

Hunger News & Hope

A Seeds of Hope Publication

We Need Stories of Hope

In the next few issues of *Hunger News & Hope*, we are going to assume that you, our readers, already know that there are catastrophic needs all around us. If you have a television, a smartphone, an email inbox or a subscription to a newspaper, you already know essentially what is going on. This is one of those times in human history when people with any degree of empathy are weighed down with sadness and frustration. We feel outrage at the almost gleeful dismantling of the world's best humanitarian aid outlets. We see neighbors being manhandled by government-sanctioned thugs. We feel powerless.

And we at Seeds believe that all this horrific news, bombarding us all day, every day, can give rise to despair. We think that most of our readers are people of faith, people who have an underlying (if sometimes very faint) belief that the world is in God's hands and that there is always hope. We need to constantly remind each other of this.

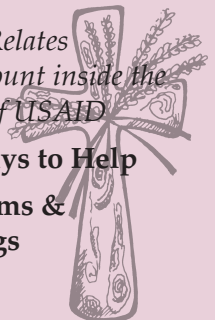
We think the best way to share hope is to continue to tell the stories of people doing things, small and large, that make a difference. In this issue, you will find the story of a community movement that responds to the needs of immigrants in many different ways. You will find the story of people who are trying, against all odds, to bring rights to hungry Cuban people while advocating for a more humane national policy toward their country.

You will find the story of Guyana, the only country in the world that can feed itself. You will find news briefs about church organizations responding to earthquake victims in Venezuela, about a new study showing that climate change increases stunting in children (and urging faith communities to develop programs that will prevent this), about a new book that relates a personal inside account of the destruction of the US Agency for International Development. You will also find some suggested ways to help and some spiritual nourishment for the journey.

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Responding to the Needs of Our Neighbors:

The Work of the Heart of Texas Network for Immigrant Rights

by Blake Burleson

Editor's note: This is the story of a group of people in one community. We know there are hundreds of people in perhaps hundreds of communities doing this kind of work. We're not holding this group up as the best; we are sharing its story for two reasons. The first is so that you might find inspiration in knowing you are not alone. The second is that we hope the variety of efforts made by this group will cause someone to say, "I never thought about that need," or "You know; we could do something like that." This is the story of what happens when people, sometimes just two people, share their concern and decide to think of what they can do.

THE BACKGROUND

The first thing I want to say is that I'm not an expert on immigration, but I've been trying to learn. This journey began when a friend and I were having a short conversation after a service at Seventh & James Baptist Church in Waco, TX, in November 2024. This friend, Mark Brickhouse, said to me, "You know, I'm worried about our undocumented neighbors." We decided to meet for coffee.

After several meetings in late 2024 and early 2025, we invited the local community to come together at our

church in February 2025. Eighty-five people showed up. We broke into tables of interest groups who came away with action plans that day. That is how the Heart of Texas Network for Immigrant Rights (HOTNIR) began.

With a good deal of help and encouragement from our congregation and the community, Mark and I have led this network of more than 360 volunteers and a dozen teams. This is a report on the state of things in Waco and Texas, on our work, and where things are headed for us in the near future.

There are 10,000 to 15,000 undocumented or partially documented residents in our county (McLennan County), about 6 or 7 percent of the population. Somewhere around 1.7 million residents of Texas are undocumented—about 1 in 20. We all know some of them; we interact with some of them daily. They are in our neighborhoods. Many of us have been served in Waco restaurants by individuals who are undocumented or who have family who are undocumented.

Over the last 10 to 20 years, moreover, many of us have employed individuals who are migrants as landscapers, house cleaners, roofers, carpenters or masons. We paid them; they helped us. The members of my church have worshiped in our own sanctuary with individuals who are afraid of the US Immigration and Customs Enforcement agency (ICE).

Our best knowledge is that there are five or more ICE agents stationed in Waco. The ICE map created by a Rice University student in Houston shows 1,490 cases open in McLennan County with 15 opened within three months in the early spring. I do not believe this is being updated regularly. Unlike in some big cities in "blue" states, ICE tactics in Waco (and Texas in general) have been to arrest with a low profile.

But don't let the low profile fool you. The State of Texas is currently holding nearly 20,000 people in ICE concentration camps—more than any other state. Across Texas, more than half of ICE arrests now originate in local jails through cooperation with local law enforcement. In Houston, San Antonio and Dallas, ICE



Blake Burleson, co-founder of the Heart of Texas Network for Immigrant Rights, introduces former US Representative Chet Edwards before the latter speaks to a monthly HOTNIR "Lunch and Learn" gathering. Photo courtesy of Blake Burleson.

has been arresting people at courts, probation offices and immigration check ins. They have also been deployed in 14 major airports across Texas.

HOTNIR was able to capture video of an aggressive arrest of a 46-year-old woman by five agents one month ago. They banged on her door and told her to come out, or they would break the door down. She left behind traumatized grandchildren for whom HOTNIR was later able to provide counseling. She left behind neighbors who were shaken by what they witnessed.

This friend, Mark Brickhouse, said to me, "You know, I'm worried about our undocumented neighbors." We decided to meet for coffee.

Typically, we have not been able to capture these events on video. We have a rapid response unit that can usually arrive in 20 minutes, but the agents are often gone by then. I have personally not seen an ICE agent. I recently spoke to Chief Sheryl Victorian of the Waco Police Department, who said she'd never met an ICE agent. Until the incident related above, we had not witnessed agents going to a home and threatening to enter; we have interviewed eyewitnesses who reported watching agents surveil and then detain people after they got into their vehicle. That had been the pattern.

From what we can tell, the agents have not typically worn masks. This could change—and quickly. Our immigrant neighbors know this. We have found that many families are often afraid to leave their homes to take their kids to school or go to the doctor.

Detainees from our county are typically taken to ICE detention centers in Conroe, TX, just north of Houston. Some say they are better described as concentration camps. Correspondence coming from the camps describe desperate, miserable conditions. At least seven migrant deaths have been reported in Texas detention centers in recent months.

Mark Brickhouse (right), co-founder of the Heart of Texas Network for Immigrant Rights, talks to Food Security Team volunteers at the Shepherd's Heart pantry in Waco, TX.

Also shown is Seeds of Hope Council member Luke Mitchell, a member of the HOTNIR Food Security Team.

Photo courtesy of Rod Aydelotte/ Waco Tribune Herald.

State law now requires sheriffs to cooperate with ICE through formal agreements. That means local law enforcement—whose primary job is public safety—is increasingly pulled into federal immigration enforcement. In McLennan County, in spite of pleas from the community, Sheriff Parnell McNamara recently entered into the most aggressive form of agreement with ICE. To date, we have not seen the Sheriff's deputies on the streets doing immigration enforcement.

We have been seeing a variety of nonviolent demonstrations and student walkouts in Texas. There have also been sharp disagreements between state leaders and local communities during town hall meetings. Whether one agrees with those protests or not, they are a signal—especially from young people—that something feels morally and constitutionally off. This is not often well received. Recently, at a local school, a teacher was fired for providing art supplies to students in his class to make signs for their protest.

Leaders in our local schools, government and businesses are staying quiet. From what I have been able to discern from conversations with them, they don't necessarily like what ICE is doing, but they are keeping their heads down. I am hopeful, however, that there are individuals who, while not able to speak up, are able to help immigrants in quiet ways.

WHAT IS HOTNIR AND WHAT IS IT DOING?

HOTNIR is an informal network of individuals who contribute resources, skills and time in support of immigrants and migrants in the Waco area. HOTNIR includes members from all walks of life and professions

Please see "HOTNIR" on page 4.



HOTNIR, *continued from page 3*

and institutions in Waco and beyond. We are here because we care about our community and those who live in our community—including our vulnerable and frightened, undocumented and documented neighbors. HOTNIR includes people from all across the political spectrum. It includes people of faith and people with no religious affiliation at all. We are united by a simple belief: *Human dignity and the rule of law belong together.*

HOTNIR TEAMS

1. First is the **Activist Team**. This is an “out-front” group that is visible in multiple ways including protests, lobbying, rapid response units and monitoring of ICE activities. The team’s most recent project is a HOTNIR hotline. Volunteers are being trained to respond to phone calls from people asking for help.
2. There is also the **Archival Team**. This team is partnering with the Baylor University Institute for Oral History and Baylor Libraries. It is training volunteers to conduct oral interviews with folks in our community who are touched by upheavals to individuals and families being taken by ICE. We are doing this because we want to preserve these stories for posterity.
3. The **Communication Team** produces press releases and manages an informative HOTNIR website.
4. The **Faith Support Team** is made up of mainly clergy. The team has held monthly ecumenical Bible studies for the community that explore God’s love of the immigrant and God’s commandments to love our neighbors. Its members are exploring ways to provide spiritual support to immigrants who are in detention. They are also seeking to expand clergy involvement among all faith groups in Waco.

HOTNIR includes members from all walks of life and professions and institutions in Waco and beyond. We are here because we care about our community and those who live in our community—including our vulnerable and frightened, undocumented and documented neighbors.

5. HOTNIR offers financial assistance to help with legal expenses for people who are detained by ICE. This is done through organizations like Refugia, La Puerta and American Gateways. **The Fundraising Team** raises the money to accomplish that.
6. **The Healthcare Team** is made up of physicians, nurses, therapists, social workers, and psychologists. HOTNIR has been able to provide counseling for children whose parents have been taken. We are also partnering with La Puerta for pro bono counseling support for immigrant adults.

7. If a family seeks our help, we point them to experienced and excellent immigration attorneys that have been vetted by our **Legal Team**.

8. The **Immigrant Support Team** works directly with immigrants in providing education such as “Know Your Rights” workshops.

9. The **Food Security Team** works with local food pantries to deliver groceries to families who are afraid to leave their homes, and with families whose breadwinners are afraid

*Youth at Seventh & James Baptist Church in Waco, TX, made signs admonishing passersby to remember biblical mandates about loving our neighbors.
Photo courtesy of Blake Burleson.*



to go to work. The Food Security Team recently began collecting non-food necessities as well.

10. **The Primary/Secondary Education Team** is seeking to network with schoolteachers at various schools and provide immigrant families with information.
11. **The Higher Education Team** works to provide information to international students in colleges and universities who are nervous about the possibility of losing their visa status.

WHAT'S AHEAD

HOTNIR is an evolving organization. In addition to these teams, we have a number of folks with specific administrative duties such as administrators, ambassadors, advocates, legal liaisons, family preparedness coordinators, Refugia liaisons and case sponsor coordinators. If anyone has an idea and wants to develop it, we can likely use them.

Here is my wish list for the near future:

1. Research assistant
2. Someone to develop an ICE website for McLennan County
3. Finding a way to help other cities the size of Waco (around 150,000 population) to develop groups
4. Someone to continue developing relationships with nonprofits and networks outside of Waco
5. Someone to continue to grow the network and strengthen existing teams
6. Embed Spanish speakers in all teams
7. Develop more relationships with the local Hispanic community
8. Deepen engagement with local law enforcement

WHAT YOU CAN DO TO HELP

When I look around our community, the only consistent voices from leaders about the gross inhumane violence occurring in our own backyards is from clergy. The moral voices are essential. This is hard work—heartbreaking, but joyful. So, what can you do? The following is a list of possible local responses, but these can probably be set up anywhere.

1. **Stay informed.** Be a witness to unlawful and unjust actions of the federal government. If you live in the McLennan County area, you can do that by signing up to receive the HOTNIR Monday chair update. To sign up, email info@hotnir.org.¹

2. **Take Action.** Let people know these rights are out there for them.
3. **Give.** Your gift will directly affect some of our neighbors who have been detained, as well as their spouses and children left in terrible straits. Your money will go directly to help with attorney fees of a detainee, to electric bills and rent payments for families whose bread winner is detained. To help in McLennan County, you can give to Refugia, an immigrant ministry sponsored by Lake Shore Baptist Church in Waco.² For other locations, see Endnote 1.
4. **Volunteer.** HOTNIR has a volunteer coordinator (who is a volunteer herself) who helps people find the right teams for their skills and interests. You can do this in your community.

A quote from the Talmud says, “If you have saved one, it is as if you have saved the whole world.” What’s to stop you?

—Besides being cofounder of HOTNIR, Blake Burleson is a Baptist minister, an author, a former faculty member in the

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Baylor University Department of Religion and Associate Dean for the Baylor College of Arts and Sciences. Our readers, and particularly readers of Sacred Seasons, have seen many of his prayers.

Endnotes

1. If you live in other areas and don’t know where to look, Seeds will try to help you find organizations near you that are helping. If you are one of those organizations, please let us know so that we can point people your way.
2. You can support this ministry by going to the Lake Shore Baptist donation site (lsbcwaco.breezechms.com/form/6d5cd1) and indicating that your gift is for Refugia.

Reclaiming Hospitality for Immigrants

A Book Review

by Kyle Childress

Tiffani Cox Harris, *Reclaiming Hospitality: A Church's Guide to Hospitality Houses for Immigrants*, Cascade Books, 2026, 148 pages.

Every once in a while, the right book comes along at the right time. Tiffani Harris's *Reclaiming Hospitality* is one of those books. She encourages the church to practice the gospel of Jesus Christ in caring for the least of these, specifically practicing hospitality toward the immigrant, at the very time we are pressed on every side by anger and fear of anyone considered an outsider. Instead of locking our doors and turning off the lights like the church in John 20, Harris challenges us to open our doors and our arms to the living Christ who comes to us through asylum seekers, migrants and refugees.

This book is immensely readable and accessible for congregations and small groups getting ready for "companioning and accompaniment" with outsiders. It lays the theological, biblical and historical groundwork for leaders and congregations in the first three chapters, including an outline for leading a congregational study. (Preachers, if you're looking for some sermon material, this is it!) There are two appendices at the end of the book. One provides reflection questions for the previous chapters, while the second is chock-full of worship materials, litanies and prayers for local church worship.

I particularly found helpful the brief reminder of the witness of the early church in the ancient world. Pagans did not necessarily consider hospitality a virtue, and the poor and impoverished often suffered, alone, on their own. Those who

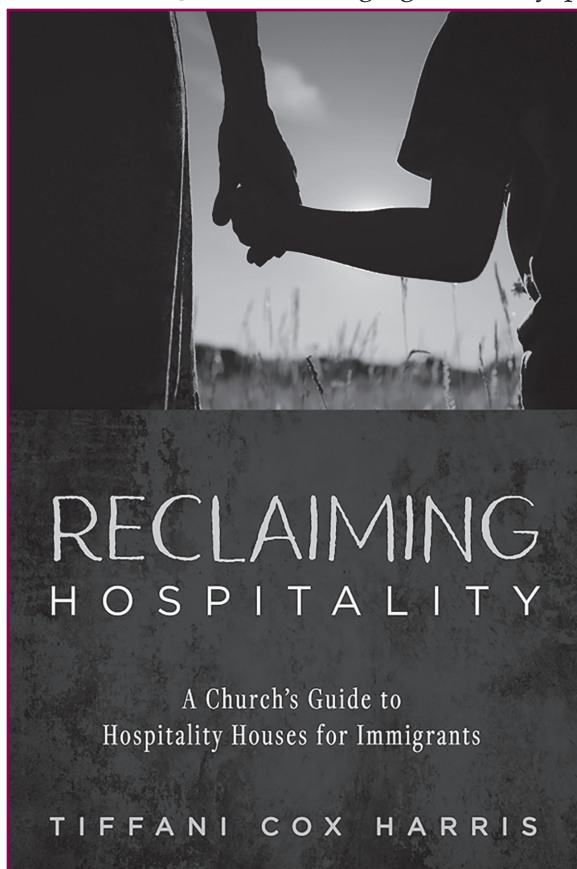
did not have family to care for them died on the streets, and often their bodies were thrown in a common pit outside the city. The early church was different. They cared for the overlooked and those left out, and suffered alongside the "least of these." Hospitality was a mark of following Jesus, and some in the pagan world

This book is vital to any church or mission group seeking to do some sort of ministry with migrants.

took notice of this unusual practice. The ancient world was harsh and often brutal with suffering as an accepted part of life. Christ-followers embraced suffering even as they embraced the poor and the marginalized.

In the remaining chapters—four through six, Harris gets down in the weeds, or as she puts it, "the everyday and quotidian" in working with her own local congregation, Dayspring Baptist Church in Waco, TX, as they discern and then get to work doing migrant ministry in their context. She details the unexpected challenges they faced, how they dealt with them, and why flexibility and humility are essential in this ministry. Throughout the book, Harris sprinkles anecdotes and stories from her church, as well as from other congregations.

For example, early in the process of discernment, the Dayspring congregation sent 20 of their members down to work with San Antonio Mennonite Church in San Antonio, TX, and its pastor, John Garland.¹ The Dayspring folks learned first-hand from the Mennonites how a small congregation with few rights worked with asylum



seekers in the middle of overwhelming need. For this group, once they returned home, the immigration crisis, though overwhelming, began to have a face and a familiar name. Harris says their imagination was opened, and they began to see themselves starting a ministry with asylum seekers and migrants.

My own congregation, Austin Heights Church in Nacogdoches, TX, has a similar story of working on the border with other congregations and learning to listen, listening a lot—to God, to migrants and to those who minister with migrants. Like Harris and the Dayspring church, we have developed a small ministry of hospitality with migrant families by providing housing and walking alongside them as they acclimate to this new place, find jobs, go to school and deal with the legal system. We learned that our congregation needed further training, so we had a day retreat with a local social worker. *Reclaiming Hospitality* has a section on trauma-informed care and ministry for just this purpose.

We also invited Harris to our church for training and preaching. This was before this book was published but, of course, she used much of what is in the book and she was invaluable to our congregation. This book is vital to any church or mission group seeking to do some sort of ministry with migrants. Unfortunately, the world we are living in, especially here in Texas—like the ancient world—is harsh, full of fear and suspicion, injustice and increasing authoritarianism. One of the ways we resist is by practicing compassion and hospitality.

-Kyle Childress recently retired after 36 years at Austin Heights Church in Nacogdoches, TX. He recently joined the Hunger News & Hope editorial team and the Seeds Liturgical Team.

Endnote

1. See an award-winning story about the San Antonio Mennonite

Church's hospitality to asylum seekers: "Participating in a Miracle," by John Garland, *Hunger News & Hope*, Vol. 24 No. 3 Winter 2024, page 1. To access the story, go to www.seedspublishers.org/news.

Unfortunately, the world we are living in, especially here in Texas—like the ancient world—is harsh, full of fear and suspicion, injustice and increasing authoritarianism. One of the ways we resist is by practicing compassion and hospitality.

Speaking up for Our Neighbors

I am frustrated with pastors who do not speak up against current immigration policies and the harsh treatment of immigrants by the United States Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) and other agencies. I am frustrated with congregations who choose quietude for fear of politics. We are living in dire times and if you attend our typical churches—even those with progressive theology—you might think it is normal to have people disappearing from our communities, families being separated, law enforcement using force against unarmed persons and government denying people's rights rather than defending them. This kind of inhumanity and lawlessness is morally repugnant. If the church doesn't raise its voice in these times, we show that we have no imagination for God's promise for a world where justice and peace finally reign.

—George Mason, founder and president of Faith Commons¹ and pastor emeritus at Wilshire Baptist Church in Dallas, TX.

Endnote

1. Faith Commons is an organization based in Dallas, TX, that works to model how to work together amid religious differences. Led by George Mason and Rabbi Nancy Kasten, the group challenges religious leaders to advocate for all neighbors who are experiencing injustice.



art by Rebecca S. Ward

Help for Our Friends in Cuba: An Update

by Carol Blythe

Editor's note: In 2025, Carol Blythe wrote an article for Hunger News & Hope titled "What You Can Do for Hungry Cubans" as part of an award-winning feature cluster on the Cuban food crisis (See Endnote 1 below). Because the humanitarian crisis in Cuba has only deepened since then, we asked her to write an update.

I live in the Washington, DC, metro area and, over the years, I have walked the halls of Congress many times advocating on various issues.

As the Advocacy Coordinator for the Alliance of Baptists, I have often asked people to contact their Representatives and Senators on various issues.

Those two activities came together in a powerful way for three days this June.

On May 30, I wrote to my fellow Baptists and shared with them the opportunity to participate in an Action Hour for Cuba on June 15. The event was organized by eight denominations (including the Alliance of Baptists) who are part of the Cuba Working Group of the Washington Interfaith Staffing Community (WISC—this is a cooperative effort of the various faith-

based advocacy offices in Washington, DC). Many people registered to participate in this justice activity.

As we gathered virtually on June 15th, we first heard background on the history of the conflict between the US and Cuba and then saw some compelling footage of humanitarian aid reaching Cubans from the Mennonite Central Committee. (This was just one example of what many denominations have done over the years.)

Next, Colleen Moore—Director of Peace With Justice, a project of the General Board of Church & Society of the United Methodist Church—taught us how to call our US Representatives and Senators. Colleen also gave us a quick briefing on our first “ask”: that members of Congress support and co-sponsor The US-Cuba Trade Act of 2026 (HR 7521 and S 136). This legislation would dismantle the main statutory pillars of the US embargo on Cuba by repealing or disabling key embargo and sanction authorities and removing Cuba-specific trade restrictions.

Why Should We End the Embargo?

Why do we support ending the embargo? The embargo (now 60 years old) has contributed to the hardship in Cuba by limiting access to resources. The embargo has not resulted in a change in the Cuban government, but it has deeply hurt everyday Cuban citizens. It is particularly immoral as the embargo includes barriers to receiving food, health care and medicines. While humanitarian aid should be exempted, we know from our own experience that financial institutions and shipping companies “over-comply” out of fear of US sanctions and refuse to offer services to our churches and denominations for our partnerships with Cuba. This makes our support to our friends in Cuba incredibly difficult.

An advocacy group visits with staff from the office of Senator Amy Klobuchar of Minnesota. From left, Rick Goodman (Alliance of Baptists), Betsy Merrit (member of the Cuba Partner Network, from PCUSA), Ava Vander Louw (Staff for Senator Klobuchar), Carol Blythe (Alliance of Baptists), Galen Fitzkee, (Legislative Associate, Immigration and Latin America, Mennonite Central Committee, US).

Photo courtesy of Carol Blythe.



The situation in Cuba has gotten much worse since the current Administration has ended fuel shipments from Venezuela, begun a blockade of Cuba and threatened tariffs to other countries who might provide fuel to Cuba. As a result, the country experiences regular blackouts of electricity that limit water access (many pumps in the water system rely on electricity), reduced

The embargo has not resulted in a change in the Cuban government, but it has deeply hurt everyday Cuban citizens.

mobility and reliable access to food. In addition, new barriers to health care and life-saving medicines have been added so that previously treatable illnesses now are becoming life-threatening.

Contacting Members of Congress

Colleen also explained that our calls would include asking members of Congress to push for diplomacy, sustained engagement and people-to-people connections rather than pursuing military hostilities and violence, which would only put more innocent people in danger and worsen an already dire situation.

Our second “ask” was for Congress to support the Cuba War Powers Resolutions (HJ Res. 153, SJ Res. 193).

Colleen then called her member of the House of Representatives to show us how easy it is to make a call after 5:00 pm and leave a message with our two “asks.” At that point, participants on the Action Hour made their own calls to Congress and reported back to the group about how their calls went. It was encouraging to see so many calls going into Congress to support our friends in Cuba. A number of calls from Alliance of Baptists members in North Carolina went to the offices of Senators Thom Tillis (R) and Tedd Budd (R). One participant said, “When they look at the call logs tomorrow, they will wonder ‘What’s happening in North Carolina and why did we get all these calls on Cuba?’”

An advocacy group visits with staff from the office of Senator Thom Tillis of North Carolina. From left: Wyatt Betler (intern in the Office of Public Witness, PCUSA), Catherine Gordon (Representative for International Issues, Office of Public Witness, PCUSA); Jai Hutzel, Laura Canfield, Kelly Hutzel, Ari Hutzel, Paula Dempsey, and Sydney Gang.
Photo courtesy of Carol Blythe.

Besides participating in the virtual Cuba Action Hour, several participants traveled to Washington, DC, to participate in visits to Congressional offices along with staff of the eight denominations that had organized the Cuba Action Days. On Tuesday and Wednesday, we divided into four different groups and began our visits to Congressional Offices.

It was a different experience to walk the halls knowing that Congress had received telephone messages the evening before supporting our meetings. We are grateful to all those who called their Representative and Senators advocating for justice for our friends in Cuba.

In meeting after meeting, we shared stories from members of our delegation who had traveled to Cuba recently. Below are some reflections on the conversations.

• *Rev. Leah Davis, pastor of Ravensworth Baptist Church in Annandale, VA, wrote: “Our group from Ravensworth was grateful to attend the lobby day. We were able to share concerns directly from our partners in Cuba, especially around the lack of food and fuel availability. It was important for me to bring my 12-year-old daughter, Lydia, so she could see advocacy in action and because in her words, ‘I love our friends in Cuba and I want to help however I can.’ We were grateful to have meaningful conversations with staffers from the offices of Rep. Don Beyer and Rep. Suhas Subramanyam, who knew of the ongoing crisis in Cuba and pledged their support for the house bills we brought to their attention.”*

Please see “Help for Cuba” on page 10.



Help for Cuba, continued from page 9

- Laura Canfield reported that one staff member got “teary” hearing stories of the dire needs in Cuba. She added, “Even if her Senator wouldn’t support our ‘ask,’ it seemed like the conversation may have helped inform the staff member (and one hopes her Senator) with a more nuanced and compassionate opinion about how the US should relate to Cuba.”

- Kelly Hutzel, who is a member of Pullen Memorial Baptist Church in Raleigh, NC, said she had been discerning how to communicate the experiences she had visiting Cuba for Wanda Hernandez Murga’s recent ordination and visiting with the members of the First Baptist Church of Matanzas. Kelly wrote, “A member of Pullen forwarded me your email looking for delegates to attend the advocacy days and I knew right away that that was my chance to speak up.” Kelly brought her two children along to talk to staff of two North Carolina House members and both Senators.

She added, “I did have it in mind that my kids would get to see advocacy and democracy in action, but I learned so much too. I was so proud of Ari (age 15) for asking each staffer where their boss stood on the situation in Cuba. It’s

important to teach the next generation to speak with their representatives. We’ll continue to do so every week until we see the sanctions lifted.”

Kelly had first visited Pullen’s sister church in Matanzas in December 2025, and then returned this year in late May. She shared her observations of the increasingly dire humanitarian situation caused by a dwindling supply of food and medicine. She shared statistics of waiting lists for thousands for surgeries. She told the story of the painful death of a beloved congregant the week she was visiting. The congregant died from breast cancer in great pain because there was no available medication.

- We also shared statements directly from our partners in Cuba, including an article by Francisco Rodes Gonzalez,² retired pastor of the First Baptist Church in Matanzas and Coordinator of the Evangelical Prison Chaplaincy, *Fraternidad de Iglesias Bautistas de Cuba* (Fraternity of Baptists in Cuba).

Staff members responded positively to these stories. After hearing about the shortage of aspirin and other over-the-counter pain relievers, one staff member told our group that he agreed and he knew his Representative would agree, too, that medicines should not be restricted to the people of Cuba.

In the Spring/Summer 2025 issue of *Hunger News & Hope*, I wrote this:

While it might seem futile to advocate with the current president and Secretary of State, we must take as our inspiration our friends and partners in Cuba who continue to actively work for justice and love—and the widow in Jesus’ parable who continued to push the “unjust judge” for justice.”

Similarly, it might seem futile to advocate with the current Congress, but we must be like the widow and keep pushing and pushing. There are too many vulnerable people who are hurt deeply by our own country’s policies for us to pause in “doing justice.” It was encouraging to visit these Congressional offices with the energy of the phone calls the night before. So let me ask you again to continue to call your members of Congress (both House and Senate) and ask them to support better US policies towards Cuba, including ending the embargo. One staff person told us directly, “I’ll be checking the call-logs to see if this is an issue on which we will focus.” Your phone calls matter!

*An advocacy group visits with staff from the office of Representative Donald S. Byer of Virginia. From left: Sylvia Campbell, Gary Campbell, Lydia Davis and Rev. Leah Davis
Photo courtesy of Carol Blythe.*



As we walked around Capitol Hill that day, we also saw lots of people with red t-shirts from “Moms Demand Action,” advocating for sensible gun laws, and we met doctors advocating for better policies for rural health.

Seeing all those people pushing for a better world reminded me that none of us do this work for justice

It was important for me to bring my 12-year-old daughter, Lydia, so she could see advocacy in action and because in her words, “I love our friends in Cuba and I want to help however I can.”

—Rev. Leah Davis

on our own. Your phone calls, your emails, your visits to your various representatives (both federal, state and local) do make a difference. So continue to raise your voices for justice. Keep asking your family, friends, fellow church members, chosen family and anyone else who is a kindred spirit to join you in advocating for a better world. Scripture calls us to

“Speak up for those who cannot speak for themselves, for the rights of all who are destitute. Speak up and judge fairly; defend the rights of the poor and needy” (Proverbs 31:8-9).

Our voices pressing the US Congress to “do justice” are important for many friends around the world and here in the US, too.

—Carol Blythe has been involved for many years in advocacy for Cuba. She is a member of the Cuba Working Group of the Washington Interfaith Staffing Community, a cooperative group of 18 denominations and faith communities based in the Washington, DC, area. A version of this article was also published by the Alliance of Baptists.

—Author’s note: See also “With Cuba in Crisis, Faith Groups Work to Influence Policy, Deliver Aid” by Aleja Hertzler-McCain, Religion News Service (Religionnews.com), June 19, 2026.

Endnote

1. See “What You Can Do for Hungry Cubans,” *Hunger News & Hope*, Vol 25 No 1, Spring/Summer 2025, page 9. You can access this issue at www.seedspublishers.org/news.

2. See “Would You Feel Anxious if Your Country Were About to Be Invaded?” by Francisco Rodes Gonzalez, Good Faith Media (Good Faith Media.org) May 29, 2026.

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Guyana: The Only Country in the World that Feeds Itself

by Michael Williamson

In an era defined by food insecurity, shipping disruptions and climate extremes, a small country on South America's northern edge is doing something no other nation has managed: feeding itself entirely from its soil and rivers. According to a recent peer-reviewed study published in *Nature Food*, Guyana—a nation of fewer than 800,000 people—tops the world in self-sufficiency across all essential food groups.

Researchers led by Jonas Stehl of the University of Göttingen analyzed 186 nations, comparing national food production against nutritional benchmarks known as the Livewell Plate, designed by the World Wide Fund for Nature (WWF) to meet both health needs and environmental limits. Their findings? Most countries overproduce meat and dairy but fall short on legumes, whole grains or fish. Only Guyana met its domestic demand for all seven food pillars—fruits, vegetables, dairy, fish, meat, staple starches and plant-based proteins.

The country's quiet success isn't an accident. Since the 1960s, Guyana has transformed its coastal wetlands into rice paddies and sugar plantations, utilizing Dutch-style dikes and canals. Inland, smallholder farmers practice resilient intercropping—planting cassava alongside red beans to nourish both the soil and

their household tables. Along the coast, nutrient-rich fisheries in the Guyana Current provide a local source of protein. Altogether, this layered system delivers diversity, nutrition and redundancy across landscapes as varied as savannas, swamps and rainforests.

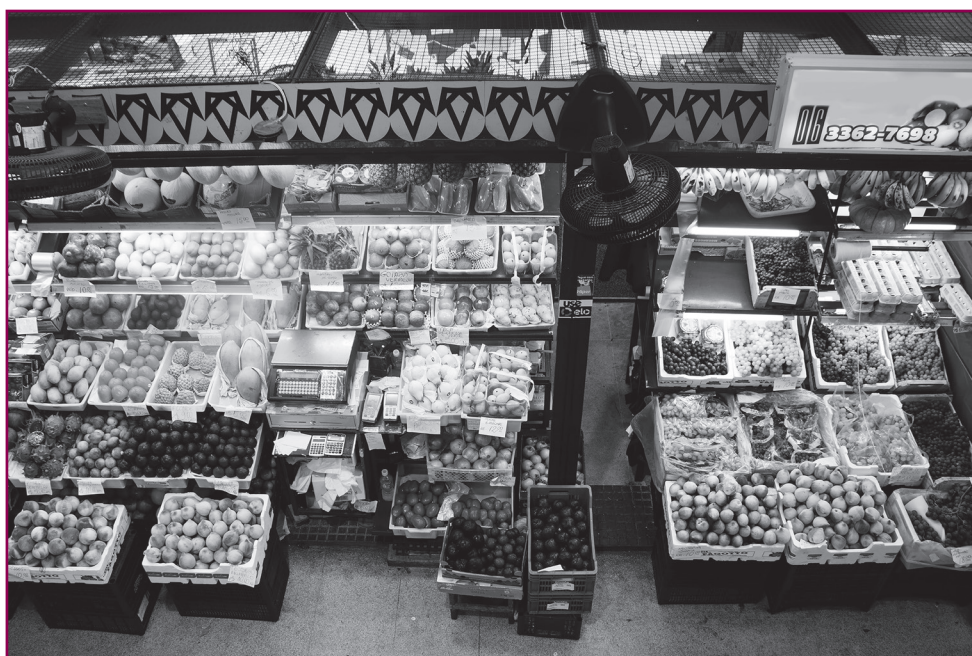
Guyana's food miracle comes just as its economy is being redefined by oil. Since 2015, ExxonMobil-led discoveries off the coast have made Guyana the fastest-growing economy in the world. Per capita Gross Domestic Product (GDP) is projected to eclipse Japan's by the early 2030s. That boom, however, raises serious questions about sustainability.

Development economists at the University of Sussex warn of a looming "Dutch disease," where petrodollars distort labor markets, draw workers away from agriculture, and make food imports cheaper than local crops, at least on paper. The fear is real: Venezuela's agricultural collapse, following its oil glut, serves as a cautionary tale.

Climate change adds more urgency. A rise in sea level poses a threat to the dikes that protect Guyana's reclaimed farmland. Erratic rainfall—driven by El Niño cycles—has already prompted the government to distribute drought-resistant rice developed in partnership with the International Rice Research Institute.

Without adaptation, the very strengths that made Guyana self-reliant could become liabilities.

Still, the contrast with Europe is telling. In Mediterranean nations like Greece and Spain, once-productive farmlands are being scorched by record wildfires. These countries import large portions of their animal feed from global markets—feed made less reliable and more ex-



A food market shows a wide variety of produce. Photo courtesy of Shutterstock/Dado Photos.

pensive by shocks like Russia's invasion of Ukraine. Even France, long celebrated for its agriculture, falls short in vegetables and pulses, according to the *Nature Food* study.

Economists often defend global food trade as a means to optimize resource allocation. They argue that it doesn't make sense for desert countries to grow wheat. But trade also introduces fragility. In 2007 and 2008, a spike in commodity prices led major rice ex-

Most countries overproduce meat and dairy but fall short on legumes, whole grains or fish. Only Guyana met its domestic demand for all seven food pillars—fruits, vegetables, dairy, fish, meat, staple starches and plant-based proteins.

porters, such as Vietnam, to impose bans, causing panic across West Africa. In 2023, India's export restrictions on non-basmati rice triggered similar ripple effects.

According to Columbia University's Dr. Jessica Fanzo, nations that rely heavily on imports—and produce only two or three major food groups—are particularly vulnerable to disruptions. Her research indicates that in certain parts of the Sahel¹, children consumed 20 percent fewer nutrient-rich foods following the global fertilizer shortage of 2022. In contrast, Guyana's food exports don't jeopardize domestic needs. It ships sugar and rice but keeps enough for its population. That kind of resilience is rare.

Just look at the Caribbean. Trinidad and Tobago², a Caribbean country, imports more than 80 percent of its calories. When pandemic-era shipping routes collapsed, it had to charter emergency grain deliveries. Jamaica's hotels serve lettuce flown in from California. In response, the Caribbean Food and Nutrition Institute now urges governments to replicate Guyana's model: invest in smallholder staples, not just luxury exports.

So what can larger, wealthier nations learn?

Plenty. According to a modeling study by the University of Leeds, for the UK to meet the Livewell Plate's nutritional targets from domestic agriculture, it would need to quadruple its pulse acreage and reduce dairy herds by a third. Politically, that's tough. But environmentally and nutritionally, it would reduce methane emissions and cut dependency on imported fertilizer.

In Germany—Stehl's home country—the study revealed that only 35 percent of the vegetables recommended by national dietary guidelines are grown

domestically. The vulnerability became clear when Ukrainian trucks stopped rolling and supermarket shelves emptied of fresh produce.

Meanwhile, Guyana's government isn't standing still. Agriculture Minister Zulfikar Mustapha recently unveiled a Climate-Smart Agriculture Plan, focusing on solar-powered cold storage, cassava flour production, and the expansion of inland aquaculture. "Oil revenue must not drown food," he told *Nature*. But keeping young agronomists from fleeing to higher-paying offshore jobs remains a challenge. In response, the University of Guyana now offers rural service stipends for students who commit to agricultural careers.

So far, the plan is holding. On the coast, markets still hum with the sales of callaloo, bora beans, and fresh tilapia. In the interior, Amerindian villages continue to roast cassava bread over open fires. And in the capital, chefs proudly serve dishes entirely grown within the nation's borders—something few countries on Earth can claim.

As global supply chains strain under the weight of war, climate shocks and political unrest, Guyana's quiet food sovereignty looks more like a superpower than a curiosity.

The country's unique combination of Dutch engineering, Indigenous foodways, biodiversity and local know-how has created something scarce: full-spectrum food self-reliance.

Whether that legacy survives the tidal wave of oil wealth—and the changes that follow—will test not just Guyana's agricultural systems, but the global conversation around food, resilience and independence.

Please see "Guyana" on page 14.



Map by Connormah

Guyana, *continued from page 13*

In a hungry world, Guyana is not just feeding itself. It is feeding others. And it is offering a blueprint on how to thrive.

—Michael Williamson is a member of the Hunger News & Hope editorial team and is a frequent contributor. He is a former Seeds intern and lives in Clinton, MS, with his wife Amy (also a former Seeds intern) and their daughter Rosemary.

Endnotes

1. The Sahel is a biogeographical region in Africa between the Sahara Desert and the more humid regions to the south, with a semi-arid climate. It stretches all the way across Africa from the Atlantic Ocean to the Red Sea.
2. The Republic of Trinidad and Tobago is the southernmost archipelagic (that is, made up of scattered islands) country in the Caribbean.

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The Other Side of the Door

A Prayer for Courage

by Katie Cook

Editor's note: Taproot is a department that dates back more than 40 years to the beginnings of Seeds as a magazine. Because of today's increased challenges for anybody who cares for marginalized people, we decided to bring Taproot back as a regular feature of Hunger News & Hope. In these times, we need the stories of people doing remarkable things, but we also need to be reminded of the spiritual center which is the mandate and inspiration for all of our works of mercy.

What if you expect me to feed 5,000 people—not counting women and children—with somebody's lunch?

"God? Is that you?" I know you're there, on the other side of that door. I know I could open it and let you in, but I'm not quite ready. Sometimes I need to lock everyone out of my life—including you. I often pass people in need on the street without stopping, because I conveniently forget that it is you in those smelly clothes, sleeping on the grate to keep warm.

But sometimes you're not even in disguise, and I still pass you without stopping. It's frightening, the thought of letting you into my little orbit—disguised or not.

I have managed to squeeze the mystery of my faith into formulas I feel comfortable with. I have watered it down so that it is easier to swallow. I have retreated into a safe corner of intellectual debate. I have moved my spiritual self out of my heart and into my brain. I have decorated my worship areas; I have them looking just right, and I don't want anybody messing with them.

I dare not let you in. Who knows what whirlwinds and raging fires you might unleash? Who knows on what horrific quest your still, small voice might send me? How do I dare to listen to the voice in the Temple? How do I dare to listen to the voice that calls me by name in the night? What if you tell me to

leave my comfort zone? What if you expect me to feed 5,000 people—not counting women and children—with somebody's lunch? What if you ask me to love my enemies? *What if you ask me to be real?*

I feel much safer putting a peephole in that door and peeking out at you from time to time.

I would love to just fling open the door, to say to the voice in the Temple, "Hey! Over here! I'll go!" I'm standing just inside the door, with the key in my hand, but I am frightened.

"God," I say, taking a deep breath, "Please, give me the courage to open the door."

—This prayer was inspired by the art below, by Emily Sadler, then a senior at Midway High School in Woodway, TX. The prayer and the art were printed in the 2004 Hunger Emphasis packet, "Practicing Hospitality."





Church Organizations Rally to Help Victims of Venezuelan Earthquakes

On June 24, two large earthquakes of Magnitude 7.2 and 7.5 hit northwestern Venezuela, causing widespread damage across the country. The capital city of Caracas was profoundly affected, as was the state of La Guira, where 80 percent of the buildings collapsed.

At this writing, almost 3,900 people have been killed, almost 1,700 injured, and tens of thousands are still reported missing. The United States Geological Survey (USGS) predicted that the death toll could easily reach 10,000 before the initial cleanup and rescue efforts are over. The USGS also warned that the “strike-slip” nature of the quakes (involving two tectonic plates) would result in a series of significant landslides.

Another concern for displaced people has been the risk of disease because of limited access to clean water and disrupted medical care.

Rights for Venezuelan people have already been stretched to breaking point from years of economic crisis, political unrest and outright conflict.

A remarkable number of religious groups has immediately gone to work to respond to the immediate needs of the Venezuelan people. In addition to large charities like Catholic Relief Services (which is partnering with Caritas Venezuela), local churches and religious coalitions are doing what they can to respond to the need.

World Vision is partnering with the World Food Programme and the US-based National Latino Evangelical Coalition, as well as the Latino Evangelical Alliance. Samaritan’s Purse opened an emergency hospital and is distributing critical relief supplies and shelter materials. Members of Catholic parishes are opening their homes to displaced families. Clergy of a wide variety of faith groups are leading efforts to inspect buildings, provide shelter and basic supplies, and search for missing people.

Several of the groups said they were preparing to provide psychological aid as well as spiritual comfort and prayer. For now, volunteers are seeking to respond with empathy and give what help they can.

Despite all this effort, the way forward may still be rough.

So many crises occur all over the world with increasing frequency that people and leaders are often distracted by the next disaster and forget the last one long before recovery is complete. Religious leaders told the Religion News Service that they are worried that international attention will not be sustained long enough for medium and long-term recovery. —Sources: United States Geological Survey; Aleja Hertzler-McCain, “Reeling from Venezuela’s earthquakes, churches rush to inspect buildings, distribute supplies,” Religion News Service; National Catholic Reporter; Al Jazeera.



Map by Addicted04.

Editor's note: If you would like to provide assistance for this and other efforts, the best first thing to do would be to find out if your denomination is responding to this crisis. The chances are that it is, and you can contribute funds through that program. Otherwise, you can send support for the organizations mentioned above. Bear in mind that groups like Church World Service, CARE, Doctors without Borders, World Food Programme and Word Central Kitchens send help to various places (like Gaza, Yemen, Congo and Sudan) where need is high. This list is not exhaustive. We would encourage you to research them and others, pick the one you feel is best for your support and set up a system in which you can contribute consistently over time to keep these organizations in operation—all the time, and not just when a crisis makes the nightly news.

Notre Dame Study Shows that Climate Change Increases Stunting in Children

One of the most woeful truths throughout human history is that low-income—and even middle-income—people suffer the most from economic crises, pandemics, armed conflict and climate change. Perhaps especially climate change. Now, a recent study from the University of Notre Dame has linked global climate change to increased incidents of stunting in children.

According to the leading global hunger organizations, stunting is defined as a condition that reflects shortness-for-age. It is an indicator of chronic malnutrition and is calculated by comparing the height-for-age of a child with a reference population of well-nourished and healthy children.

Arun Agrawal, director of Notre Dame's Just Transformations to Sustainability Initiative, is one of the study's co-authors. He is also heavily involved with the global *Laudato Si'* environmental movement inspired by the late Pope Francis. The movement took its name from a 2015 encyclical issued by Pope Francis, calling for better care of what he called "our common home." A number of Catholic (and non-Catholic) groups have embraced these teachings as they seek to make a better planet, particularly for the most vulnerable populations.

For years, reports from organizations like the Food and Agriculture Organisation and the World Food Programme have told us that factors like poor diets, repeated infections, inadequate sanitation, genetics,

maternal diet and education, and lack of access to healthcare all contribute to stunting. Now there is direct evidence that hotter temperatures themselves are also a factor.

We already knew that one of the results of climate change is a drastic increase in the number of droughts around the world (but especially in the Sahel of Africa). This affects crops and therefore food availability. But the new Notre Dame study, "Climate Change, Inequality and Childhood Stunting in African Countries," has concluded that the hotter temperatures alone can also place stress on unborn children.

Agrawal told Brian Rowe of *National Catholic Reporter* and the sister publication *EarthBeat* that almost 7 million children are being affected by these conditions. "It's a significant proportion of the population being affected, and it's a significant effect on their life chances after they're born," he told *EarthBeat*. Agrawal said that young children are the "very first" to suffer the consequences of climate change.

The authors of the study called specifically on members of the Catholic community to provide greater attention and investment in sanitation, maternal education and healthcare access in developing countries, citing that these measures could improve child health and reduce stunting and its effects. Agrawal called especially on the network of Catholic hospitals, care facilities and other rights to work toward mitigating these devastating effects on children.

The doctrine known as Catholic Social Teaching dates back to an encyclical issued by Pope Leo XIII in 1891. It stresses God's preferential option for the poor and vulnerable and underlines the challenge from the study's authors. But almost every faith tradition in the world calls for a very similar care for poor and vulnerable people—which, of course, means all people of faith should join this response with the same attention and investment in the measures the authors called for.

—Sources: Brian Rowe, "Notre Dame Study Links Climate Change to Stunted Child Growth in Africa," *National Catholic Reporter*, June 2026; Nabin Pradhan, Elizabeth Ludwig-Borycz and Arun Agrawal, "Climate Change, Inequality and Childhood Stunting in African Countries," *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences (pnas.org)*, June 2026; *Seeds Hunger Glossary* (www.seedspublishers.org/hunger-glossary).

Newsfront is continued on page 18.

New Book Relates Personal Account from Inside the Destruction of USAID

Nicholas Enrich worked at the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) under four US presidents. He served as the Bureau of Global Health's director of policy, programs and planning until January 2025, when he was designated as USAID's acting assistant administrator for global health. It was his dream come true.

However, after US President Donald Trump's second inauguration, USAID became the first target of Elon Musk's newly created Department of Government Efficiency (DOGE). For months Enrich witnessed the demolition of USAID, including the devastation, not just to the agency, but to the millions of people around the world who were suddenly being thrown into chaos. Then he began to release what he called whistleblowing memos, exposing illegal actions on the part of DOGE.

On March 2, 2025, he was abruptly placed on administrative leave because, he says, of his acts in exposing the vicious manner in which the Trump administration handled the dismantling of the agency. Now he has written an insider's account of that process. *Into the Wood Chipper: A Whistleblower's Account of How the Trump Administration Shredded USAID* is a blistering personal account of what he experienced in that time.

Enrich's memos did have some effect. According to Simon & Schuster, publishers of the book, in the days following the release of the memos, hundreds of canceled aid projects were revived, and those documents were cited in a Supreme Court case on the legality of USAID's dissolution. The publisher went on to say, "While his memos were too late to save USAID, Enrich was one of the first government officials to publicly blow the whistle on DOGE's reckless destruction, sounding an early alarm bell for other federal agencies that would soon find themselves in the crosshairs."

In a briefing about the book with Sara Jerving at Devex newswire, Enrich talked about what he called "the vindictive political appointees who ran roughshod over the agency" and about the "millions of deaths" that ensued.

Enrich said that chaos took over when the operations were shut down with little notice. Staff members were systematically forced to abruptly stop lifesaving projects in spite of events like Ebola outbreaks.

Jerving also reports a story that Enrich told of frustration that ensued among the new, political appointees. As the rainy season began in some parts of the world, some of them wanted to restart malaria programs, but they suddenly realized that all of the malaria experts had been put on administrative leave.

"It was at that point that the chief of staff of the agency...smacked the table, and said, 'you see, this is why you might be able to do this at Twitter, but it's not going to work here.' And I think that was an example of how frustrated they became at what they had broken," Enrich said at the briefing.

—Sources: Devex newswire, Simon & Schuster, *New York Times*.

Editor's note: Recent reports from Devex describe the absorption of the remnants of USAID into the US State Department, describing a new model in which the department awards fewer, larger grants to a short, handpicked list of agencies—some of which, it has to be admitted, are well-

Please see "USAID" on page 19.

Right: The USAID logo was on every box of supplies delivered around the world from that agency including the words "from the American people" or "a gift from America."



I Want to Help, but I Don't Know Where to Start

We are all plugged into a 24-hour news cycle. Almost every day brings news of a hurricane, a flood, a tornado, an earthquake, or a wildfire—not to mention the devastation of armed conflict. On top of that, we hear that some country no longer has medical support for the epidemic that is raging through its population and that people in the US have lost SNAP benefits

If you're reading this publication, then you probably care deeply about the people you share this globe with. And you want some way to help.

The first thing we're recommending seems contrary to what we've been taught about Christian ministry. We're told not to just throw money at problems. Our training and instinct tell us to go to the place where the disaster is, come face to face with the people and help physically. And it is true that we should never avoid personal contact with people in need. (In fact, we believe that this kind of contact is vital to our souls.)

However, this is not always feasible, and it sometimes causes problems. Sometimes we get in the way. Sometimes—probably most of the time, especially in cases of events that happen a long way away—we need to financially support people who are already in the affected area, and who know what they are doing.

The second thing is this. It isn't helpful to send old clothes and household items to disaster or conflict areas. Displaced people do need these things, but they may not be able to use what you send.

Dealing with this kind of donation often becomes a burden for relief agencies. We hear reports of relief workers—such as in Florida, after a hurricane—being forced to take truckloads of donated clothing to the trash dump. These same agencies can use monetary donations to purchase the needed items—or, better yet, distribute them to families in need to purchase their own.

This not only lends dignity to the families in need, but—and most of us don't think about this—it will also help bolster the local economy.

There are organizations in your community that have thrift stores. Donate your clothing and household items that are in good condition to them. They use the revenue for women's shelters, shelters for unhoused people, food pantries and emergency assistance pro-

grams. They also welcome you as shoppers, because this also provides revenue for their ministries. Also, it would be helpful if you would go through your donations carefully and make sure you are not giving them junk. This puts an additional burden on them.

So, to help injured and displaced people in Venezuela, Gaza, Sudan or Lebanon, or the people in a nearby state where a flood or tornado has hit, your best gift is a monetary one. And some agencies are more prepared to help than others. Some already have personnel in the area and can literally wire funds to them in minutes. Some partner with indigenous organizations and thus have fewer overhead expenses, so you know your donation is going to help the affected people.

We have named a handful of these below the article about Venezuela on page 17, but there are many more well known and trusted agencies who could use your donations to make life better for people in dire situations. If you would like help in finding the agency that works in the areas you are most concerned about, email seedseditor1@gmail.com, and we'll find some suggestions for you.

-lkc

USAID,

continued from page 18

known and respected. However, this model leaves much of the humanitarian aid community without funding, shaking their heads in confusion and consternation. Another Devex report tell us that the decision makers have decided to award large grants to three UN agencies: the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, UNICEF and the World Food Programme. The department seems to be supporting "hyper-prioritization," meaning that it is focusing on the communities facing the most extreme need. The UN itself has focused on the 87 million people it claims have the most severe needs.

This editor agrees that emergency needs must be met first, but worries that this model, which seems to leave out the "development" in "relief and development," will cripple decades-long efforts toward true development and sustainability for all nations.

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Let the rain come
and wash away the ancient
grudges, the bitter hatreds
held and nurtured over
generations. Let the rain
wash away the memory of
the hurt, the neglect. Then
let the sun come out and fill
the sky with rainbows. Let
the warmth of the sun heal
us wherever we are broken.
Let it burn away the fog so
that we can see each other
clearly. So that we can see beyond labels, beyond accents, gender or
skin color. Let the warmth and brightness of the sun melt our self-
ishness, so that we can share the joys and feel the sorrows of our
neighbors. And let the light of the sun be so strong that we will see
all people as our neighbors. Let the earth, nourished by rain, bring
forth flowers to surround us with beauty. And let the mountains
teach our hearts to reach upward to heaven.

—Rabbi Harold Kushner



art by Rebecca S. Ward

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Statement of Purpose

Seeds of Hope is a private, independent group of believers responding to a common burden for the poor and hungry people in God's world, and acting on the strong belief that biblical mandates to feed the poor were not intended to be optional. The group seeks out people of faith who feel called to care for poor and vulnerable people; and to affirm, enable and empower a variety of responses to the problems of poverty.

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