

**Why Are We Asking?**  
**EAD 2013**  
**Rev. Michael E. Livingston**

Rebecka and Jourie Ortiz live in Woonsocket, RI with their two small children. They've been SNAP recipients since October of 2011 and get \$518 on the first day of every month deposited electronically on their (Electronic Benefit Transfer) EBT card. By the end of the month when the benefits are exhausted, Rebecka makes a dish they name for the kids "rice-a-roni" but she and Jourie call it what it really is, "rice-a whatever." Laid off from low-paying jobs in 2010, they finally got part-time jobs in 2012 making 8 and 9 dollars an hour. For the past three years it's been buy milk nearby for \$3.80 *or* for \$3.10 across town? Pay the \$600 to the landlord *or* \$110 for their cellphones and some part of the \$840 they owed the electric company? Their combined monthly income is \$1,700 a month. When their SNAP money runs out and their bank account is empty they make the circuit of Woonsocket's church food pantries. "Saint Agatha's on Mondays. All Saints' on Tuesdays. Saint Charles's on Thursdays..." It opens at 10:00am but the lines starts to grow at 6:00am.

Fully one-third of the people of Woonsocket, RI are SNAP recipients, what used to be called food stamps—just like Rebecka and Jourie. This means that businesses in this hard hit town also depend on the *government-funded-through-the-Farm-Bill SNAP program*. At one local store half of the customers are white, a quarter Hispanic, 15 percent African American, plus a dozen immigrant populations drawn to Woonsocket by the promise of cheap housing. Friends, this is equal opportunity poverty. The Farm Bill is the biggest anti-hunger program in country. Congress should enact a farm bill this year **that alleviates hunger and malnutrition...**

Haylar Ayako's seven grandchildren were dying of starvation and malnutrition in his village in Ethiopia. Drought, war, and U.S. agricultural policies, and international monetary injustice were slowly killing them in Ethiopia. The Farm Bill also provided for aid through the Food for Peace program. One day a bag of green peas with a USAID stamp on them reached Ayako. The bag started in North Dakota and traveled 12,000 miles by rail, ship, and truck with warehouse stops in Lake Charles, LA, Djibouti, on the Gulf of Aden that serves as a port for food aid,

and Nazareth, two hours south of Addis Ababa before finally reaching his village of Shala-Luka.

The trip took more than six months. U.S. farming giants, trucking and shipping companies all made millions of dollars from this gift of food. But his grandchildren were dead when the food arrived. Haylar Ayako is a farmer. He could have been sent money by wire to grow the food his family actually eats to keep them alive.

Food policies in Canada and the European Union buy food near where it is used. Our program “serves domestic interests more than the world’s needy” (Gawain Kripke, senior policy adviser at Oxfam America). The Government Accountability Office says that the costs of administration, shipping, and logistics eat up one-half to two-thirds of the budget of the Food for Peace Program. Getting the aid from “vendor to village” from the U.S. farm to the family in need overseas averages four to six months.

What we have, in Walter Berry’s words, is an “absentee

economy...without limit in its greed, without mercy in its exploitation of land and people.” The farm bill is on life support, it expired last September and programs like the experimental Local and Regional Procurement Program need expansion not elimination. Congress should enact a Farm bill that **reforms international food aid by purchasing food in the areas where it is consumed** if we have any real hope of increasing global food security.

Listen to seventeen-year-old Anna Alexandre talk about her experience in the Youth Farmer Training Program of Inter-Faith Food Shuttle Program in Raleigh, NC. ... *I have found a community that I actually belong in. I have learned an incredible wealth of knowledge about nourishing my body, [and] the earth... There are things YFTP has taught me ... I would have never imagined myself doing. I never thought I would call myself a food rights activist ... I ... never thought I would call myself a farmer, but I can now, and I do so proudly! And YFTP is just the start! It ... will continue to ignite my devotion to working for a beautiful and just world.”*

Inter-Faith Food Shuttle (IFFS) was awarded a Beginning Farmer and Rancher Development Program Grant, funded by a grant from the Farm Bill. The funding expires in 2014. It's only a small part of creative new areas that are beginning to flourish but are now threatened by eroding funding for the expired bill. Programs supporting women, people of color, community food banks all stand to benefit from congress enacting a bill that supports **vibrant farms and strong communities.**

If you are able, stand up...if you are you a farmer. Stand up if you are from a farming family...involved in soil or water conservation? Part of a community food program? Do you have a vegetable or fruit garden in your urban or suburban home? Does your congregation have a food pantry? Does your church or parish sponsor a Meals on Wheels program for seniors or shut-ins? I'll get the rest of you now—Do you shop in a grocery store? Do you eat food in the USA? This is about you too. The Farm Bill affects all of us, every one of us--and the God created earth that is our home.

Does anybody really believe anymore that "The earth is the

Lord's and all that is in it, the world, and those who live in it;" (Psalm 24:1) "...soil loss, soil degradation, chemical pollution, the loss of genetic and specific diversity, the extinction or threatened extinction of species, the depletion of aquifers, stream degradation, the loss of wilderness, strip mining..." Walter Berry again, "How can modern Christianity have so solemnly folded its hands while so much of the work of God was and is being destroyed?" Congress should enact a farm bill **that protects God's creation.**

Two and a half years in DC—today (almost exactly) and you give me more than 2 minutes at a press conference to say something—fair warning—you've created a monster...All the pent up frustrations of a person of faith, one among many in the faith advocacy community in DC—and a preacher no less—required to bow down to representatives serving in offices of the venerable institutions that define this city (pretend we're in DC) and embody the history of our nation: the Senate and House chambers and of course the White House. The faith community is asked to influence the process of governing. So we go to these meetings respectfully, with smiles and warmth, and we

make our case, we aim to please, we offer support, information, and a perspective they don't often hear. At our best we tell stories of our people, God's people that we trust will move them to act for justice, out of compassion and love. But...

- 30 thousand deaths, school children shot down on sidewalks outside their homes and in the sanctuary of an elementary school, and no serious congressional action on background checks, registration, and assault weapons, multi-shot clips. We get first posturing and finally retreat by Democrats even, under the withering attack of the gun lobby and the millions of dollars in campaign money it wields to get its way.
- 11 million hard working people in this country, immigrants (not illegal aliens, not even undocumented, everybody has some documents and not others)—this has been their country for years, and they deserve a roadmap to citizenship that respects family unity and protects the rights of workers.
- Public schools abandoned, teachers treated like lab specimens poked and prodded, evaluated as if they and not

the crushing poverty of the children they teach were not the problem we refuse to face in "school reform..."

- Revolving cliffs: fiscal, sequestration, debt ceiling, lame ducks--all of them created by manufactured fear and used like a screw driver to tighten the nuts and bolts of ignorance and insecurity in a wall built to keep every "other" out.
- Thank God the President has forcefully called for raising the minimum wage and there is a bill in congress to do just that. But there are growing millions of hard-working people making minimum wage or below and unable to feed themselves and their families.

These conditions are sinful and a stain on our nation and God is not pleased with us. I wish I had King's voice, silenced 45 years ago, or J. Herbert's for that matter so you could get the full weight of what I just said. **These conditions are sinful and a stain on our nation and God is not pleased with us.**

If you are fortunate you were not watching the Louisville/Duke game in the NCAA basketball tournament that will end Monday night in the annual "March Madness" ritual that means nothing set next to the political machinations of congress



that shape the fortunes of every person on the planet. I was watching, take that as confession, when Kevin Neal jumped to contest the shot of an opponent and landed awkwardly and with such impact that he broke his leg in two places, a compound fracture. Only the reaction of his teammates and even the opposing players, coaches, and spectators were visible as the action was filmed and shown in real time. His teammates were writhing on the floor, grief stricken at what they had seen.

The sequence was replayed from a different angle and it was, arguably, the single most gruesome sight ever filmed of a sporting event. I promise you will not see this film because it will never be shown again. In a close-up of the player in the minutes after he fell, clearly in agony, we can't hear him, but we can read his lips. Over and over again, Kevin says, "Win the game, win the game, win the game." The mere basketball game is at stake, victory for his team, nothing else. He has suffered a horrific accident and is in excruciating pain and what he thinks and says is, "win the game."

We call it an "Ask," but why are we asking? Every year, one year after the next we ask, we beg our government, our elected officials to be decent, to do the right thing, to protect the

most vulnerable people among in the most modest ways. Every year, year after year after year we go, people of faith, non-profits of all kinds and for all kinds of issues pleading for justice and fairness, grace and mercy for the people of God. Even when we win we don't get much, not nearly enough to offset the horrors of capitalism gone wild, gone global, feeding the insatiable hunger of corporations who are not "the people" the constitution envisions.

What we ought to be doing is turning over the tables in the sacred space of our national governmental cathedrals—those places so profoundly corrupted by legal yet profoundly unethical money-changing and special interests, some of them of a most pernicious nature. We should be shouting with righteous indignation: *God loves Rebecka and Jourie and their two children, God loves Haylar Ayako and loves still his seven dead grandchildren, God loves every person on earth created in God's very own image.*

We have a sacred duty on Monday and when we return to our homes whether or not you go on visits. Remember who you are and for whom you speak...You speak for God and for God's own people. Thus says the Lord!

When you go in those congressional offices Monday, tell that *legislative assistant* you talk to the faith version of what that injured player, Kevin Neal kept saying: "For heaven's sake, save the soul of our nation, win the game, conserve the beauty and the richness of the earth, win the game, care for the many and the one, win the game, win the game." Tell them you're speaking for God's people at home and abroad, in this nation and every nation.

Tell them to pass a farm bill *this year* that alleviates hunger and malnutrition, supports vibrant farms and healthy communities, and protects God's creation. Amen.