
Lutheran Commitment to Ending Hunger: Our History

Do you know why the ELCA has a World Hunger Program and Appeal, and why we take the work so seriously? This section briefly explains the history and gives you a sense of your role in it.



Our Commitment to Ending Hunger

You may not realize it, but by accepting the role of synod hunger leader, you have become part of an important story that began decades ago.

The World Wars

Lutherans have always taken seriously the call to respond to God's love by caring for their neighbors, and it manifests in many ways. One of them is the ELCA World Hunger Appeal and Program. ELCA World Hunger was officially established in 1987, but its beginnings date back much further. In fact, World War I is a good place to start. The destruction caused by World War I stirred Lutherans in the United States to respond to their neighbors in need on an unprecedented scale. It was then that, for the first time, Lutheran groups organized national appeals, calling on churches across the country to give to those who were devastated by the war. In 1919, the National Lutheran Council (NLC) issued an appeal to help Europe. Over the next ten years, U.S. Lutherans contributed some \$8,700,000 to people in Europe and to Lutheran missions in China, Japan, India and Africa.¹

As it turned out, World War I was something of a rehearsal for World War II. When Hitler invaded Poland in 1939, the NLC quickly issued an appeal to help displaced Lutherans in Europe. By late 1940, it was clear the war was very serious and much more of Europe needed help. The NLC issued another appeal, this time with the name of Lutheran World Action (LWA). Though originally intended as a short-term response to the war, over time the needs and importance of the work beyond World War II became obvious. In 1951 the NLC decided to create a permanent role for relief work in its member churches.²

LWR and LWF

As World War II ended and Lutheran World Action continued to mature and develop, so did two other significant Lutheran organizations. Lutheran World Relief (LWR) began in 1945 in the United States as a clothing appeal for Lutherans and Christians in war-torn Europe. LWR initially consisted of the eight NLC churches and, a few years later, the Lutheran Church – Missouri Synod (LCMS). By the mid-1950s, LWR had expanded its purpose well beyond clothing and European Christians. LWR was working in developing countries all over the world, and offering assistance to people in need, regardless of religion, race, or policy.³

¹ Charles P. Lutz, Loving Neighbors Far and Near: U.S. Lutherans Respond to a Hungry World (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Fortress, 1994), p.26-27.

² Lutz, p.27

³ Lutz, p. 29

During this same time frame of the late 1940's to the mid-1950's, an international Lutheran organization was created: Lutheran World Federation (LWF). Based in Sweden, the initial purpose of LWF was like that of LWA and LWR: to respond to war-created needs in Europe and Asia. And like LWR, as time went on and World War II needs were addressed, work in other parts of the world expanded. In fact, LWF became the largest Protestant humanitarian organization in the world.⁴ Today, both LWR and LWF continue their work and are important partners to the ELCA World Hunger Appeal and Program.

Beyond War

If the two World Wars promoted the inception of widely organized humanitarian aid by American Lutherans, the 1960's cemented our resolve and commitment. American culture was focused on peace and love, equality was a growing concern, and media was bringing new awareness of hunger in the United States as well as poverty abroad. Not coincidentally, new political structures were created to address these issues: the Peace Corps, the U.S. Agency for International Development, the American Freedom from Hunger Foundation, Headstart, and Job Corps.⁵ All of these forces converged to make hunger, poverty, and U.S. involvement part of the collective American concern, reinforcing the work already begun in American Lutheran churches and elevating it to a permanent priority.

Certainly a lot more has happened to get from the Lutheran churches of the 1960's to today's ELCA World Hunger Appeal and Program. However, by the 1970's, the foundation was complete. All of the branches of Lutheranism in the United States had a strong belief that fighting hunger and poverty was an important part of their responsibility as Lutherans, and had organized structures for doing so. By the time several synods combined and formed the ELCA in 1987, the basic commitment was unquestioned. ELCA's World Hunger Program has evolved over the years to meet changing needs, but the basic purpose is the same: to help people lift themselves out of poverty into self-sufficiency.

The Fight Today

Since 1987, millions of dollars have been raised and countless people helped, not only through direct relief, but also through development projects, education, and advocacy. It is here that you join the story. As a hunger leader, you are in a position to continue and add to this important legacy. We hope you embrace the opportunity and find enjoyment and purpose in this work, this witness of God's love.

⁴ Lutz, p.30

⁵ Lutz, p.33