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*Living Lutheran*,  
May 2018

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## Study guide

# Farm bill brings Lutherans together

By Robert C. Blezard

Raise your hand if you've eaten today! OK! Now raise your hand if you plan on eating tomorrow! All right! Everybody who had a hand up should be interested in the 2018 Farm Bill now working its way through Congress. It shapes the future not only for our farmers and their communities, but also nutrition programs for millions of Americans in need nationwide.

## Background

Farm bills, which are renewed about every five years, are closely watched because they spend big money. The 2014 Farm Bill called for about \$489 billion. The spending broke down as follows:

- 80 percent—nutrition.
- 8 percent—crop insurance.
- 5 percent—commodity crop programs.
- 6 percent—conservation.
- 1 percent—other programs.

## Exercise 1: Hunger in America

Since nutrition programs make up 80 percent of the Farm Bill, let's take a deep look at hunger in America.

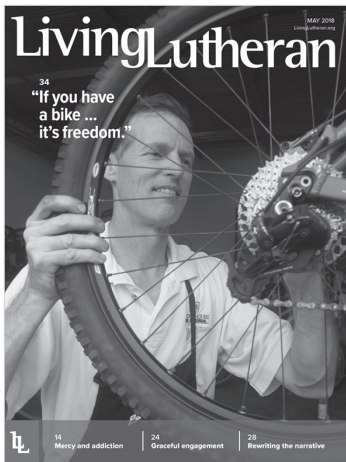
"Food secure" is a technical term meaning simply that a household always has enough to eat and stay healthy. Households that have trouble finding enough to be healthy are called "food insecure." Members of food-insecure households experience hunger.

The nutrition part of the farm bill aims to assist hungry households.

### All households

The U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) reports that 87.7 percent of *all households* in 2016 were food secure—had enough to eat—while 12.3 percent were food insecure, or hungry. Among those 12.3 percent were 4.9 percent, or 6.1 million households, that experienced very low food security.

- What did you think and feel when you learned that 1 in 8 American households has trouble finding enough food to be healthy? Or that 1 in 20 experiences very low food security?
- Do you know which households in your community are hungry? Not



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necessarily their names, but where they live, where they may work, how they live? How about your synod? Your state?

- Why do you think so many households have trouble putting food on the table?
- Would you support farm bill programs that help feed hungry Americans? Why or why not?

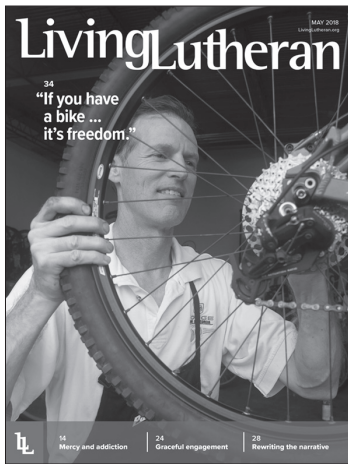
### Households with children

The USDA reports that 83.5 percent of *households with children* in 2016 were food secure, but 16.5 percent of these households—1 in 6—were “food insecure.”

- What did you think when you learned that 1 in 6 American households with children has trouble finding enough food to be healthy?
- Do you know which households with children are hungry in your community? Not necessarily their names, but where they live, where they may work, how they live? How about your synod? Your state?
- Why do so many households have trouble putting food on the table?
- Would you support adequate spending to help provide more food to families with children? Why or why not?
- The USDA says adults in about half of the food-insecure households protect their children from hunger by giving them part of their food. So in those households, the children have enough but the adults do not. Would you sacrifice part of the food you need so your children would have enough? Why?
- What does it say about the parents who give so their children are adequately fed?
- Would you want to help such a family? Would you support federal programs that put more food in their cupboards and refrigerators? Why or why not?
- Hunger is highest among households headed by single mothers, about a third of which are food insecure, the USDA reports. Just under a quarter of households headed by single fathers also experienced food insecurity. What reasons can you think of to explain why single-mother households experience the highest hunger?
- Do you know of single mothers who are struggling to work and raise kids? What do they face?
- Would you support farm bill funding if you knew that single parents would get help? Why or why not?

### Help for the hungry

It used to be called food stamps, but now it's the Supplemental Nutrition



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Assistance Program (SNAP), the largest in the farm bill's nutrition category. It gives money for groceries directly to families in need. About 43 million Americans depend on SNAP, receiving an average of \$132 per month, *Newsweek* reported (March 17, 2018).

Children make up the largest block of recipients, 44 percent. Of the total recipients, 13.4 percent are children under 5 years old, and 30.7 percent are children from 5 to 17 years old. Adults over 60 years old make up 11.8 percent of recipients.

- How much do you/your family spend on groceries a month? How does that compare to the \$132 per month average in SNAP?
- Imagine a family for whom \$132 a month represents the difference between being healthy and going hungry. What images come to mind?
- Would you support this program? Why or why not?
- In approving the 2014 Farm Bill, Congress cut SNAP by \$8 billion, *Newsweek* reported. There are signs that some in Congress want to reduce funding by another \$20 billion for the 2018 Farm Bill. Is this a wise idea?
- Would you support funding the SNAP program at the 2014 Farm Bill level, with no cuts?

### Exercise 2: Conserving our environment

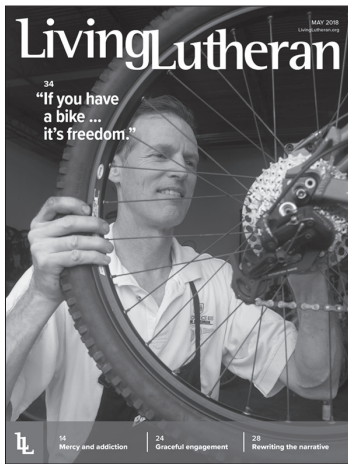
Farming can be hard on the environment. Farmers often use pesticides, herbicides and petroleum-based fertilizers that run off into waterways and can get into drinking water supplies. Soil erosion can deplete the fertility of the ground and pollute rivers and streams. Moreover, overcultivation of land can destroy wildlife habitat and disrupt fragile ecosystems.

Conservation measures in the farm bill encourage farmers to adopt practices that are more environmentally friendly.

- What have you seen or heard about farming practices that harm the environment?
- Is it a good idea for the federal government to encourage agriculture practices that are easier on the environment?
- Would you support such measures in the farm bill? Would you advocate for them to be funded at current levels?

### For study and action

- **Invite** a farmer, representative of the Farm Bureau (or other farmer advocacy group), hunger advocate or environmental group represen-



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tative to speak at your congregation to talk about the 2018 Farm Bill.

Ask how the farm bill affects taxpayers, hungry people, small farmers and agribusiness corporations. Ask about the importance of crop insurance and commodity crop programs. Ask how the environmental programs help promote a cleaner, more-sustainable planet. Ask how your congregation can get involved in advocacy.

- **Keep abreast** of political developments on the 2018 Farm Bill as they unfold. Getting legislation through two chambers of Congress and onto the president's desk is often complicated and full of unexpected twists and turns. Use your internet search engine to explore the issues from a variety of news sources.
- **Be an advocate** for hungry people, small farmers and environmental protection. Your first stop is ELCA Advocacy ([elca.org/advocacy](http://elca.org/advocacy)), but here are some other advocacy groups that can give you updates, analyses and tips on how (and who in our government) to visit or send letters, faxes, emails.
  - National Sustainable Agriculture Coalition: [sustainableagriculture.net](http://sustainableagriculture.net)
  - Bread for the World: [bread.org](http://bread.org)
  - Farm Bureau: [fb.org](http://fb.org)
  - Catholic Rural Life: [catholicrurallife.org](http://catholicrurallife.org)

# Farm bill brings Lutherans together

By Angela Denker



Photo: Courtesy of John Johnson, ELCA Advocacy

During a trip to North Dakota and South Dakota in 2017, staff from ELCA Advocacy and the churchwide office met with synod staff members, bishops and ELCA members to discuss the importance of the farm bill to rural communities.

Since 1938 the U.S. government has approved a farm bill every five years. First created to assist farmers during the Great Depression, the farm bill today is expansive legislation reaching into the lives of every American—it's the federal government's primary agriculture and food policy tool.

For Lutherans, this legislation has long been a focus of denominational advocacy work, but 2018 is the first time ELCA Advocacy is putting its entire staff behind farm bill efforts.

Amy Reumann, Advocacy director, said the bill is a priority for focusing on nutrition, rural development, research and conservation efforts. "The farm bill is so vital for programs that are really important to us ... from the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) to emergency food and commodities. This year we are also working on [the farm bill] in terms of honoring land claims by indigenous people who are impacted by it," she said.

Reumann and other Advocacy staff members traveled to North Dakota and South Dakota in 2017 to meet with farmers and learn why the bill is so

important for farming communities.

"We heard that the farm bill is immensely important for what their next five years are going to look like," she said. "We heard some great perspectives and ideas that we'd love to get heard more in Washington. ... Farmers use all sorts of different techniques, and they have an incredible sense of responsibility to restore the land as they farm."

For many Lutheran farmers across America, their pride in farming and taking care of the land is attached to their faith. "They truly see it as a gift from God," Reumann said. "They have a commitment to feed people, and there's an awareness and a sense of pride to that."

Tom Tveit, a member of Resurrection Lutheran Church in Pierre, S.D., and a retired rancher and farmer, was one of those who met with Advocacy staff to discuss the 2018 bill. But he said his advocacy for the bill is not just for farmers and ranchers.

"The farm bill provides ways to help provide food aid to people who need it both domestically and internationally," he said, speaking on the ways





the legislation lines up with his Lutheran faith.

The bill's importance can seem obvious to rural Lutherans, while those in suburban and urban areas aren't as aware of the ways it touches their lives. "Our challenge is that it shouldn't only matter to the rural populations," Reumann said. "We live so disconnected from our source of nutrition."

One way many non-rural Lutherans become involved with farm bill-related ministries is through the church's commitment to ending hunger and increasing food security. From the ELCA's largest to its smallest churches, almost every congregation has some kind of hunger ministry, from collecting money for ELCA World Hunger to countless food pantries, soup kitchens and community meals.


Despite the ELCA's hard work to fight hunger, Reumann said more than 95 percent of domestic food aid comes from sources other than the church—primarily the federal and state governments. "The government has the infrastructure in place to deliver food wherever it's needed, especially in rural areas," she said.

When churches partner with the government to provide food where it's needed, that's part of the farm bill at work. The ELCA Advocacy team hopes to see that vision of partnership between diverse groups of Americans as part of the 2018 bill.

"I would like to see a holistic bill that addresses adequately the needs of nutrition as well as giving the support that rural areas need," Reumann said. "I'd like to see a vision and commitment not just for food policy but also for people and communities."

Reumann also hopes legislation like the farm bill inspires Lutherans to become excited about advocacy work and speaking up about issues that impact them. She noted that 150 participants learned about issues and how to do advocacy, including visits to representatives on Capitol Hill, in January during the ELCA Hunger Leaders Gathering in Washington, D.C.

She encouraged people to visit the ELCA's Advocacy website and sign up for alerts that encourage action, as well as build relationships with lawmakers and people in communities that rely on the church for food assistance.

"Advocacy is faith formation by teaching people and providing opportunities for people to speak their faith in public—bringing it to bear on a public issue," Reumann said. "I'm very interested to see how advocacy develops leaders in the church and teaches people how to wrestle with Scripture, theology and relationships." 

Download a study guide at [livinglutheran.org](http://livinglutheran.org) by clicking on the "Spiritual practices & resources" tab. For more information on ELCA Advocacy's efforts, go to [elca.org/advocacy](http://elca.org/advocacy). To learn more about ELCA World Hunger, visit [elca.org/hunger](http://elca.org/hunger).



**Angela Denker** is a former sportswriter turned Lutheran pastor, writer and speaker based in Minneapolis.

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