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Study guide

An oasis in a food desert

By Robert C. Blezard

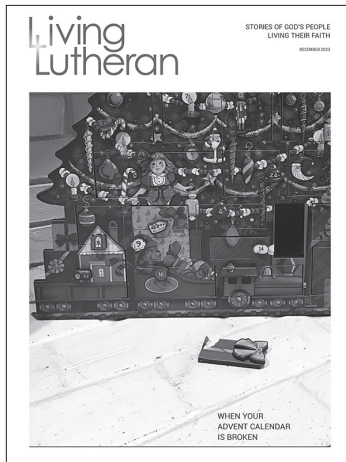
For many Americans, poverty is not the only issue complicating their ability to obtain sufficient healthful, nutritious food. Where they live in relation to well-supplied grocery stores can be a major issue, especially if they don't have a car or if public transportation isn't readily available. These factors conspire to create "food deserts," where people are unable to eat healthfully. Churches are helping! Can yours do more?

EXERCISE 1: UNDERSTANDING FOOD DESERTS

Explore this hypothetical case:

Linda is a 76-year-old widow, disabled and living only on Social Security in an apartment in part of the city that had its heyday in the 1950s. She has no family nearby. Linda doesn't own a car and can't afford taxis or Ubers. The nearest fully stocked grocery store is in a suburban neighborhood 2 miles away. She could get there by city bus, but her disability prevents her from carrying groceries. Out of necessity, Linda shops for her meals at a nearby convenience store, where fresh, nutritious food is unavailable. She eats mostly preprocessed frozen meals, snack items and canned goods. Her diet contributes to health problems, including borderline malnutrition and obesity.

- Can you relate to Linda's predicament? Can you share about it?
- List the problems that conspire to make it difficult for Linda to eat healthfully.
- Why does Linda have no real options for food shopping except the convenience store?
- What are the economic and logistical reasons that a grocery store company would choose *not* to operate in a given neighborhood? Other reasons?
- What kind of foods are generally available at convenience stores? What would it be like to rely on them for all your meals?
- Explain why Linda is trapped in a "food desert."
- If Linda had access to better-quality food, how might her health and well-being improve?
- What are potential remedies for Linda's predicament?
- How might a congregation in Linda's neighborhood help? How might a suburban congregation help her?



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Study guide: **Food desert** *continued*

EXERCISE 2: FOOD DESERTS

As a study group, talk about your understanding of what constitutes a food desert.

- What factors make up a food desert?
- Which factors lie with individuals or families? Which are attributable to the community?
- Do food deserts exist only in one type of community?
- Under what circumstances might an urban neighborhood be a food desert? Can you think of a hypothetical individual or family?
- How could a rural setting be a food desert to an individual or family? Come up with a hypothetical case.
- How might a suburban neighborhood be a food desert to an individual or family? Brainstorm a hypothetical situation.

EXERCISE 3: NEIGHBORS

Imagine two neighborhood individuals or families. One experiences life in a food desert with no ready access to fresh, nutritious food, whereas the other has no problem whatsoever. Come up with a hypothetical scenario where this could happen.

- Under what circumstances might the food desert neighbor be living? What problems might that person have?
- What circumstances might make it possible for the other neighbor to have no problem obtaining good food?
- What might be some solutions for the neighbor living in the food desert?

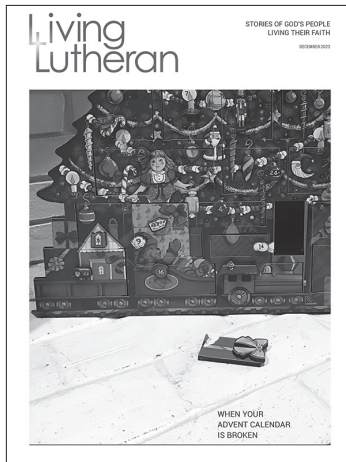
EXERCISE 4: YOUR COMMUNITY

Examine the community or area where you live and where your congregation is located. Perhaps your study group could take a “field trip” to local neighborhoods. Research information about your community including:

- Income levels compared to state and national averages.
- Education levels compared to state and national averages.
- Family composition compared to state and national averages.
- Average rent and home prices, as well as rental vacancy rates and home purchase availability.
- Public transportation system, including routes, location of bus stops and schedule of operation.
- Location of fully stocked grocery stores.

Once you have all that data, explore:

- How likely are residents in your community to experience living in a food desert? Explain.



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Study guide: **Food desert** *continued*

- What neighborhoods or pockets within your community are likely to be food deserts for residents? Why? Within what proximity are those neighborhoods to your congregation?
- How might your congregation do more to help?

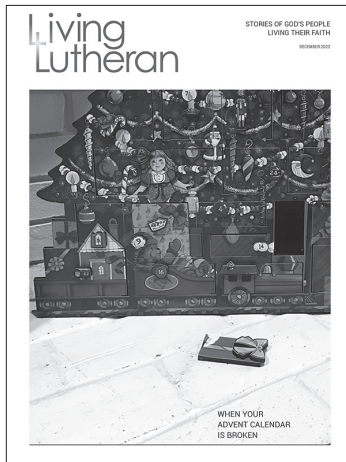
EXERCISE 5: POVERTY REALITIES

Advocates for those experiencing poverty point out that feeding programs are a blessing to the hungry, but they don't address the root issue: Many people and families are unable to earn enough to live. Consider the following facts:

- The federal minimum wage has been \$7.25 an hour since 2010. Statista.com reports that, accounting for inflation, the current minimum wage is 40% lower than the \$1.60/hour minimum in 1970. If the 1970 wage kept up with inflation, it would be \$12.04/hour.
- Affordable housing is a crisis in many areas. The National Low Income Housing Coalition reports that there are only 36 affordable and available rental units for every 100 extremely low-income renter households.
- The coalition reports that in some cities, minimum-wage workers would have to put in 80 or more hours a week to afford a one-bedroom unit. Average-wage workers would have to put in 50 or more hours.
- The United States' inflation rate of 75% in 2021 and an estimated 7.7% for 2022 has reduced the buying power of all individuals and families, but it is hardest on those in lower-income brackets.

Discuss:

- What adverse economic trends or forces are you and your community experiencing?
- What, if any, belt-tightening measures have you had to take, or seen people take, to cope with the economy?
- Why are more people these days in need of food assistance (and other types of help)?
- Explain why and how poverty can be seen as a systemic issue and a matter of economic justice.
- What public-policy measures might help the growing numbers of needy people?
- It is right and biblically correct that Christians mobilize to feed people who are hungry, but why is it important that God's people also advocate for public-policy solutions that would address the root causes of poverty?
- How might you, your congregation, your synod and other Christians advocate for economic justice?
- **For action:** Devise an advocacy strategy for your congregation and submit it to your pastor or congregation council for consideration.



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Study guide: **Food desert** *continued*

EXERCISE 6: THE FARM BILL

The federal farm bill, renewed every five years and last passed in 2018, is a vast piece of legislation. It accounts for hundreds of billions of dollars in spending and contains myriad provisions that span a wide variety of programs—including land conservation, dairy supports, rural development, agricultural research, energy, crop insurance, price insurance and farm credit.

The farm bill also earmarks billions of dollars in a variety of programs to assist people who are hungry, including school lunches, the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (formerly called food stamps), emergency food aid, help for seniors and support for farmers markets.

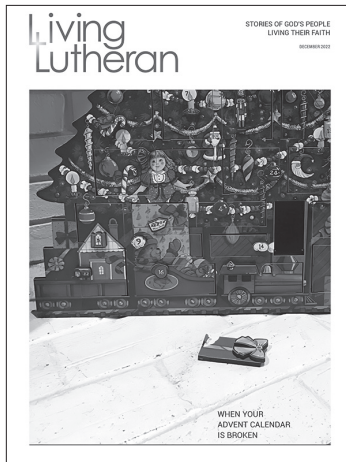
The nutrition programs in the farm bill often comprise the most controversial—subject to debate and vulnerable for spending reductions. This is largely because the lobbies for the farmer- and business-oriented provisions are generally much stronger than advocates for nutrition programs that help those in need. This is where faith-based advocacy can make a big difference.

For action:

- Explore how the farm bill and its nutrition programs assist your community in feeding the poor and hungry.
- Learn from advocates, such as those connected with the ELCA (elca.org/advocacy) to learn what's happening with the farm bill, especially regarding the fate of nutrition programs. Find out how you and your congregation can help.
- Find out which legislators are shepherding the 2023 Farm Bill and ask them by letter, phone calls, constituent visits and other means to ensure that nutrition programs receive adequate funding.
- Through newsletter articles, temple talks, guest speakers and other means, educate people in your congregation and community about the farm bill's impact on the hungry in your area.
- Draft an advocacy strategy for your congregation and share it with your pastor or congregation council for action.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

- Visit your local convenience store and plan out a week of meals using only the items available there. How would your diet differ from what it is now? How would the value you get for your food dollar change? If you ate only convenience-store food over the long term, would you experience better or worse health? Explain.



About the study guide author:

Rob Blezard

is pastor of St. Paul Lutheran Church in Aberdeen, Md. He earned a Master of Divinity degree from Boston University School of Theology and has done further study at the Lutheran Theological Seminary at Gettysburg (Pa.), now called United Lutheran Seminary.



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- If you have a car and are accustomed to driving to a grocery store, how would your eating habits change if you suddenly couldn't drive? How does the picture change as you add in each of these complicating factors?
 - 1) You live alone and have no family nearby.
 - 2) You don't have extra money.
 - 3) There is no nearby access to public transportation.
 - 4) For medical reasons, it is difficult for you to leave the house.
- Most ELCA congregations have some sort of feeding ministry, such as a community meal, food pantry or food drives for local agencies. What does your congregation do to help people experiencing hunger? What is the history and future prospects for those ministries? What more could your congregation do? What's preventing you from doing it?
- It is good and right that Christians follow the Bible's directives to feed the hungry, but why are there so many people experiencing hunger in North America, which is one of the richest countries in the world? What are the underlying causes of poverty and hunger? Do food pantries and community meals help solve these underlying problems? What else can Christians do?
- What is a food desert, and what problems conspire to create and perpetuate them? Which of those problems are churches best suited to addressing? How can they do so? Is your congregation active? Why or why not?

An Oasis in a Food Desert

By Michael Weaver



Photos: Courtesy of St. Paul Lutheran Church

Members of St. Paul Lutheran Church, Millville, N.J., in cooperation with the Tri-County Rotary Club, organized a special Thanksgiving meal donation.

For many Christians, meals begin not with picking up a fork but with a moment of silence to give thanks. For Jessica Cameron, who lives in a food desert, that pause of gratitude comes from a very grateful heart. “I think how great it is to be able to receive [this food],” she said.

Every Sunday, immediately after worship at St. Paul Lutheran Church in Millville, N.J., she

and others “shop” along a line of tables in the parking lot or the education wing of the church, choosing from vegetables, meats, potatoes, eggs and whatever is being harvested that week in this farm-rich area of southern New Jersey.

A 54-year-old double amputee, Cameron especially values St. Paul’s feeding ministry because the church is just two blocks away from



St. Paul sometimes sponsors an ice cream truck in the summer so its neighbors can enjoy a treat.

her apartment. Her only other option for fresh food is a chain supermarket two miles north, and her only way of getting there is to roll her wheelchair to a bus stop three blocks away.

"It's convenient for me," Cameron said of the St. Paul ministry. "It's wonderful that people there care about people."

Higher inflation has made grocery shopping more challenging in almost every nation, but for some 39 million Americans, even finding or reaching a supermarket can be a real, everyday challenge. More than 1 in 10 Americans live in a "food desert," typically low-income, inner-city neighborhoods where supermarket chains are hesitant to operate, transportation is limited, and breakfast, lunch and dinner options might be little more than a packaged product from a gas station or convenience store.

"They have the prices raised so high in these convenience stores around here that people can't afford it," Cameron said.

Downtown Millville, where Cameron lives, is only one of many identified food deserts in New Jersey, where the cost of living already ranks sixth highest in the nation. Advocates say that in Trenton, 75 miles to the north of Millville and



During the COVID-19 pandemic, St. Paul members placed food outside the church building for their neighbors to take.

much more populous, they once spotted a gallon of milk priced at \$9.25 in a recognized chain grocery store with few competitors.

Food and advocacy

Sara Lilja, an ELCA pastor who serves as director of the New Jersey Synod's Lutheran Episcopal Advocacy Ministry of New Jersey (LEAMNJ), sees firsthand the challenge everyday Americans face in putting food on the table.

Forty percent of New Jersey residents, she said, are "housing distressed," meaning they spend more than 30% of their income on rent or house payments. That imbalance often leads to problems affording enough food for everyone in the home.

In New Jersey and elsewhere, congregations such as St. Paul often are at work to fill in the gaps. Fully 95% of ELCA congregations provide their communities with free meals, food distribution or some sort of food assistance. Food banks dot the landscape in every state, helping those congregations and other groups feed those in need.

And every five years in the halls of Congress, senators and representatives hammer out legislation largely unknown to the everyday shopper: the farm bill.

Known or not, the farm bill has been a fixture of the nation's agricultural economy since the 1930s, when President Franklin Roosevelt signed the first versions to shore up falling farm prices and stabilize the U.S. food supply during the Great Depression and Dust Bowl.

Since then, the farm bill has been renewed every five years, setting policy on everything from price supports to funding levels for school lunch programs. Congress passed the latest farm bill in 2018 and will vote on its renewal in 2023, probably by the fall.

No matter what details emerge in the 2023 Farm Bill, faith-based organizations will continue to feed the hungry. But as Lilja explained, the details and funding levels will have a “huge impact” on the availability and accessibility of food for millions of Americans.

At LEAMNJ, Lilja’s staff and volunteers already are preparing video testimonies for legislators, asking residents in food deserts and elsewhere to “tell their stories” of hunger and share successful hunger solutions.

The folks at St. Paul, which averages 60 worshipers on a Sunday morning, are such witnesses. When Karen Bernhardt became pastor of St. Paul in 2016, she found parishioners somewhat wary of their neighbors, but they quickly embraced her call to assist the “working poor” in downtown Millville.

“I was very fortunate that our congregation has an open heart for this,” Bernhardt said. “People know to call upon us. We’re small, but we’re mighty.”

Though the fine points of the farm bill may change every five years, Lilja said the St. Paul program enjoys “pretty robust” support across party lines.


Food banks, local governments and agencies such as Lilja’s highlight the changing nature and demographics of hunger in America. For instance, advocates are seeing an unprecedented rise in hunger on college campuses, to the point where some faculty stock food closets for the students they see falling asleep from lack of nutrition.


Lilja finds that faith communities in New Jersey and beyond “have incredible on-the-ground feeding systems set up.” But they can’t meet the need alone, she said.

“We don’t have nearly the capacity to purchase the foods,” Lilja said. “We can’t do it alone, and the federal government can’t do it without us. We have to partner together.” †

To learn more about the ELCA’s advocacy efforts or to become involved, visit elca.org/advocacy or search for “farm bill” at elca.org. Download a free study guide for this article by clicking on the “Spiritual practices & resources” tab at livinglutheran.org.

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