

Ending hunger

by [Leon Howell](#) in the [November 17, 1999](#) issue

*Grace at the Table*, by David Beckmann and Art Simon

Spencer Bachus, "a diehard Republican from Alabama's most diehard Republican district," in the words of the *Washington Post*, has been spearheading an effort in the U.S. House of Representatives to offer debt relief to more than 40 impoverished nations. In Mozambique, for example, where a fourth of all children die before their fifth birthday, government expenditures for debt repayment are four times more than for public health.

Bachus has urged his colleagues to approve \$970 million as the U.S. portion of a growing official response to the grass-roots Jubilee 2000 debt relief effort. The proposed legislation would mandate that countries instead use their debt-repayment funds for health and education.

Bachus, a strong fiscal conservative, has never visited a developing country and has only recently learned about the international debt crisis. A family friend who belongs to Bread for the World (BFW), the Christian citizens movement to combat hunger, asked him to look into the issue. Later, four BFW members from his Birmingham district flew to Washington to discuss the subject with him. An active Southern Baptist, Bachus viewed debt relief as an issue with religious dimensions. He turned into an unexpected crusader. Legislation offering serious debt relief has a fighting chance to emerge from this Congress, and Bachus is a key player.

Each year BFW, based in the nation's capital with 44,000 members across the country, takes on a legislative target aimed at helping poor and hungry people. Each year it makes converts of legislators in both political parties. This year it helped shape the U.S. legislative expression of Jubilee 2000. Last year its key victory was legislation that redirected significant U.S. aid in Africa toward rural development. The year before BFW persuaded Congress to make food stamps available to 270,000 young, disabled and elderly immigrants who, for no good reason, were among almost 1 million legal immigrants who lost food stamps as a result of the dramatic '96 changes in the welfare laws. In '92 and '93 it helped gain an almost \$2 billion

increase in funds for Head Start, the Job Corps and the remarkably effective WIC Special Supplemental Feeding Program for Women, Infants and Children.

Arthur Simon, who founded BFW, and David Beckmann, who succeeded him as president, have written this book to mark the organization's 25th anniversary. Both ordained Lutheran pastors, they have worked with the poor-Simon in a parish in Manhattan's Lower East Side and Beckmann in Bangladesh before working on poverty issues for the World Bank for 15 years.

Using a question-and-answer format, Simon and Beckmann have produced a crisp, honest and hopeful book. It challenges people of faith to act on the biblical imperatives to feed the hungry and do justice for the poor. In a world where one in five people-1.3 billion-lives on less than a dollar a day, "Has there been progress in reducing world hunger?" the book asks. Part of the answer is that the "proportion of people going hungry in developing countries has fallen sharply from more than one in three in 1970 to one in five in the mid-1990s."

But, barring dramatic action, the actual number of hungry people will continue to increase as population grows. "Is there enough food to feed the world?" The answer is an emphatic yes. "The problem, right now, is primarily one of distribution. Families need enough money to purchase food or they will go hungry."

The authors commend those who practice charity, who staff food pantries, who cook for the hungry. But they argue that more must be done. The world possesses the food, the wealth and the know-how to end hunger. It lacks the will. "The key for each of us is to help change the politics of hunger. That in a nutshell is the message of this book." Are we likely to succeed? "If we are faithful, if we lend our lives to a cause that is near to the heart of God, we can leave the matter of success to God."