

EDITORIAL: Offer letters to reduce global poverty

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Can you afford to invest \$1.17 and a few minutes to reduce global poverty? That's the cost of three first-class stamps and the amount of time you'll need to write your senators and congressional representative, urging them to direct an additional 1 percent of the federal budget to defeating global poverty, hunger and AIDS.

This is a goal already claimed—but not yet funded—by our government. The United States has joined 188 other countries in agreeing to the Millennium Development Goals, a set of eight objectives for overcoming poverty, hunger, disease, illiteracy, environmental damage and discrimination against women. The cornerstone of the project is a worthy target—cutting poverty in half by 2015. President Bush has signed on to this grand plan. Last year, he pledged to double all foreign assistance in order to ensure progress.



Two obstacles stand between the president's intention and reality. First is congressional approval; the House and Senate have to ratify a budget that includes such funding. Second is allocation of resources. Less than half of all U.S. foreign aid goes to poverty-focused development assistance, or programs that actually eliminate poverty. For example, last year, the United States spent \$19.5 billion on foreign aid, but only \$9.6 billion (49.2 percent) focused on poverty reduction and helping countries provide health care, schools, clean water, sanitation and roads—the kind of infrastructure necessary to help people climb up out of the pit of poverty.

Unfortunately, the need is overwhelming: Worldwide, more than 850 million people suffer from hunger. Six million children die from hunger-related causes each year. That's almost 16,500 children per day, 685 per hour. They're among the 50,000 people who die daily from such poverty- and hunger-related diseases as AIDS, tuberculosis, malaria, malnutrition and dysentery.

The enormity of the problem can lead well-meaning people to despair. But Bread for the World, the multi-faith grassroots hunger-fighting lobby, has urged Christians to stand together to make a difference on behalf of the world's poor. Bread for the World has called for an Offering of Letters—a letter-writing campaign urging Congress to increase the United States' poverty-focused development assistance by \$5 billion in the 2007 budget. That would elevate hunger-fighting funding from about \$10.6 billion this year to \$15.6 billion next year. It's still about \$18 billion below the level

needed to stay on pace to cut poverty in half by 2015, but it's a doable goal.

Some may say an additional \$5 billion for poverty relief is excessive. But the new figure still is much less than 1 percent of the government's \$2.5 trillion budget.

Some may say international aid is a waste, that it props up corrupt governments. But most poverty-focused assistance programs work with responsible, democratically elected governments, local citizens, or U.S. and local nongovernmental relief organizations.

Some may say this is none of our business, that poor people are the responsibility of local churches or their own governments. But the Bible says otherwise. The prophet Isaiah promised: "If you spend yourselves in behalf of the hungry and satisfy the needs of the oppressed, then your light will rise in the darkness, and your light will become like the noonday" (Isaiah 58:10). Jesus admonished: "To the extent that you did it (fed the hungry, gave drink to the thirsty, comforted the stranger, clothed the naked, and visited the sick and prisoners) to one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did it to Me" (Matthew 25:40) and "From everyone who has been given much, much will be demanded" (Luke 12:48).

God will judge us by how well we cared for our poor neighbors, and in this small world in which we live, all people are our neighbors.

"One Spirit. One Will. Zero Poverty" is the theme for Bread for the World's Offering of Letters this year. Please participate, and urge your church to participate. By encouraging our government to spend less than 1 percent of its budget—an amount we never will miss—we can take the next step toward eliminating poverty and all the diseases and maladies that plague the world's poorest citizens.

You can find out more about the Offering of Letters by visiting Bread for the World's website, www.bread.org. Pull down on the "Take Action"

button, and you will find an array of resources, from Offering of Letters resource kits, to sample letters, to a handy tool that tells you how to reach your senators and representative.

Write today. People are dying of poverty.

News of religion, faith, missions, Bible study and Christian ministry among Texas Baptist churches, in the BGCT, the Southern Baptist Convention (SBC) and around the world.