

Feeding the Soul:  
The Church's Response to Hunger

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### **Introduction**

A beautiful summer day in Memphis includes, if you are lucky, a trip down to the Mississippi River. The city's public parks make enjoying the beautiful views and picnic areas feasible for anyone with free time and access to a car. This is exactly what I and my group of friends were doing on a normal summer afternoon—enjoying the day by celebrating a friend's birthday by the river. When we arrived I noticed what looked like a large family gathering by the bank. The group had coolers of drinks and while the kids were running around blowing bubbles the adults were standing by idly chatting, enjoying the summer breeze. Soon after we arrived, we positioned ourselves on the top of the bank, lending a perfect vantage point to all the nearby happenings. A mere five minutes later, I noticed two children, about ten years of age, walking our way with two water bottles in hand. "Do ya'll want anything to drink?" the first child timidly asked. "No thank you, we aren't thirsty at all" was our collective group response, assuming that the children were simply trying to be good neighbors, or were put up to it by their parents. Not two minutes later a van pulled up to the curb directly behind us, letting out a group of about four adults, a few children, and even more cases of water and fruit punch. A smartly dressed middle-aged man then approached us and offered us some fruit punch—not taking no for an answer this time. I asked politely what was the purpose of this group that was gaining more members, obvious to me now that it was not a simple family gathering; "we are a church group here for ministry" was his reply as he turned to walk away and unload the rest of the supplies. After being

propositioned three more times by different groups of young children and amassing an impressive fifteen bottles of water/fruit punch between the three of us, I decided that it was about time to ask someone what exactly was going on. After speaking with an adult from the group, I learned that they brought the children out to the park and downtown area once a month for a service project to help the homeless and disadvantaged downtown population.

The New Covenant Seventh Day Adventists (SDA) Youth Society's mission is to show Christ's love in a tangible way through feeding the homeless and hungry people of Memphis whenever the opportunity presents itself. After asking the gentleman who led the group why the children were delivering water, his very practical answer was "because it's hot!"; and his reasoning behind why food is chosen as their ministry of choice? "Well, we see lots of children who don't get to eat breakfast, lunch, or dinner, and we want to do something about that". Many Christian groups such as this one are not only an organization that gives relief-based aid, but a proselytizing, or evangelical, one. To this however, the man simply responded in the negative and stated, "We are into being kind and showing kindness to one another" which to him and his church group includes *showing* the love of Christ, not expressly *telling* people about it.

This experience, however normal seeming, was an eye-opening one for me. Here I was, knee deep in research on food ministries, calling and setting up appointments with church workers and pastors, reading every book or website that could pertain to my project, but still somehow missing the big picture. While at Mud Island on a beautiful summer afternoon with friends, I suddenly realized the everyday application to all that I was studying. I was reminded again in a very tangible and forceful way that churches across Memphis are trying their best to help alleviate the real and immediate hunger problem facing many Memphians. Churches are educating their youth on the importance of reaching out to the community and helping to develop

a better way of life for all of those involved. The New Covenant SDA Church and their youth program is one of many such programs that take literally and forcefully Christ's exhortations to care for the poor. But they could do more.

During my time by the Mississippi River, while I was unintentionally hoarding free bottles of water, my resolve was strengthened to discover why churches invest so much time and energy into a relief form of ministry, which for the SDA Youth Society translated into giving away free water. As I took my water bottles home with me that Saturday and was thirsty by Monday, I was left pondering how the current form of ministry developed and how churches could do more than give privileged college students free bottles of water. In this paper I deliver the findings of my research and fieldwork with church ministries in Memphis and present the facts as to why the current form of ministry adopted by most churches—relief—is neither sustainable for the future nor the best use of a church's resources. By relief aid, I am referencing the current system of “emergency” food that is currently in place: food pantries, grocery giveaways, soup kitchens and more. In order to successfully present my case, I first give the background of the important relationship that exists between the church and food ministries, which lays the foundation for understanding why churches are well built for ministry in the first place. Next, understanding how current food ministries in Memphis operate and are supported is crucial. Through offering an in-depth analysis of three Memphis food ministries, one is able to better understand the current form of ministry that exists in churches in Memphis. After exploring these three unique examples of functioning Memphis food ministries, I give some of the main reasons why the relief form of aid is unsustainable for churches and why they should start seeking an alternative way of doing things. Finally, this paper delves into some possible solutions that the church is currently and can in the future, explore.

## **How and Why the Church is Involved in Ministry**

American Protestant church ministries, such as the New Covenant SDA Youth Program, are increasingly common relief programs in cities, especially Memphis, TN. It is an expectation that a church, along with shepherding the lives of its congregants, also has in place at least one outreach ministry for the community. This could be a clothes closet, food pantry, soup kitchen, or if a church does not have the space or does not have a permanent building, simply supporting an already successful outside ministry is a given. A church's worth can be seen to be measured on its community involvement, on how much it gives back and makes a difference in the lives of the poor. Churches have, and will, continue to embrace this form of ministry by using their defining structures to their advantage to fulfill the tenets of their faith. If one stops to think about it, a church is made up of a body of people—however large or small—who are willing to do as Jesus has commanded and help the poor. An example of this mission from Jesus can be found in Matthew 19:21 when Jesus states, "If you want to be perfect, go, sell what you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, follow Me" (New King James Version). This Christian principle of helping the needy can be manifested very differently. In modern times the church can be either a ready fountain of volunteers, it can provide funds for other developing or successful community ministries, or it can be a mixture of both. In addition to this, churches are also in a unique position—literally. In the American south, there are churches around every corner, including churches of every size, denomination, and cultural background. These faith organizations have the ability to be located in areas where government organizations generally are not, they outnumber the government sponsored programs, and they are usually better trusted by lower-income communities. With all of these advantages on their

side, and the exhortations in the Bible to serve the poor and needy, churches are a logical avenue for community relief, outreach, and development.

The city of Memphis is also especially equipped for churches to be the ones to answer the call of the needy. A quick internet search of local churches will reveal that there are well over fifteen hundred established churches in Memphis not even counting smaller house churches or for that matter temples or mosques. This abundance is quite normal for the American south, aptly named “the Bible belt”, where Christian churches dot every corner and where you can still find some stores and restaurants closed on Sunday. In addition, in 2010 Memphis (including the surrounding eight counties) was ranked number one for hunger in the United States by a survey co-sponsored by Gallup (Conley). Memphis is also consistently mentioned as one of the nation’s hot spots for food deserts, along with cities such as Chicago and Atlanta. Food deserts “are places with too few choices of healthy and affordable food and are often oversaturated with unhealthy food outlets such as fast food joints” (Winne xvii). All of these elements combine in Memphis to create the perfect storm—a city where most of its working class, and especially the multitude below poverty level, cannot afford enough food for their families, even with government assistance. It is these conditions and this environment that keeps the level of church involvement sky high.

In order to address these serious issues, churches in Memphis—and all over the United States—are engaging in food ministries including soup kitchens, food banks, food pantries, and other forms of emergency food, otherwise known as “relief” aid. This relief however, not only is trying to help out the poor, but is a way of ministering to a church’s own congregants. The function of ministry in a church is also to promote fellowship amongst its members, and serving together is a logical avenue for creating better relationships and strengthening their own

community. The plethora of ministries works not only to try and strengthen the people of the community, but also to bless the volunteers who work so hard to make it happen. As long as there is an aspect of fellowship involved with ministry, churches will be a part of it.

### **The Relationship between the Church and Food**

And with these ministries is always the presence of food. Food and the church have a long history of working together and there seems to be no end in sight for the ever-present affiliation. While most Christians never take the time to question why it is commonplace for every Church to have a kitchen, why potluck dinners are synonymous with Wednesday night worship, and why food for some Christians is so closely tied to spirituality, it can be seen from the beginnings of Christianity that sharing a meal holds an important place in the faith. In Norman Wirzba's "Food & Faith: A Theology of Eating", the Duke Divinity School professor delves deep into the link between Christianity and food. He posits that humans have the innate desire to enter into deep relationship with one another, and when these relationships are not Christ-like—when they do not show mercy and love like Jesus did—then there is no way for the people of God to truly form the body of Christ (151). This theory overflows into the way that Christians choose to eat. In the Christian faith the example that Jesus gives of how to eat and share a table is most well embodied in the Eucharist, or Last Supper as it is commonly referred. Wirzba comments that "The evidence of the early church suggests that the community of followers ate together regularly and often, and that in their eating they tried to bear witness to Christ's way of dwelling on earth" (149). This method of sharing a meal around a table has many practical applications, one being that it enforces the idea of equality. In the Gospel of Luke, Jesus emphasizes the diversity and charity that should be found around a meal; Luke 14:12-14 states:

**12** Then He also said to him who invited Him, When you give a dinner or a supper, do not ask your friends, your brothers, your relatives, nor rich neighbors, lest they also invite you back, and you be repaid. **13** But when you give a feast, invite the poor, the maimed, the lame, the blind. **14** And you will be blessed, because they cannot repay you; for you shall be repaid at the resurrection of the just (NKJV).

This popular Bible verse gives the threshold for many Christians on how to engage with people around a table, further enforcing the strength of the relationship between Christianity and food.

### **Introduction to Three Memphis Food Ministries**

This entreaty for the sharing of food with the needy provides the model and impetus for so many of the Christian food ministries today. The three specific ministries that I studied all modeled the Eucharist or Eucharistic ideals in one form or another. The Urban Bicycle Food Ministry (UBFM), founded and led by Reverend Tommy Clark is a great example of a small community of believers who work to give immediate relief to the hungry of Memphis. UBFM was created by Rev. Clark only a year ago in July 2012 while he was still attending Seminary School at Memphis Theological Seminary. He took a summer class dealing with the different forms of ministry, and after seeing a need to be fulfilled in Memphis (the ever growing crowd of hungry people) he decided that he should do something about it. Explaining the origins, Rev. Clark explained: “I thought to myself, you know, how about me and some of my buddies start meeting every Wednesday night, ride our bikes around, and meet some homeless people in Memphis” (Clark). When asked why he used food, Rev. Clark responded that “food is an open door”, a way to reach people on the most basic of needs. Pretty soon after its inception, what he wanted to call a small house church quickly escalated into a thriving fellowship-based ministry in Midtown Memphis, complete with a non-profit status, financial support, and a ready stream of volunteers committed to their cause.

On the other end of the ministry spectrum lies Bellevue Baptist Church located right on the outskirts of Memphis. Bellevue is known by many Memphians because of its sheer size, boasting an incredible church campus and a membership of roughly 30,000 congregants. More than this however, is the impressive campaign launched in 2007 by Bellevue, aptly named Bellevue Loves Memphis, which makes ministry in the city of Memphis a priority for the congregation. At the heart of this crusade lie several food ministries, most importantly the food pantry at their outreach church Impact Baptist, and their garden that is situated on Bellevue's own campus. After speaking with Ben Taylor, the director of Bellevue Loves Memphis, and with Jerry Benya who works directly with the food ministry at Impact Baptist, I learned that the Impact ministry gives away free groceries to low income families every Saturday in addition to having a fully stocked food pantry at all times for emergency situations. Back at the Bellevue campus, Jeremy Cromwell and a team of volunteers manage a several-acre garden whose fresh produce goes directly to the Memphis Food Bank, Collierville Food Bank, Impact Baptist's food pantry, and an inner city church in order to supplement the congregant's diets. These large scale ministries provided a useful contrast to the comparatively tiny Urban Bicycle Food Ministry of Rev. Clark.

Middle ground between these two ministries was found in the form of the programs in place at First Congregational Church in the neighborhood of Cooper-Young. First Congo claims an impressive array of food ministries, including Food for Families, which gives out free groceries every fourth Sunday of the month, Loaves and Fishes, a soup kitchen complete with a hot meal and oftentimes take home snacks on every Tuesday and Thursday, a food pantry located on the church campus, a community garden that helps to feed the food pantry, and even several new bee hives that are part of the family now. Molly Peacher-Ryan, the director of the food



ministries at First Congo, expressed that when she stepped into the role of director the food ministries had long been established and running successfully by the hard work and dedication of the congregants. Pastor Sonia Walker of First Congo emphasized also that the food ministries are an incredibly important part of the church, helping the community in which the church lives is an integral part of their mission, and using food is great because “food brings everybody to the table” (Walker).

## **Comparisons and Contrasts between the Ministries**

### ***The Use of Food***

These three ministries hold both large differences and strong similarities, with the most obvious similarity being that they all involve food. However, when talking with these churches the most striking revelation was that everyone cited food as being simply a means to an end. None of the ministries had a theologically scripted answer ready for the question of why they used food to minister to the needy. Only when prodded did Pastor Sonia Walker from First Congo give a response that was based on scriptural precedence when she cited the Eucharist as an example for First Congo’s soup kitchen—wherein both the volunteers and recipients share a meal together. This was a surprising turn of events to realize that the tie between food and faith was not a readily acknowledgeable idea. These churches were using food in their everyday ministries to help reach people, and they did not have a scriptural answer or precedent ready to give out to an inquiring person. Instead, food is seen to them as an obvious tool for ministering to people, and an immediate need that cannot go unnoticed. Rev. Clark called food “an open door”, and emphasized that although they have named themselves a *food* ministry specifically, they have often delivered other types of supplies to the homeless. Jerry Benya from Bellevue’s Impact

ministry said that hunger is simply such a prevalent need in the community that they chose to address it on a large scale. These ministries each saw a need, one that is relatively easy to give aid to, and decided to address it head on—while all using different approaches to achieve the same result.

### ***Evangelism in the Ministry***

One noticeable and important difference in the approaches to their respective ministries is the use, or hidden use of, evangelism. Every ministry has a unique approach to the question of evangelism, and oftentimes whether a church employs an evangelical ministry or not reflects strongly on the denomination it belongs to—by looking at the method of ministry one can determine the beliefs of the congregation. However, it is quite difficult for a church ministry to claim that it is completely un-evangelical, when it is founded and working with Christian motivations that argue differently. For example, while studying the different food programs of UBFM, First Congo, and Bellevue, it was interesting to learn that Bellevue is the only church that actively claims and acknowledges evangelism in its food ministries.

Being a Southern Baptist affiliated Church, Bellevue's beliefs include: the trinity of God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit, the scriptures as the divine and inspired word of God, that Jesus Christ has risen from the dead and will come again, and that salvation is achieved only through believing in Jesus Christ ("Southern Baptist Convention"). Since salvation is achieved only for those who confess in Jesus Christ as their Lord and Savior, evangelism plays an incredibly important role in the Baptist Church. Other than sending Baptist missionaries to other countries to spread the news of the gospel, Bellevue also focuses its attention on its own hometown of Memphis, TN. Jerry Benya of Impact Baptist Church was able to explain to me the intricate process of a Saturday grocery giveaway which takes place in the fellowship hall of the

church in Frayser. First, the recipient receives a number and when their number is called they are taken to a different section of the room to fill out information that the Memphis food bank requires such as their zip code and name. Next the person is taken to a different table and fills out a form that is specifically for Bellevue's purposes to help keep track of how many families they serve, etc. After this is when the recipient is shown to a different room that is filled with Christian counselors---mostly members of Bellevue's congregation---and the recipient is individually paired with one. They are asked if they would like to hear about the gospel and if they say no, because they still have some time available while waiting for their number to be called to receive their food, the counselor asks about their life, or if there is anything that they would like to receive prayer about (Benya). Bellevue receives 99% of their food from the Memphis Food Bank, and since the food bank states that the food has to be given away to people at absolutely no cost—which includes an evangelical message in exchange for the food---the recipients have the ability to deny that they want to hear the Gospel. Ben Taylor, when asked about the evangelical aspect of the ministry remarked that “we are not apologetic about our beliefs”, and Jerry Benya added that “the food we give away is gone every week, that's not what we care about, we care about the people who we serve”. Bellevue also acknowledged the behind-the-scenes ministry that occurs amongst their volunteers when Jerry Benya asserted that “Church is Saturday, worship is Sunday” (Benya). What he means by this is that having fellow Christians and non-Christians working together to give away their groceries to the hungry every Saturday is a unique form of church, that is too important and enriching for those involved to pass up. It is the desire to share the message of the love of Jesus Christ with the hungry and with each other that helps motivate Bellevue Baptist to be involved in a food ministry.

On the opposite end of the spectrum lie First Congo and the UBFM, both of whom do not claim to be involved in an evangelical ministry also because of their love and belief in Jesus Christ. Both ministries do not showcase an openly evangelical food ministry, but can be seen to be evangelical in ways similar to that of Bellevue. It was expressed equally at First Congo and at UBFM that the homeless people and low income families that they are serving oftentimes do not need to hear any more of the scriptures or gospel because they have been hearing it all of their lives. Rev. Clark from UBFM explained that,

We are not evangelical, I have found that a lot of the people that we meet with downtown are more spiritual than we are, and the homeless people can quote Scripture until your ears fall off and will pray with you and tell you their theory on the Wesleyan Quadrilateral...so I don't see the need there, we are going to make friends...to meet their needs (Clark).

The bicycle ministry is also an ecumenical one which encourages Christians from all denominations, and even non-Christians, to partake in the weekly ride to the homeless of Memphis. In this way, the evangelism happens mostly among the members of the ministry, not from the members to the homeless. Different Christians from all walks of life getting together to have fellowship and prayer is a definite avenue for evangelism; this evangelism simply has a different target audience than other ministries.

First Congo also places the importance of the ministry in getting to know the hungry people and not on preaching to them. Pastor Sonia Walker emphasized that the church instead of focusing on evangelism places a great emphasis on social justice issues and equality amongst all people. The purpose of the ministry she states is to meet a need that they see in the community and to do so lovingly. In the very same way that UBFM has a little hidden evangelism in their ministry—so does First Congo. First Congo, although not claiming to be evangelical, does in fact invite their recipients to attend worship on Sundays, and they do all pray together before every

Loaves and Fishes hot meal. Through these three different approaches come different results, different volunteers, and different forms of ministry.

### ***Equality in the Ministry***

When comparing the approaches of these different ministries, it is worth noting that both First Congo and UBFM share an emphasis on equality between the givers and takers of the ministry and a passion for developing relationships through the food that they are serving. First Congo is especially aware of their role in empowering the homeless and low income recipients of the free food and therefore has a higher emphasis on the type of ministry that includes community development and education. Examples of this include the community garden and the soup kitchen where the volunteers are oftentimes the recipients themselves. As mentioned earlier, the Loaves and Fishes hot meal is significant because Pastor Walker, before every meal, gathers around everyone who wants to participate including both volunteers and recipients and leads a prayer to bless the food. This may seem insignificant but in fact it lays the groundwork for breaking down the barriers that are inherent between the volunteers and recipients. By praying all together and then later sharing a meal, the idea that everyone is equal before God is enforced and put into practice.

Similarly, for the UBFM, the emphasis is placed on showing the love of Christ through forming relationships with people, which is why when they deliver their burritos the members always approach a person by simply asking if they are hungry; they do not limit their burritos to the homeless population and they ride bicycles in order to appear more equal to the people on the streets. Rev. Clark explained better the motivation when he said:

The unique thing about using a bike is when you ride up to someone asleep on the street, they see that you're cold too, or you're hot too, that you're exposed to the elements too, you're with them and you're kind of meeting them at the point that they're at. So it's a little more intimate...so it's more of a fellowship ministry than it is a food ministry (Clark).

His explanation behind the use of bicycles and food just goes to reiterate that the beliefs of the different congregations help to inform their actions in a very tangible way.

### ***How Church Structure Influences a Ministry***

In addition to a church's beliefs shaping the way that they run their ministries, the structure and resources of a church also play a major role in determining how mission looks and is carried out. The structure of a church can include its location, denomination, the amenities of its campus, the size and makeup of its congregation, its reputation, and even its leadership. With a church's particular structure comes the different type and amount of resources available for outreach and ministry. Bellevue Baptist compared to the UBFM is a useful demonstration of how structure dictates ministry and how a similar idea can be manifested in different ways.

Bellevue Baptist and the UBFM have incredibly different structures and characteristics. Bellevue's congregation numbers around 30,000 while UBFM has a maximum participation of about 20 bikers every Wednesday night. Bellevue's campus is located in the outskirts of Memphis TN, UBFM operates out of a small duplex in Midtown. Bellevue is a Southern Baptist church while UBFM describes itself as an ecumenical church, bringing together great diversity in beliefs and ideas. Bellevue has impressive financial backing and connections and UBFM relies heavily on donations and a very small budget. All of these differences and more culminate into how each of the churches executes their respective food assistance programs. Bellevue Baptist through their food ministry at Impact Baptist has a fairly regular presence in the Frayser community, but the other ministries that are a part of Bellevue Loves Memphis follow the model

of picking a different service site every month. Bellevue plans service days every month at different locations which usually is a form of cleanup or delivery of needed goods, but hardly ever returns to the same site. This is because they have a large pool of volunteers with sufficient financial backing and the volunteers do not live in the areas that they are serving, so a different service site every time is crucial to get across their message and spread their reputation. UBFM on the other hand operates out of a duplex in Midtown which is also along with downtown the neighborhood that the bikers ride around in. The UBFM volunteers thrive on a small family feeling, and the fellowship that results from this group of people benefits not only the recipients of the food but also the volunteers themselves. It would be ridiculous for UBFM to take a different route every week because of their small volunteer pool and emphasis on creating relationships with the homeless and hungry. On the same note, it would also be an interesting choice if Bellevue decided to pour all of its resources and people into one single venture with only one purpose—instead it does outreach all over the city, using multiple forms of ministry and relief to suite the interests and talents of its large volunteer population. Along with Memphis's great diversity of citizens comes great diversity amongst churches which fuels different and creative strategies to try and solve the same problem of hunger.

### ***Format of Ministry***

Although the three different churches all address the problem of hunger in a structurally different way, they all use the same format of relief based aid—with varying intensities. First Congo however did showcase the best understanding and use of a development form of ministry. When doing any kind of charity work or mission there are three generally recognized stages of aid: relief, rehabilitation, and development (Corbett and Fikkert). The first stage, relief, when applied to hunger can be described as the administering of emergency food. When natural

disasters or unexpected crises hit a community or an individual, oftentimes food security is one of the biggest problems that is encountered. The system of emergency food relief that is put in place by the government is oftentimes supported by the private sector in the form of church relief. Because of this intervention by the private sector, emergency food in the form of soup kitchens or food pantries oftentimes becomes less of an emergency occurrence and more of an everyday reliance for families. First Congo's ministries incorporate more of the last two stages of rehabilitation and development into their programs by focusing on empowerment, education, and justice. The other two ministries, UBFM and Bellevue Baptist, heavily use the relief form of aid, and while perpetual use of this form of aid is not ideal, there are valid reasons for why this method has been chosen and is currently in place. For the UBFM, their ministry of relief is what developed for them simply because of feasibility. The group meets only once a week, which limits the amount of involvement that they can have in a community, and they simply deliver a quick dinner and a kind word of encouragement. As much as it would be better to run a ministry which dealt more with the issues of helping people get off the streets to better their lives, UBFM is taking their limited time and resources to fulfill the immediate bodily needs of their fellow Memphians. Bellevue has also thought about the fact that their ministry operates as a relief based one, and Ben Taylor even remarked that "there should definitely be a balance between the two [aid and development] but right now we are finding that going past aid is a slow process" (Taylor). Bellevue is aware that they are only providing a band-aid solution to the problem of hunger, but when talking with the men in charge of the ministry, I was able to witness that they are at a point in their work where moving past the relief stage of simply giving away free groceries seems like an impossibility. These three ministries, as different as they may appear to be, all involve some level of need-relieving ministry that struggles to be able to do much more



than offer a surface solution to the hungry and homeless of Memphis. Even though this reliance on the relief method does vary in the ministries in the extent of use, it is still important to recognize its existence.

### **The Effects of a Relief Style Food Ministry**

With this method of aid begs the question of whether or not the church is the one who should be responsible for so much of the relief that goes out to the community. There is a struggle, a give and take, between the effectiveness of the government programs aimed towards helping the poor, and the steps that the church has to take in order to care for the hungry people left behind. Through researching the three ministries in Memphis and starting to understand better the food assistance programs that are available through the government, I have come to wonder what the real effect is of these free food programs on the hungry population of America. Each church in Memphis that has a food ministry—besides simply First Congo, Bellevue, and UBFM---feels on one level or another that giving to the needy is a part of their Christian lives. Jeremy Benya illustrated this by quoting 1 Samuel 15:22 when he was asked about the reasoning behind the ministry: “Has the Lord as great delight in burnt offerings and sacrifices, as in obeying the voice of the Lord? Behold, to obey is better than sacrifice, and to heed than the fat of rams” (NKJV). Obeying the commandments of the Bible to serve the needy and give respect and help to the poor is one of the main reasons that the private charity sector is headed by churches. This distribution of responsibility in turn gives people a way to supplement their government food aid, which is oftentimes not enough to avoid hunger. Churches, as discussed earlier, are places that seem built for ministry and are filled with people whose beliefs instruct them to try and fight the inequality in our world. However, the format of nearly every church food ministry in Memphis (or any other type of ministry for that matter) is one of relief, of

providing free emergency food to struggling families and individuals. Even First Congo, which is easily the most progressive and community minded church that I studied, has most of its resources going towards free emergency food. Emergency food and the programs that provide it like soup kitchens, food pantries, food banks, and food rescue operations are part of a hotly debated issue. The question is whether or not having the prominent form of hunger relief come in the form of a free handout, is actually bettering the situation, or worsening it. In *Sweet Charity: Emergency Food and the end of Entitlement*, Janet Poppendieck generalizes her critique of the food relief system to include all of the private sector charity, not simply the religious organizations, and asks what is “the cost of kindness?” (38). She argues that the emergency food programs are as popular and well received as they are because they help to relieve our conscience, in other words they are a “moral relief bargain” (39). She posits that different religious organizations, not simply Christian ones, can be especially affected by this idea of a “moral relief bargain” because of their admonishments from their religions to serve the needy and the poor of their community.

There are currently many calls for reform to the aid system, both within and without of the religious community. A recent documentary entitled *A Place at the Table* discusses some of the issues that can result from the dependency of our government aid on the private sector, and the problems that this creates for the food system in general. This documentary and the conversation that it creates over the current state of the American food and relief systems, is one that does not focus on the work that the church is currently doing, but instead shows the political and social climate that the church is working within. The co-director Kristi Jacobson explained the argument of the film recently in an interview with Bill Moyers when she advocated strongly for the strengthening of government aid programs and the lessening of dependence on the safety

nets put in place by the private sector (Jacobson and Chilton). However, this approach to fixing the broken aid system is hailed by many to be an unnecessary use of government money. Giving a greater budget to the government's emergency food systems (food stamps, etc.) is claimed to be a waste of the already scarce government resources, especially when the church and other private organizations are picking up the slack and feeding the hungry people that are being left behind. Because of this interdependence and complicated relationship between the government programs and the private sector, one cannot enact any form of change without strongly affecting the other. Understanding the political environment that the church works within, is crucial for grasping the restrictions that are placed on the church, which shows in part why it has delved so deeply into the relief form of aid.

### **Moving Towards a Different Form of Ministry**

We have already discussed how important fellowship and relationships are to the church and how food is used often as a uniting factor amongst the congregation. Well, knowing that the food ministries of a church have both the purpose of ministering to the hungry and also to the very members of the church themselves emphasizes the importance that these programs hold in the lives of congregants. The importance of these ministries to the churches is what keeps the food pantries, soup kitchens, and more, close to the heart of a congregation, which in turn continues to lighten the load of the government in response to hunger. However, I would argue that because the church has been able to sustain relief programs for so long, it shows that they would also be a great place to institute different forms of ministry that would create a longer and deeper impact. As mentioned earlier, the three generally recognized levels of aid as defined in *When Helping Hurts: Alleviating Poverty Without Hurting the Poor. . .and Yourself*, are relief, rehabilitation, and development. The relief stage—being the easiest method to utilize and

oftentimes the most apparent solution---is what churches focus on with giving emergency food in the form of food pantries, soup kitchens, etc. However, the development stage is something that the church is also inherently suited for, and a step that would be incredibly important for the community. This community development form of ministry can be defined largely as “involvement in activities encouraged by your congregation that support the physical, material, emotional, and social well-being of people from your congregation, neighborhood, and community” (Hugen et al. 413). This type of ministry goes one step past the current structure of our food aid, which is in the form of free food/groceries, and really works hard to heal the hunger from the inside out. Some examples of this could include forming community gardens maintained by homeless or low-income individuals, giving educational classes or workshops for job training or interview tips, giving cooking classes to moms who need to know how to stretch their dollar while maintaining a healthy diet, etc. First Congo was able to institute some of these solutions on a small scale, but for these programs to be effective this form of ministry cannot be the minority in Memphis. These solutions are not easy, nor are they perfect, but they could be a way to develop ministry that goes past the relief stage and works towards rehabilitation and development. Since churches are staples in every neighborhood in Memphis, they have the staying power and the ability to really get to know a community, the ability to impact youth, and the ability to create and foster creativity and hope in times of need. Channeling these characteristics and resources into educational programs and community growth initiatives would be a wonderful step forward for churches, and would greatly benefit the community as well.

This ideal of a church involved in multiple stages of ministry is a difficult dream to attain at this moment in our country. As it stands now, the church is doing what it can to address the issues that stand before it, but it has significant limitations placed upon it. All of the

representatives of the different ministries that I spoke with acknowledged that what they are currently doing in the form of aid is not sustainable, nor is it ideal for tackling the issue of hunger head on. However, they all also approached their predicament with a legitimate list of reasons as to why they could not simply change the courses of their respective programs to focus on community development when the need of hunger was so clearly sitting in front of them. One reason is certainly that the government and the church have a closely tied relationship—no matter if they should or should not—that places restrictions on both of these institutions and makes it more difficult for one or the other to change the way that they are delivering relief to the needy of America.

### **Different Solutions to Consider**

Since there is no easy resolution to this problem, revitalizing how the church thinks about and executes ministry can be a step in the right direction. Working with communities to build better infrastructure, relationships, and better access to well-paying jobs will in turn be manifested in the drop of hunger and rise in healthy citizens. Gail Feenstra, Food Systems Analyst at the University of California at Davis, does an excellent job of demonstrating the close connection between having a healthy food system in a community and the effect that this has on the community as a whole. Feenstra states that “food is an important component of a healthy, sustainable community and the food system has a major impact on employment, waste management, transportation, and the health and well-being of the larger ecosystem” (31). With churches working in their communities to create a better food system---not simply the distribution of emergency food—the long term impact would be incredible. A possible first step in a church making the shift to a more relational form of ministry could be “to reform existing commodity-based ministries so as to decrease their potential for abuse and increase their

opportunities for relationship building” (Sherman 139). Taking a small first step such as this one, which works within the existing church structure to produce a different outcome, is a great stepping stone for churches who want to start pushing the limits of their current ministries.

To make the matter more personal, in Memphis, TN there are already individuals and organizations that are making strides towards changing the way that the church approaches its relationship to food and the type of ministry that results. One such organization is the Memphis Center for Food and Faith (MCFF) which is “part theological institute and part community development ministry” (Ranson 16). The Center is a new presence in Memphis that works to encourage the church to think about the ways in which it interacts with food, and to realize the power that it has to conduct change within its congregation and beyond. The executive director for the Center, Noah Campbell, met with me to discuss his vision for the future of the relationship between the church and food. He gave me an encouraging glimpse into the work of the Center which includes helping congregations to buy and source their food locally, and to engage with the needy in their communities by working in the food justice issues present in low income neighborhoods. In a recent article found in the Church Health Reader, Campbell states that “our vision is to connect congregational food practices to ministries of creation care and community renewal” (16). This type of food awareness in congregations that the Center is advocating for is an important step in moving past the present food aid system consisting almost solely of food pantries, soup kitchens, etc.

### **Conclusion**

Congregational food practices are an integral part of the current food system. Congregations have considerable buying power within their localities, and if even half of the churches in Memphis started attempting to buy locally and create sustainable food ministries, it

would enact serious change in the political and environmental landscape of our Bluff City. However, the change needs to happen on several ends. Examples of the avenues that can be taken to enact change are the government making policy changes to their food aid, employers paying an actual living wage, and congregations becoming aware of their role in the problem of hunger going past simple relief ministries, All three of the ministries that I was able to study—First Congo Church, UBFM, and Bellevue Baptist—have food ministries in place that reflect their respective beliefs, structures, and missions and that make an impact on the food system of Memphis. These ministries have stepped up to the call of the needy and have handled hunger how they believe is best. The time for churches to be simple emergency shelters however is at an end. These places of worship have the resources necessary for community development, and following the path of development will lead to greater rewards for both the needy and the congregation.

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