



Interfaith Action on Hunger

A Shared Obligation

By J. Andreas Hipple

With more than 1 billion undernourished people – many of them children – across the globe, hunger is a problem that affects all religions and nationalities. The roots of hunger are as diverse as the communities that it affects; conflict, natural disaster, water shortages, disease, climate change, and, of course, poverty are among the many other factors involved.

Solving a problem that affects people of all faiths requires the active support and participation of people from all those faiths. Individually, all major faiths call upon their adherents to exhibit compassion by helping the needy. Muslims, Christians, Jews, Hindus and others have since time immemorial supported projects, activities, and organizations dedicated to helping feed the poor, sick, and hungry. Maximizing the impact of these efforts by increasing interfaith collaboration is an important next step to eradicating hunger; fortunately this collaboration has already begun in the United States and abroad.

A Shared Compulsion to Act

Muslims, Christians, Jews, and others all find clear language in their holy books and traditions that compel them to fight hunger and poverty.

For Muslims, this fight is fundamental to the faith; it is the essence of zakat, the third pillar. The importance of charity is underscored throughout the Quran (e.g., Surah 2, verse 110). This charity is not only directed toward fellow Muslims. The Quran (4: 36) calls believers to “do good – to parents, kinsfolk, orphans, those in

“None of you has faith until you love for your neighbor what you love for yourself.”

(Sahih Muslim, Hadith #45)

When such love turns into act of true compassion across faith lines, it can forge a better future for everyone!

need, neighbors who are near, neighbors who are strangers, the Companion by your side...” Charity should be directed broadly, not limited to fellow Muslims. Recall that “If Allah had so willed, He would have made you a single people, but (His plan is) to test you in what He hath given you: so strive as in a race in all virtues” (Quran 5:48).

This broader sense of community, and the individual’s responsibility toward those in need regardless of identity, suggest that Muslims should extend their hands across faith lines to collaborate in the struggle against hunger. The Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) is commonly quoted as having said that “the person who sleeps full while his neighbor sleeps hungry is not a true believer.”

Similarly, the Bible calls all Christians to take action and provide for the poor and hungry without discrimination. “If

a brother or sister lacks food and one of you says, ‘go in peace,’ and yet do not supply their bodily needs, what is the good of that? Faith if it has no works is dead” (James 2:15-17). Helping the hungry has great spiritual benefits for Christians: “If you offer your food to the hungry and satisfy the needs of the afflicted, then your light shall rise in the darkness and your gloom be like the noonday” (Isaiah 58:10). The Good Samaritan parable in the Gospel of Luke (10: 25-37) makes clear the importance of loving and helping one’s neighbor regardless of identity.

Recent Christian thought has emphasized the unambiguous value of helping the hungry. A powerful statement about the importance of fighting hunger came from Pope Benedict XVI in his 2009 encyclical Caritas in Veritate. Drawing inspiration from earlier writings by his predecessor Paul VI, Pope Benedict XVI stated that feeding the hungry “is an ethical imperative for the universal [Roman Catholic] Church.”

For Jews, the Torah places hunger and poverty at the center of the faith. Leviticus (19:9-10) calls on Jews to give to the poor the corners of their fields and to leave them any fallen fruit. This is in the context of a concern for others that is not limited to fellow Jews; it is in the spirit of “Love thy neighbor as thyself” (Lev.19:18).

Alleviating hunger is of great importance to those outside of the great monotheistic traditions, as well. The Mahabharata (XIII.59.11), one of Hinduism’s great Sanskrit epics, states that “[t]here is none other who does greater good than the one who removes the hunger

of those in a difficult situation, helpless, weak and disturbed." Gandhi and other leading thinkers and activists throughout the faith's history have been inspired by Hinduism's call to action against hunger.

If the concern for the poor and hungry is shared across religious boundaries, and there is agreement that this concern must not be limited to co-religionists, then there is reason to work together to defeat the scourge of hunger. Interfaith action to fight hunger is therefore a way for members of each religion to practice their personal faiths, while strengthening their capacity to have a positive social impact through coordinated action across faith lines.

Interfaith Action against Hunger

Why is it important to increase the number of interfaith approaches to the hunger problem rather than to develop free-standing initiatives for each faith tradition?

The efficiency argument dictates that interfaith initiatives are more likely to succeed in reaching a greater percentage of people in need. In much of the world, adherents to different religious groups live side-by-side within their communities. An interfaith approach can help compassionate projects reach more of society's neediest and thus maximize a project's impact. The spirit of compassion that can be found in all major religions is best expressed by an approach that builds bridges and extends a helping hand to all who are in need.

Tackling hunger – or other pressing issues – in a joint manner can also have noticeable side benefits. In the United States, working together with non-Muslims can allow members of the country's diverse and growing Muslim population to contribute positively to both the fight against hunger and the struggle against unfair negative stereotypes of Muslims. For example, in New York City, the Islamic Cultural Center on East 96th Street collaborates with the Jewish Theological Seminary and a Presbyterian church to operate a soup kitchen. The shared compulsion to feed the hungry and protect the vulnerable in one's community drives a collaboration that has forged bonds of friendship and respect among volunteers of multiple religions.

Other examples, both small and large, can be found around the United States

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and the world. The Indiana-based Interfaith Hunger Initiative – a partnership between local Christian, Jewish, Muslim, Buddhist and Sikh congregations – is founded on the belief that "working together across faith lines on an important project will strengthen our community." The initiative supports several local food pantries in Marion County, Indiana and a school lunch program in Kenya that feeds some 2700 vulnerable children, including many AIDS orphans. Other programs, from the New Jersey-based Middlesex County Coalition to Combat Poverty and Hunger to the Idaho Interfaith Roundtable Against Hunger, provide opportunities for local interfaith action.

In countries with a history of conflict characterized by friction between members of different religious groups, interfaith projects can help build trust and reduce tensions. In this way, programs that seek to relieve the most pressing hunger can alleviate conflict and thus address an important root cause of hunger.

Internationally, a significant example comes from Nigeria – a country of about 150 million people split roughly half-and-half between Muslims and Christians and with a history of ethno-religious strife. The Nigerian Inter-Faith Action Association (NIFAA), a non-governmental organization co-chaired by the leaders of the Nigerian Supreme Council for Islamic Affairs and the Christian Association of Nigeria, has mobilized tens of thousands of imams, pastors, and priests to become active partners in an interfaith campaign against poverty and disease, beginning with malaria, a disease that costs the country 12 percent of its annual GDP, according to one study. The economic loss associated with malaria is a major contributor to hunger in Nigeria. To the extent that an interfaith ap-

proach can both reduce this burden and forge peaceful ties of friendship between Muslim and Christian leaders, NIFAA's program can strike at multiple root causes of poverty and hunger.

An additional vehicle for interfaith action is advocacy designed to change policies and increase investments in programs to end hunger. A leading advocacy group is the Alliance to End Hunger, which includes influential Muslim, Christian, Jewish, and secular organizations in its campaign to raise the issue of hunger on the national agenda.

Around the world, Muslims, Christians, Jews, Hindus, and others are hard at work, working together to eliminate hunger. Individual Muslims and other can support these efforts in any number of ways, as interfaith action is valuable in a wide range of initiatives that target hunger, from local soup kitchens and food banks to programs that invest in international food security or engage in global advocacy.

Growing Interfaith Action on Hunger

With these and countless other examples of interfaith collaboration on hunger, there is little doubt that the idea has caught on, and that people of all faiths are acting upon their religious duty to care for the needy among us and broaden our conception of the global neighborhood. As the Prophet Muhammed (pbuh) said, "None of you has faith until you love for your brother what you love for yourself" (Sahih Al-Bukhari, Kitab al-Iman, Hadith no.13), and "None of you has faith until you love for your neighbor what you love for yourself" (Sahih Muslim, Kitab al-Iman, 67-1, Hadith no.45). When such love turns into acts of true compassion across faith lines, it can forge a better future for everyone.

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