

# What You May Not Know About Hunger

**M**alnutrition is a general term that indicates a lack of some or all nutritional elements necessary for human health. **Protein-energy malnutrition (PEM)** is by far the most lethal form of malnutrition/hunger and the one referred to when world hunger is referred to. Children are its most visible victims. Malnutrition plays a role in at least half of the 10.9 million child deaths each year. These young children are prematurely—and needlessly—lost.

First recognized in the 20th century, PEM's full impact has been revealed only in recent decades. Infants and young children are most susceptible to PEM's characteristic growth impairment because of their high energy and protein needs, and their vulnerability to infection. Globally, children who are poorly nourished suffer up to 160 days of illness each year. Malnutrition magnifies the effect of every disease.

**P**rotein-energy malnutrition (PEM) affects every fourth child worldwide: 150 million (26.7 percent) are underweight while 182 million (32.5 percent) are stunted. Geographically, more than 70 percent of PEM children live in Asia, 26 percent in Africa and 4 percent in Latin America and the Caribbean. Their plight may well have begun even before birth with a malnourished mother.

**T**he world produces enough food to feed everyone. World agriculture produces 17 percent more calories per person today than it did

30 years ago, despite a 70 percent population increase. This is enough to provide everyone in the world with at least 2,720 kilocalories (kcal) per person per day. The principal problem is that many people in the world do not have sufficient land to grow, or income to purchase, enough food.

**P**overty is the principal cause of hunger. There are 1.2 billion poor people in developing countries who live on \$1 a day or less. Of these, 780 million suffer from chronic hunger, which means that their daily intake of calories is insufficient for them to lead active and healthy lives.

Extreme poverty remains an alarming problem in the world's developing regions, despite the advances made in the 1990s. Progress in poverty reduction has been concentrated in Asia, and especially, East Asia. In all the other regions, the number of people in extreme poverty has increased. In sub-Saharan Africa, there were 58 million more poor people in 1999 than in 1990.

Hunger is also a cause of poverty. By leading to such effects as poor health, low levels of energy, and even mental impairment, hunger can lead to even greater poverty.

**C**onflict is a cause of hunger, but not the most frequent cause. Worldwide, there were some 21.5 million refugees and displaced persons in 1999 – largely as a result of wars, political turbulence, civil conflict and social unrest (e.g. Afghanistan, the Balkans, Democratic People's Republic of Korea, East Timor, Somalia and Sudan). In such

emergencies, malnutrition runs rampant, exponentially increasing the risk of disease and death. But, important and visible though it is, conflict is not nearly as important as poverty as a cause of hunger.

**P**rogress has been made in reducing the number of hungry people. There has been progress in reducing the number of hungry people, but it has been slow. The target set at the 1996 World Food Summit was to halve the number of undernourished people by 2015 from their number in 1990-92. The latest data show that the number of undernourished is falling by 6 million a year. This means that the annual rate of reduction has to be stepped up to 22 million.

A number of trace elements or micronutrients such as Vitamin A, iron, and iodine are important for health. Vitamin A deficiency can cause night blindness and reduces the body's resistance to disease. In children Vitamin A deficiency can cause growth retardation; an estimated 79 million preschool children suffered from Vitamin A deficiency in 1995 (*Micronutrient Report*, 2001 pp. 30-31). In South Asia and Africa, approximately 30 percent of children suffer from Vitamin A deficiency.

Iron deficiency is a principal cause of anemia. Two billion people—over 30 percent of the world's population—are anemic, mainly due to iron deficiency, and, in developing countries, frequently exacerbated by malaria and worm infections. For children, health consequences include premature



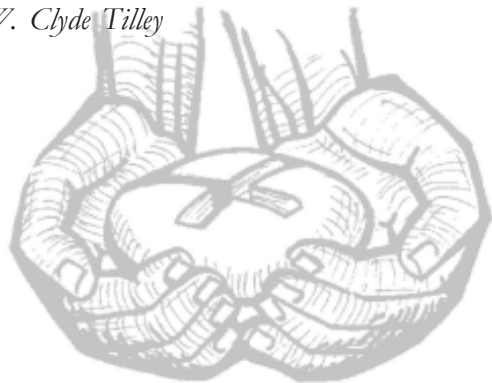
birth, low birth weight, infections, and elevated risk of death. Later, physical and cognitive development are impaired, resulting in lowered school performance. For pregnant women, anemia contributes to 20 percent of all maternal deaths.

Iodine deficiency disorders (IDD) jeopardize children's mental health and often their very lives. Serious iodine deficiency during pregnancy may result in stillbirths, abortions and congenital abnormalities such as cretinism, a grave, irreversible form of mental retardation that affects people living in iodine-deficient areas of Africa and Asia. IDD also causes mental impairment that lowers intellectual prowess at home, at school, and at work. IDD affects over 740 million people, 13 percent of the world's population. Fifty million people have some degree of mental impairment caused by IDD. —from *Hunger Notes*, an online publication of the World Hunger Education Service, the World Health Organization (WHO), the UN Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO), and the Medline Plus Medical Encyclopedia. Art on this page is by Rebecca Ward.

The growing millions of hungry people in our world are both a judgment upon our overstuffed affluence and an opportunity that presses urgently upon us. When nearly ten million people in our land, over one-third of them children, live in households experiencing hunger, Jesus is present demanding a response. When one in ten households in our affluent nation reports that its access to food is extremely limited or uncertain, Jesus is present awaiting a response. An estimated eight hundred and twenty-eight million people on our planet are undernourished.

Christ is shown in mercy when his people break bread to them; he is shown in judgment when we do not. Never did Lazarus press closer to the rich man's door than does the hungry world that presses its claim upon us in Jesus' name right now. God's people ought to break bread to them in sacrificial giving, in political action, and in economic sharing of our abundant resources. The challenge is to find the way rather than bemoan our helplessness.

—W. Clyde Tilley



# Litany for the Hungry Crowd

by Katie Cook

LEADER: We pray to the God of hope today, our hearts heavy with care—for our families and friends in pain and sorrow; for brothers and sisters in our own country without food and shelter; for the dying children of famine-stricken countries; for the innocent victims of political turmoil all over the world.

PEOPLE: God, we call upon you for their sakes. We have felt pain for them. We have shed tears for them. We come to you again with a prayer in our hearts and on our lips for these suffering ones. We lift them up for your gift of healing.

LEADER: We also realize that you called us to put our caring into action. We know that you have called us to share our portion. But we see so much need that we hardly know where to begin. We ask that you would show us the way.

PEOPLE: We are like the hungry crowd, the five thousand who sat before you that day long ago. But our hunger is mostly spiritual, and our want is not so keen as that of others.

LEADER: You are the source of all good gifts. Feed our hungry souls, that we may be able to share from our gifts.

PEOPLE: We are like the Twelve were on that day of the great feeding. We are caught up in our own needs. We would send the crowd away.

LEADER: Forgive us for our selfish motives. Help us to see that your ways are higher than our ways, and that there is a way to feed the multitudes.

PEOPLE: Make us like the little boy who shared his tiny lunch. And make us like Andrew, who believed that such a small portion could make a difference.

LEADER: Deliver us from the “wisdom” of the world that tells us there is no hope. Remind us that you are their hope, that you are our hope.

At hope into our hearts today, we pray. Take our tiny portions and use them to feed us. Take our tired efforts and use them to ease the pain. Remind us that you are greater than that which is in the world. AMEN.



After this, Jesus went across the Sea of Galilee (some call it Tiberias.) A huge crowd followed him, attracted by the miracles they had seen him do among the sick. When he got to the other side, he climbed a hill and sat down, surrounded by his disciples. It was nearly time for the Feast of Passover, kept annually by the Jews.

When Jesus looked out and saw that a large crowd had arrived, he said to Philip, “Where can we buy bread to feed these people?” He said this to stretch Philip’s faith. He already knew what he was going to do.

Philip answered, “Two hundred silver pieces wouldn’t be enough to buy bread for each person to get a piece.”

One of the disciples—it was Andrew, brother to Simon Peter—said, “There’s a little boy here who has five barley loaves and two fish. But that’s a drop in the bucket for a crowd like this.”

Jesus said, “Make the people sit down.” There was a nice carpet of green grass in this place. They sat down, about five thousand of them. Then Jesus took the bread and, having given thanks, gave it to those who were seated. He did the same with the fish. All ate as much as they wanted.

When the people had eaten their fill, he said to his disciples, “Gather the leftovers so nothing is wasted.” They went to work and filled twelve large baskets with leftovers from the five barley loaves.

The people realized that God was at work among them in what Jesus had just done. They said, “This is the Prophet for sure, God’s Prophet right here in Galilee!”

—John 6: 1-14, *The Message*