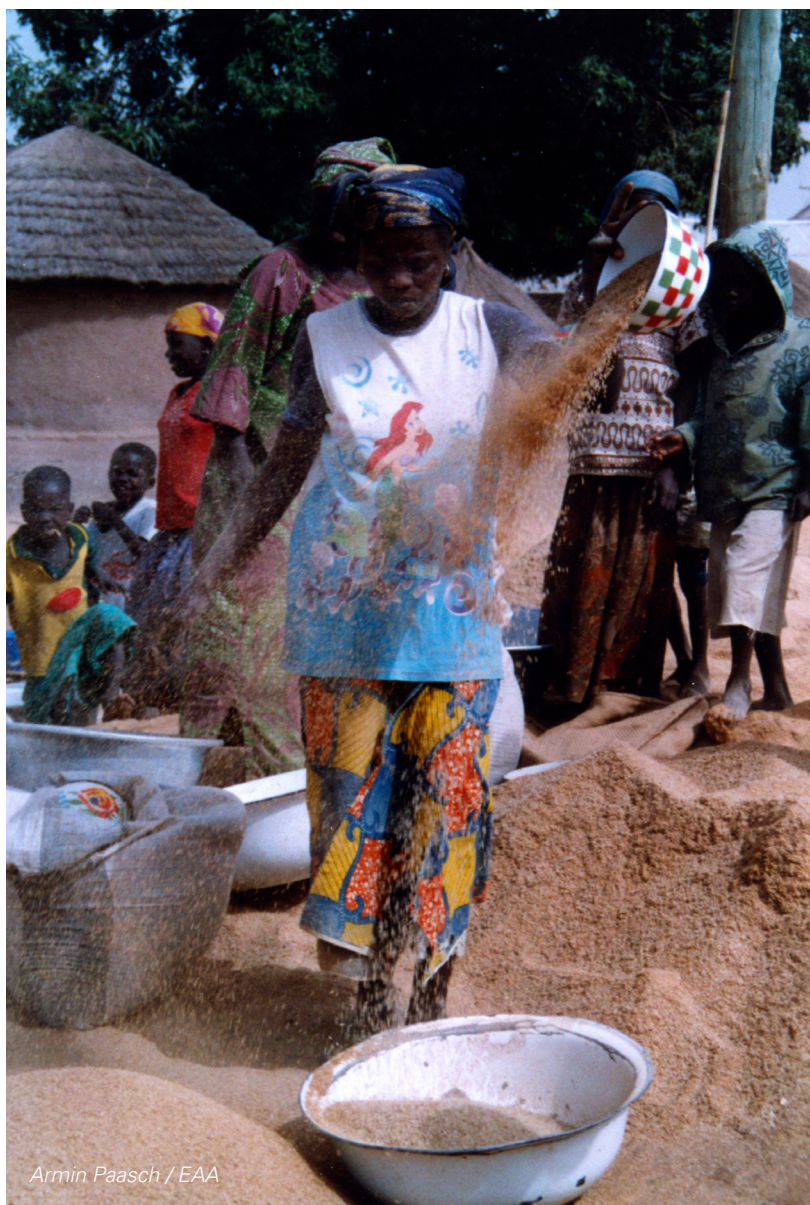
A rights and gender perspective

God gives life, not just once in creation, but again and again in every meal. Food is a central theme in the Bible that Jesus connects to during his life. In his loneliness in the very last and darkest evening of his life he invites the disciples to supper, a supper that in the growing church will become a meal of joy. Through plain ordinary bread and wine God's presence is revealed not just for the disciples present, but for everyone sharing wine and bread in all times.

A plain supper becomes a political manifestation of the early church. Those with power were worried about people who gathered and shared bread as equals. The supper was a demonstration of every human being's dignity and equal value, regardless of people's background and rank. Meals were not empty events but a proper sharing of food as a pattern for the rest of daily life. This was seen as a threat by those in power through the injustice and violence of the Roman Empire. The early church was persecuted for these suppers.

Paul claims that faith is a personal choice, but must be practised in communion. One can't be Christian alone. In baptism this belonging to a faith communion is established. The tradition of baptism was in the early Christian communion something revolutionary as it manifests everyone's equal value. In meals shared in communion the consequences of baptism are made visible. If you don't want to share food equally with others, you don't live out your baptism (1 Cor).

It's obvious then that Paul gets upset when he hears about the problems in the congregation of Corinth (1 Cor). The poor, who were the ones living furthest away, didn't manage to come in time for the common meal, the Agape meal. Others who came early had already eaten all the food when the poor arrived. Some people ate without restraint while others were starving. Paul tells them to wait for everyone before starting to eat. No one should be hungry! No service should be celebrated if there has been no Agape meal prior to the service. The mission of the congregation was to be a cross-border community for all people: slaves and free, landowners and landless, adults and children, Greeks, Jews and Romans. It was to be a picture of God's vision of creation and a prediction of God's reign.



But of course, even Christians are, though under the reign of God, simultaneously always under the reign of sin, too. As Christians, we are aware of that. We know that we individually and our communities often are under the reign of greed and selfishness. And we also know that even our best efforts often are threatened by error, complexity, unpredictability, poor planning and incoherence of our actions. Therefore, frequent confession of and repentance from sin are essential for Christians. Even though widely practised in fellowship, they are individual acts which aim at *metanoia* – rethinking – and lead back into the wholeness of Christian communion.

When we celebrate Eucharist we use words from the book of Corinthians “Because there is one bread, we who are many are one body, for we all partake of the one bread” (1 Cor 10:17). But how do we act today? “One body” and “one bread” – do we show this in our daily life, after communion? Haven’t we lost the provocative and demanding origins of the early church’s Agape meal and celebration of communion? Don’t we too often look upon Eucharist as something between me and God, something for my spiritual well-being, far from its political implications in the early church? If we are to live out our baptism when we confess “one body” and “one bread” we need to act against the systems that lead to hunger. This includes discovering and changing our own role in these structures. We need to provide food for those who are in immediate need and at the same time work to eradicate the causes of hunger. We need to let Eucharist give us strength and inspiration to fight for food for all!

We as Christians believe that every person is created in the image of God, which means that each and every one reflects holiness. Abuse of human rights is hence

ultimately an abuse of the source of holiness – God. 3
Defending human rights and upholding respect for human life and dignity is an inseparable part of confessing the triune God. Human dignity and well-being are enhanced through ensuring that governments fulfil their responsibility to continuously reaffirm and make effective people’s rights: civil, political, economic, social, cultural and environmental.

Food insecurity is not just a matter of injustice between the poor and the rich, but also very much an issue of power. Different groups are being discriminated against due to gender, ethnicity, caste, religion, class, etc. This becomes clear in the fact that women in every society are those suffering the most from food insecurity, since, in general, they are the poorest. They are doubly exploited, both by being economically weak and being subordinated in society. They therefore have the weakest possibilities to handle crises such as poor harvests and the weakest possibilities to control and form their own situation in a long-term perspective. Those who own a lot exploit the earth’s resources at the expense of others. In general men are the richest. They are those who consume the most and those who own and control food production and distribution. Being unable to feed yourself and your family also means being marginalized and stigmatized. When Jesus meets people he re-establishes their dignity. He treats us as subjects, able to re-gain power over our daily life. In our commitment to food security issues, human dignity must be a starting point. We need to meet each other as right-holders and subjects in our own life and development, not reduce each other to objects for others’ kindness and charity.



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In our Judeo-Christian tradition food is a central theme. When Jesus prays “Give us today our daily bread” (or as in other interpretations “Give us day by day our daily bread”, “Give us each day food for the coming day”), he reveals a double time perspective (Luke 11:3). In the texts of creation, we find harmony and order. It’s almost taken for granted that the earth provides food for everyone. Shouldn’t God nurture God’s creation? (Ps. 104:12-14, 27-28). When evil takes a grip on humanity and harmony is lost, it also affects our food supply. There is still enough for everyone, but some take what they want at the expense of others. In Jesus’ prayer for bread he prays that this should be corrected, here and now. But in the prayer Jesus also gives us a vision for the future. In the meantime, the vision is to be realized by the sharing of bread. Sustainable development is only achievable when long-term human needs are satisfied without threatening the resource base on which future generations depend. As Christians we are called by Jesus to pray and strive for *daily bread* and *bread for the coming day*. We should then be the first ones to raise our voice in society for a sustainable development that embodies the long-term perspectives that we already confess in our Christian belief.

Food security is a matter of global justice. Patterns of consumption as well as models for production and global trade must be reversed. The problem of food insecurity is in many ways also closely linked to the growing culture of consumerism. The promise of satisfaction through consumption is given to individuals. And the picture of humans as individuals always searching for self-fulfilment is carried globally by consumerism. This belief in humans as independent of nature and of each other is devastating global development. We as Christians believe that we are created by God to live in communion with each other and with the rest of creation. As churches and faith-based organizations we must therefore counter the growing culture of individual consumerism and contribute to sustainable development. If we practice a just stewardship based on the deep understanding of being created in communion with creation, we could provide adequate and nourishing food without damaging fragile ecosystems. We as churches and faith-based organizations must not be passive and watch people suffer from lack of access to adequate, safe and nutritious food. We must ensure that in our own work we do not contribute to supporting this unfair system.

Living in communion with others and creation also gives us the strength we need to be able to take the responsibility that God has given us. Only when we gather and work together will we manage to reach our vision of *food for all*. Our stewardship must be carried out as a global community. If we as a worldwide church join hands to advocate for policies and practices of governments, international organizations and agribusinesses for a world without hunger, we will move mountains! To believe in a global communion also creates a feeling of belonging that is necessary for every human’s well-being. Living in communion gives us the possibility to receive *Food for Life*, abundant life, both in material and existential ways.

A reconciliation perspective

“Then he looked up at his disciples and said: ‘Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God. Blessed are you who are hungry now, for you will be filled’ ” (Luke 6:20-21). These are hopeful words that might inspire the engagement with global justice. But when Jesus calls out: “But woe to you who are rich, for you have received your consolation. Woe to you who are full now, for you will be hungry” (Luke 6:24-25), there are for sure many rich people who don’t want to listen. What does Jesus actually ask of us? The feeling of being rejected can be strong. But upon meeting Zacchaeus, the tax collector, Jesus manifests the challenging love of God. Zacchaeus is rejected by others as a sinner and an exploiter. But Jesus doesn’t reject Zacchaeus; he meets him and shares a meal with him. Jesus reveals the destructive living of Zacchaeus. But at the same time he shows trust in Zacchaeus’ ability to change his way of living. Jesus trusts him to find new motives within himself, beautiful ones, given by God. There is something here for those who need to change into a more sustainable lifestyle. If we can rest in God’s confidence, we might be able to look upon ourselves with love and forgiveness. If so, we might be free from selfishness. A selfishness that most of all may have come from trying to handle daily life, a want of belonging, and a search for approval, meaning and quality of life. If we like Zacchaeus dare to switch from having ourselves in the centre to having God in the centre; things might fall into place. Reconciliation with God can help us to be reconciled with ourselves and life. But reconciliation also requires justice; order needs to be restored. In reconciliation we find strength to work for this. The confidence Jesus has in Zacchaeus helps him to give back what was taken. Giving back then doesn’t just become restitution to others, but also of ourselves and our dignity as human beings.



In wars, conflicts and other repressive situations the oppression of people is legitimized by creating a distance and a hierarchy between different groups. You create a feeling of “us” and “them” (the other). “The other” is dehumanised. By giving “the other” labels such as “less civilised”, “uneducated” and “terrorists”, cruel acts are made possible. It’s frightening how the exploitation of nature and other people’s work and poverty is based on the same principle of “us” and “them”. This distance between rich and poor, and between humans and the earth, legitimize ongoing unjust and unsustainable food production, distribution and consumption. As long as this distance remains we can still damage fragile ecosystems and ruin the climate, as well as exploit others’ work. Often the structures upon which our societies are built prevent us from making good, just and sustainable choices for the earth and others. Change isn’t easy. On the other hand, we can’t avoid the fact that structures are human made, and we can’t abdicate responsibility. The more powerful you are, the more responsibility you have. These structures are built upon the choices and acts of groups and individuals and our attitudes and values become visible in these structures. The structural discrimination of black and “coloured” people in South Africa during apartheid was possible through the discriminatory acts and attitudes of individuals at all levels in society. At the same time, without the acts of individuals coming together with trust in God and in each other to fight apartheid, the fall of the system would have never occurred.

Just as in conflicts and wars, we need to break down borders between “us” and “them”, we need to listen to each others’ life stories, without avoiding the painful truths. It’s only then that we can start to identify with “the other” and break through borders of “us” and “them” and discover the humanity and dignity of “the other”. The rich might then discover the humanity of the poor and vice versa. And when the earth asks us, just as when Jesus asks Simon Peter after his denial: “Do you love me more than these?” our answer will be “Yes, you know I love you.” “Yes, you know I love you.” “Yes, you know I love you” (John 21:15-17). When reconciliation has occurred, the acts of change can be made and order can be established.

But how is this possible? How can this very process of reconciliation become real every day anew? How is it possible that Zacchaeus climbs down the tree? How is it possible that we are empowered to hear the call of Jesus Christ and live

up to it? How can we really tear down walls which separate us? The main necessity is the basic Christian insight that we cannot strive for the salvation of the world nor the solution of our problems by our own efforts. Rather, as Martin Luther put it, our whole life is repentance.⁷ We are totally living out of forgiveness from our sins which is granted by Jesus Christ and the grace of God which will be granted to us and cannot be earned by us in any way. This creates an attitude and a spirituality of humbleness; humbleness towards God and towards fellow humans. And this humbleness enables us to understand three points which are essential for a future in justice and peace, namely: (i) People in the developed world will need to profoundly challenge and reconfigure their way of life, with a radical reduction in their consumption of resources. The need for this seems to be beyond doubt by now. (ii) We all need to embody the insight that solutions cannot be found by individuals, nor by individual or small groups of governments; they can only be found if we generate an atmosphere in which the views of people affected by the global changes are taken into account. (iii) Churches need to form communities of humbleness which exemplify a lifestyle of listening to one another.

The humbleness will keep us aware that all our efforts and all our decisions are interim and preliminary and that we need one another and that nobody can live for themselves alone. We must develop a sense of interdependence and dependence on others. This may serve as a strong shield against the triumphalistic attitude of people who think everything is possible and who set their beliefs and actions accordingly. This will enable us to listen to one another and to be open to the stories of others.

Mission and grace are inseparable

An abundant life is a life where our human rights are fulfilled without living at the expense of others, where we have meaning and direction and where we are loved and belong to a community. Jesus challenges us to focus on our neighbour and on God, not just ourselves. At the same time he assures us that each one of us is carried and loved by God.

“As the Father has sent me, so I send you” (John 20:21). Jesus says this when his disciples are most frightened and dejected. Their hopes of the Messiah that would save and restore Israel and the world had been dashed. Suddenly, the risen Christ is among them and says “So I send you”. As Jesus was sent, we are sent in the same way. We are expected to do what Jesus says: to love your neighbour and your enemy, go and make disciples, go and

do like the merciful Samaritan. We are expected to do what Jesus did: heal, speak and preach, share meals equally, give hope and love, question structures and norms. All this is a lot to live up to. But still, we are sent. We are living in this mission.

We are all called to stand before Christ and say: “Here I am. Make use of me, with my strengths and imperfections. Send me.” We are called to be open to be sent into the places where we are. That is where the mission gets its form - today, through us. The sending challenges us to take part, not to look away. In a global and unjust world we cannot shut our eyes to the fact that everyone does not have their daily bread, despite the fact that there is enough food in the world for everyone. The sending challenges us to take part in the work for dignity - for a life to the full for each and everyone.

How can we live up to everything that Jesus was sent for? Or rather, how can we live with the fact that we do not live up to it? We might experience it as a heavy thing, to be sent as Jesus was sent. And the risk is that we fall into the trap of acting in order to experience a sense of worth. That is why we must remember that this sending is not in isolation. Sending comes in a stream of grace.

We do not need to deserve God’s grace and love. We are not given love after we have confessed our sins, acted in a certain way or proved our faith. Love is there as a precondition for life, entirely out of God’s grace. Many people in the richer parts of the world carry feelings of guilt and shortcoming when faced with the condition of the world. We can see that what we do affects others. We feel that we need to take responsibility, but still we do not always take it. Sometimes we do not have the strength, and sometimes we do not know how. Life comes in between; we might lack time, peacefulness, strength or money. Sometimes we cannot because structures hinder us. These may be external structures such as an unfair design of trade rules. But likewise these can be structures within us and within our community. As individuals we might feel small in relation to the big systems, world politics and economics that in themselves can be unjust. At other times we simply do not know what to do! The term ‘climate anxiety’ is used more and more often, to describe a growing phenomenon of a pacifying, yet at the same time a stressful, feeling of powerlessness, a fear and panic in the face of the extensive environmental problems that can no longer be neglected.

In an individualistic society, where consumerism is the focus, each one is encouraged to fulfil themselves. We are being fed with commercial slogans, that all aim towards

building the conviction that we must consume resources to have the right lifestyle and shop our way to our true identity. In this commercialized society it becomes at the same time up to each one of us, as individuals, to solve all the problems – to save the world. We are told to make good choices, buy fair trade goods and eat organic food. It is hard to create an identity separate from what you consume in a society like this. It is difficult to keep the sense we are all born with – the sense of enough, the sense of living in God’s grace and love.

Inseparable

Structures are built by humans and can therefore be changed by humans. We are in different power positions and with different opportunities to influence our environment, relations or larger systems. We are sent to act from the position we are in, whether we are poor or rich. Furthermore, we are as much embedded in God’s grace whether we are rich or poor, powerful or disempowered. As a consequence of God’s grace, we can act in love towards our neighbour. The sending and the grace are inseparable. Sending alone risks becoming only law and obedience. Grace alone risks becoming too inward looking and self-sufficient.

The important function of the Church is to create the space where the community of the Eucharist becomes real, to be an agent of God’s grace and at the same time challenge our society and ourselves to act where the world needs action. The Church must be able to keep these two together. When the Church does this, it can be relevant and effective in the struggle for a life in fullness for each and everyone. The Church’s prophetic voice must speak of mission and grace, of sending and loving. The people of God ought also to uphold the power of community, in a world of individualism and consumerism, as well as to claim the individual’s human rights where they are violated. The people of God must keep on emphasizing that we need each other, that we are interdependent and affect each other.

We must continue to believe that together we can create a culture of affinity and communion with the whole of creation. This will equip us to be agents of God’s mission and to be witnesses of God’s grace.

To live abundantly on earth means that each and everyone has sustainable access to enough food for body and soul. It implies that our human dignity, rights and equal value are being respected and that we experience reconciliation with God, each other and ourselves. In the Church we manifest this in the shared meal, and we refuse to think of someone as “the other”. We keep proclaiming that we are inseparable, because we are the Body of Christ.

To comment or add your own theological reflection on Food for Life, visit <http://www.e-alliance.ch/en/s/food> or email speicher@e-alliance.ch

¹ This paper stems mainly from the inspiration of Sofia Oreland from the Church of Sweden with contributions of Pablo Prado from the YMCA of Guatemala, Roberto Malvezzi from the Catholic Church in Brazil, Paul Hagerman from the Canadian Foodgrains Bank in Canada, and Eckhard Röhm from Bread for the World in Germany.

² John 10:10

³ Bartholomew Shaha, *Seeking Abundant Life for all*, (Bangladesh: Chittagong YMCA, 2000), p. 89.

⁴ Leonardo Boff, *Ecología: Grito de la tierra, grito de los pobres*, (Madrid: Editorial Trotta, 2006).

⁵ Karen L. Bloomquist, “The High Cost of Food: Familiar Refrains in a New Crisis”, *Thinking it over* 19 (May 2008).

⁶ Bartholomew Shaha, op. cit., pp. 12,13.

⁷ In the first of the 95 Theses on the Power and Efficacy of Indulgences (1517) Luther states: “omnem vitam fidelium penitentiam esse voluit.” He (i.e. Jesus Christ) wanted the whole lives of the faithful to be repentance.

