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Allegheny Synod Hunger - 2022

I would like to start with a verse from 2 Timothy 3:16-17, *All scripture is inspired by God...so that everyone who belongs to God may be proficient, equipped for every good work.*

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Equipped for every good work.

Now what Paul is talking about is what he calls the "last days," the distressing times of greed, lies, persecution, and suffering. And what he says is look to scripture, for it will equip you for good works.

So, we are going to look to scripture in this time of hunger and need. I don't think we are anywhere near the last days, but we are certainly in distressing times. For over 30 years, we, the world, has made tremendous progress against hunger and poverty. In 1990, we had almost a billion people hungry around the world. Since then, we were on target to cut that number nearly in half in the coming years. By 2014, we were down to about 600 million people hungry, still too high, but phenomenal progress.

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That's all changed. For the last seven years, hunger has been creeping up, slowly at first, and then more quickly since 2020. By the latest measure, as many as 811 million people around the world are hungry. Nearly 1 in 3 people aren't sure where their next meal is coming from. One of my roles with ELCA World Hunger is to monitor data on hunger and poverty, and the last two years, when looking at the data, I found I had to take breaks, it was emotionally taxing seeing these numbers. Now, I am sure that many of us would say that anytime we have to do statistics, we want to cry, but it has been distressing to see decades of progress begin to be reversed.

I take solace in Paul's words to Timothy that in the midst of our distress, scripture still has all that we need to be equipped for good works, and this is especially true when it comes to hunger because so much of scripture is really just the story of people longing to be fed. It's the story of wandering Hebrews worried about starvation in the wilderness, of poor widows waiting to die of hunger, of disciples figuring out how to feed the multitudes. What are the first chapters of the bible about - God providing food and humans violating rules about food.

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Each of these stories reflects what we already know about food. Food is never just food. I love this quote from sociologist Pat Caplan: "Food is never 'just food,' and its significance can never be purely nutritional." Food is never just food. It is a part of who we are, it is our identity, our history, our place in time.

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In Cincinnati, Ohio, one of the ministries that you support through ELCA World Hunger is a great example of this. Tikkun Farm was converted from an old dairy farm in 2015 into a nonprofit space for growing food and relationships within the community. In fact, its very name, Tikkun, means to repair or restore, and the farm's mission is to be a place of radical hospitality and love. And it has been this for the many Bhutanese refugees who work on the farm.

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Jharana is one of them. Her family fled Bhutan in 1992 and settled in Nepal as refugees, where Jharana was born. In 2016, unable to return to Bhutan, they came to Ohio. Tikkun Farm provided them with a garden plot where they could grow their own food. At Tikkun, Jharana's family was able to meet new friends, Jharana and her brother could get help with homework, and they could share their culture and learn about others' cultures with their new neighbors. But more importantly for her parents, at Tikkun,

they were able to do something they hadn't done for over 20 years: farm. For Jharana's parents and grandparents, working on the garden gave them a chance to return to the agricultural work that their family had depended on for generations. It was part of them, part of their history. Having the extra food helped, but what Tikkun provided was both a return to the family's identity and history and a chance to carve out a new identity in a new place, with new neighbors.

This is possible because Tikkun Farm recognized that the most important product of the farm is not the food but the community. The food, for Jharana's family and other Bhutanese refugees, is a symbol of both identity and welcome, and for all the participants, it is a means to the larger end of creating a community of radical hospitality, love, and justice – healing and restoring the community in Cincinnati.

This robust understanding of what food really means is reflected in scripture, too. In the **Exodus**, the Hebrews are liberated from slavery only to wander in the wilderness, away from their homes, away from farms and stores of food. And yet God does not leave them on their own to starve or to pick themselves up by their sandal-straps. No, God sends manna to sustain them, until their journey is over.

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This manna is not just a means to feed but a means to create a people who will feed others, who will be part of the restoration of the world. God is not merely feeding; God is creating a people. In part, through food.

When future generations stray from this plan, they are reminded of this by the prophets. Through their calls to justice, God reminds the people – I fed you so that you would have the nourishment you needed to be the community of faith and justice that this world needs.

This is why the work that we support as church together, work like that of Tikkun Farm, is never just about food. The ministries that we support through ELCA World Hunger have the long-range goal of transforming communities and reducing barriers. As it was in the times of the prophets and still is now, hunger is not a problem of calories but of justice.

To give another example of this, in **Tanzania**, our companion church is working with Tanganyika Christian Refugee Service to provide training and technical skills in modern agriculture to 400 community members, the majority of whom are female. Female farmers worldwide face unique obstacles when it comes to farming. In many regions, they cannot legally own or inherit land. They are more likely to be denied loans or access to markets. As a result, they are less likely to be able to cultivate land or to afford the seeds, fertilizer, and tools needed to grow crops or to have the capital necessary to start a small business.

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The church in Tanzania and TCRS, with support from ELCA World Hunger, helped to provide technical training in farming, tools, seeds, and financing and helped the farmers organize together, both to unlock loans and capital through village savings and lending groups and to give the women a stronger voice in negotiating prices. As a result, women in the village of Minyinya were able to cultivate profitable cabbage, spinach and tomatoes. One member, Rose, pictured here, even started a kiosk business, while another woman began raising and selling chickens. All of them are planning to invest in other local businesses by contributing to the village savings and loan group.

Women and girls worldwide are more likely to experience hunger and poverty. Projects like this are important in ensuring access to food, but if we really want to end hunger, we have to realize that what is true for food is true for hunger. Food is never just food, and hunger is never just the absence of food.

Hunger is a symptom of inequity, a tangible consequence of life in a world that is still yearning for the wholeness God has promised.

And that's the first lesson we learn in doing this work. The lesson we need to carry with us as we face the rapidly growing number of people who are hungry around the world. We can't end hunger with food. Because hunger isn't merely about food. It's about equity. And we cannot feed our way out of inequity. That takes renewal, reinvestment, transformation.

The cascading effects of the war in Ukraine highlight this well. It's no exaggeration to call Ukraine, as some news reports have, the "breadbasket of Europe." In fact, it might be an understatement. Ukraine – and Russia – are major suppliers of key exports: wheat, rye, barley, corn, rapeseed (which is used for canola oil), in addition to fertilizer, livestock feed, and fuel. Together, Ukraine and Russia provide more than 30% of the world's cereal supplies.

Obviously, there is an urgent need for immediate relief for the millions of people directly impacted by the war, who have fled to neighboring countries or remain trapped inside Ukraine. Lutheran Disaster Response has been active through our companion churches in the region almost since the invasion began, accompanying refugees with the help that they need now.

But the effects of the war and sanctions are already rippling around the world at a time when many countries are already struggling.

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Even if other countries could fill the gap, we can't feed our way out of the hunger crisis caused by conflict. The war didn't create global vulnerabilities to hunger; it revealed them. It reveals a global food system that leaves millions of people at risk for hunger every time a crisis occurs. This is what makes the work that we do together through ELCA World Hunger so important, particularly when it comes to our support for farming communities.

When we provide through our partners tools, training, seeds, and protection of rights, our aim is not merely to grow food but to help communities build the long-term resilience they need to weather crises. So that the next time a war erupts halfway around the globe, local communities will have the assets they need to feed themselves and their families, to break the cycle of hunger for good.

That graph I showed earlier of the rising rate of hunger is merely a visible reminder of much larger inequities, inequities that we address through the holistic ministries supported by ELCA World Hunger. And we support these ministries because we know that we do not face a hunger crisis in an otherwise just world, but a justice crisis in a hungry world. We need to ensure that plates are full, yes. But the good work that scripture equips us to do is good work toward a future where everyone has not only a full plate but a place at the table. Because hunger is not just about the food we eat but the tables at which we dine.

And that points to the second point I want to make. I know what you're saying, "Lord have mercy, he's only on the second thing." Well, there's only two things, so just hold with me.

The first point we can draw from scripture and from the world around us is that we can't end hunger with food. The second thing we learn from walking with our neighbors in this work, from looking at the trends in hunger and poverty, seeing who is vulnerable and where, is that hunger is not incidental, accidental, or coincidental. Let me say that again: hunger is not incidental, accidental, or coincidental. It

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is the predictable result of policies, practices, and systems that are set up to ensure a small few thrive while many fight to survive. That's why we can look at the demographics and geography of a community and with reasonable certainty predict their vulnerability. Hunger is the result of choices we make about food, the economy, jobs, health, the environment, about who is welcome and who is not.

When we look to the stories of food in the bible, when we see Jesus dining with friends and neighbors, what we see is the creation of tables at which all are fed – physically and spiritually. We see welcome extended to those who normally would be locked out. In Paul's writings, we hear descriptions of banquet meals in the early church that brought together rich and poor, enslaved and free, even if Paul had to remind them, at times, about their obligations to one another. We see the church formed by and giving life to a new kind of table.

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The gifts you give to support ELCA World Hunger are investments in building and rebuilding these kinds of tables, tables to which all are welcome and at which all are fed. These are tables of nourishment, justice, and radical hospitality, or in short, the kind of tables we need to end hunger for good.

In Palestine, where children and youth face displacement, discrimination, abuse, and detention by authorities, Defense for Children International-Palestine provides legal support, psychosocial care, and vocational training to marginalized young people. Through these services, they help ensure that the rights of young people are protected, and that they have access to the care they need to thrive, now and into the future. The boxes you see here are products young residents at a DCIP transitional house made through their vocational training program.

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In Bangladesh, young adults with vision impairments have found a place of welcome, care, and opportunity through the Visually Impaired Rehabilitation Center of RDRS-Bangladesh, which is supported by ELCA World Hunger. Here, the residents learn Braille and life skills, complete their formal education, and learn new skills that will allow them to support themselves. Munni Akhter, one of the residents pictured here with her jute handicrafts, said that she couldn't believe that there would be a place like this for her and for other people with vision impairments before coming to the school. But now, she is committed to becoming a teacher and helping others. She says, "I want to break the misconceptions that people hold about us. I want to let people know that visually impaired people can do well for society just like others if they get the opportunity."

Helping provide that opportunity, creating that table in communities where all are welcome and where everyone can envision themselves as part of God's transformation of the world, is at the center of the work ELCA World Hunger supports around the world and here in the US.

This center in Bangladesh is one of the featured stories in our new Vacation Bible School program for 2022, "Tree of Healing." Recognizing the need to celebrate the diversity of the world that God has created, we worked closely with disability ministries of the ELCA to provide through this story a chance for children and adults to learn more about disability, hunger, and inclusion. The activities for the day featuring this story in VBS include opportunities for children to experience both American Sign Language and Braille. This is part of the holistic focus on health of the VBS and our focus on justice-centered faith formation through the educational resources your gifts make possible.

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This lens is at the center of the work we do together. Because if we are going to meet the hunger crisis we face today, we have to see food for what it is: a symbol of hope, of identity, of justice, of welcome, of our dependence on God and one another, and of our hope for a place at the table for all.

We are facing a set of interlocking crises that lead most analysts to predict a dire future. Climate change, COVID, war, inflation. It's a bleak picture of the months and years to come. And yet, we know by faith that, despite all of this, the only future that has been written in stone is the promise of a future when hunger will be no more.

And we know we can make progress toward that future. We saw it as hunger rates steadily declined for more than two decades worldwide. We have been equipped for every good work – and we have done some of it.

And so I want to conclude with gratitude and an invitation. First, gratitude. Your gifts to ELCA World Hunger this past year have been an investment in that future. They have enabled our church to support the ministries I mentioned and hundreds of others. That \$108,100 from our synod is at work in the world, changing lives. Thank you.

But also, an invitation. ELCA World Hunger has been the focus of the special offering of the ELCA Youth Gathering for several cycles, each of which helped us raise over \$1M to support this work. Even more important than the dollars raised has been the numbers of young people we have been able to engage through the Gathering, to share the story of what their church is doing in the world.

Despite the cancellation of the Youth Gathering, ELCA World Hunger is forging ahead with the Global Farm Challenge that was planned for the Gathering though we are doing it in a new way. This summer, I am inviting you to be part of a youth-led, whole-church campaign to raise money to support smallholder farmers around the world, who face disproportionate challenges in feeding themselves and their families, especially now with the war in Ukraine. These gifts will enable farming communities to weather the particular challenges they face now by building resilience and fostering opportunity for the future.

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More information has been mailed out and is available online. We have activities you can use, including a new Global Farm Challenge To-Go card game and podcast, online fundraising options, and more. But I invite you to check out the website listed on the slide and to join in this initiative. Later in the year, we will have more opportunities, as well, including, this Fall, our new study guide and action guides for Advent and Lent. We will also be hosting several Hunger at the Crossroads webinars for people interested in learning more about hunger and topics such as housing, migration, and health. You can find information about all of this by following ELCA World Hunger on social media or by subscribing to our blog.

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Thank you. Thank you for the time today, thank you for the time and the gifts you have shared with this church. In Christ, we are drawn together with all that we need to face the current crisis in hunger head-on. We are equipped for every good work by the living word of God, who promises a future when we will hunger and thirst no more, and who invites us as the people of God to be part of that story. Thank you for saying yes to that invitation and for being part of God's work in transforming our world.