

The World Food Crisis

Churches Sounded Warnings Years Ago

By Religious News Service

Almost overnight the world food crisis has jolted the American people. The fact that 460 million human beings face starvation is terrifying.

But a full decade ago, even before, a farsighted group in the Churches knew and warned that famine, the Third Horseman of the Apocalypse, was saddling up for a devastating global ride.

To some religious leaders, the November World Food Conference in Rome was long, long overdue. Labeling as "new" a proposal heard in Rome, that citizens of rich lands should eat less must have depressed church food specialists, who made that suggestion years back.

Neither governments nor the public, including many church members, paid much attention in the mid-1960s when a chorus of diverse religious voices spoke bluntly about the specter of famine.

Perhaps it sounded exaggerated when in 1968, summarizing several years of research, the National Council of Churches declared, "The time of world famine has begun."

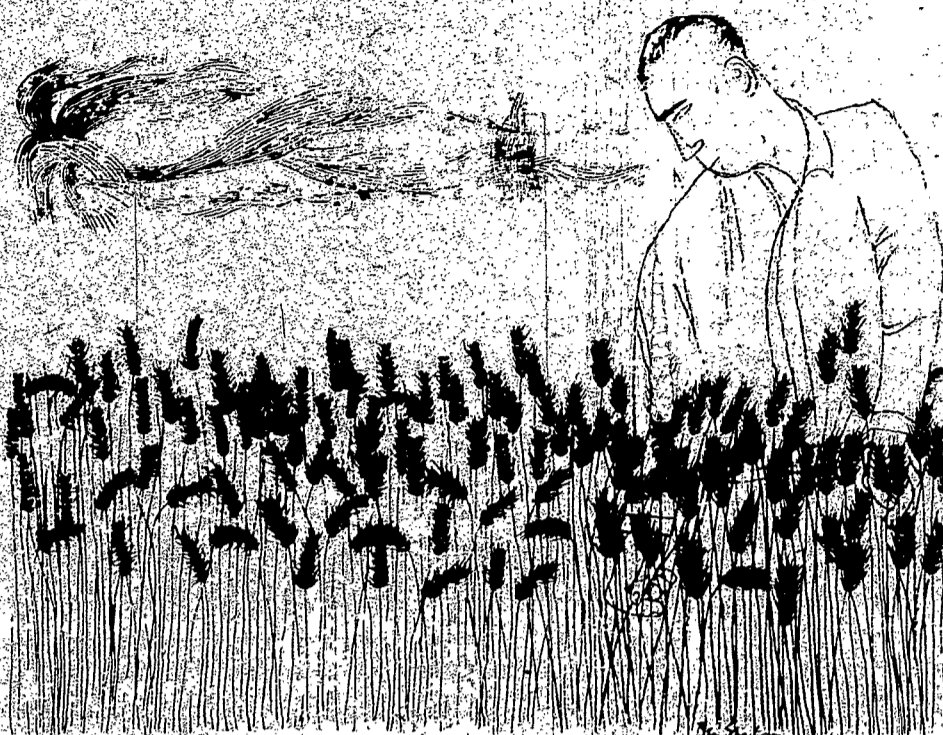
Perhaps it sounded too hard when a year earlier Christianity Today, the evangelical magazine, called for a massive Christian anti-hunger program, based chiefly on self-help technical assistance.

Perhaps it sounded too expensive when in 1961 a Roman Catholic newspaper (The Courier) in Oklahoma City described the cooperation needed among farmers, engineers, dietitians and ordinary, concerned individuals to "attack the world food problems."

Such voices were talking about more than religious or governmental response to natural disasters. Their message was very close to that being broadcast today. The world is close to running out of food to feed its people, or at least is not keeping up with food requirements.

Churches and religious groups were not alone, beginning in the late 1950s, in efforts to alert the public to real and potential famine. Scientists, certain international agencies (especially the United Nations' Food and Agriculture Organization) and, at times, national states dramatized the hunger problem and initiated life-sustaining projects.

It is, however, the Church in



Man and Nature by Ben Shahn (1898-1969), courtesy Kennedy Galleries. (RNS)

this country more than any other U.S. institution which has tried to drive home the lesson that hunger and starvation cannot be solved by reports or pennies in an alms box. Through periodicals, religious education curricula, films and speeches, the facts on famine have been kept up-to-date.

That people should have listened to the religious voices more carefully is now abundantly clear. The religious warnings turned on one or both of two observations: 1) Those who have food have the duty to feed those with none. 2) Governments and social institutions, particularly in prosperous nations, tend to ignore the need both to prepare for (or control) growing world population and to achieve greater justice in the distribution of available food.

Bread is nothing new in the history of religion's concerns. Feeding the Hebrew people during their wilderness wanderings was a major problem Moses took to his God. Jesus refused to send crowds of listeners away hungry. Sharing sustenance was a mark of the earliest Christian community in Jerusalem.

The contemporary religious concern for food extends back at least to humanitarian efforts during World War II. Organized religion played pivotal roles in caring for World War refugees and, then, in feeding the people of ravaged European lands after the armed conflict ended.

Agencies established or expanded in the 1940s were continued as the world returned to peace, for wave after wave of human need arose, notably

among the poor of Asia, Africa and Latin America.

As new nations emerged from colonialism in Asia and Africa, so too did enormous challenges in agriculture, medicine, education and social organization. By the early 1960s it was clear to the U.N. Food and Agriculture Organization that hunger was one of, perhaps the biggest, problem facing the family of nations.

The question in the early 1960s was not if but how food could be provided to the world. About half of the globe's people were estimated to be hungry — although not necessarily starving — in 1961 and 1962. Crops were abundant in North America, the earth's major bread-basket, and food prices were relatively low in the U.S.

There was a considerable optimism about human ability to conquer hunger as new agricultural methods were introduced into India, Kenya, Brazil and other poor lands. U.S. surpluses were available when drought, flood, earthquake or war happened.

As the 1960s slipped by, efforts seemed less and less effective in keeping up with food needs. Spiraling population growth was a contributing factor to the problem.

First in sub-Saharan Africa and parts of India, then in East Africa, Sri Lanka, Bangladesh, Laos, Cambodia, Haiti, El Salvador, Honduras and Guyana, the list could go on, the Third Horseman gained control.

By 1974, U.N. Secretary General Kurt Waldheim an-

nounced that 32 nations were on the brink of starvation.

The National and World Councils of Churches, Caritas International, Catholic Relief Services, Oxfam (British), Bread for the World (German) and dozens of Protestant and Roman Catholic mission agencies knew this as early as 1965, and insist that human foresight, ability and compassion can wipe out famine.

"Enough food can be produced for all — and more to come — if man applies himself intelligently to the resources put at his disposal by God," Msgr. Luigi G. Ligutti, then executive secretary of the National Catholic Rural Life Conference, said in 1957.

Pope Paul's remarks to the 1974 World Food Conference were along the same lines.

There is a distinct religious reluctance to back away from the belief that human beings can learn to use resources intelligently, but some doubts have come up in religious circles. Confronted with the dimensions of the food crisis last August, a group of ecumenical leaders gathered in West Berlin had no response except that of falling on their knees in prayer.

One cause of despair is the unwillingness of the industrial nations of the West, the Communist nations of the East and some oil-rich states of the Middle East to allocate sizeable parts of their goods to the 32 starving countries. Six months after Mr. Waldheim called for \$5 billion to save the most desperate nations, only \$2.4 billion had been pledged, and \$1.5 billion of that came from the Shah of Iran.

The percentage of gross national product which industrial countries give for aid to the starving is fractional. In 1972, the U.S. gave 0.66 per cent, Canada 0.98 per cent and France the high of 1.06 per cent. The Communist world did worse.

As 1974 draws to a close, food has virtually replaced the weather as a most talked about public issue. Will it end with talk?

A scientist addressing a recent convention of the American Lutheran Church put the challenge in sharp language. The food problem, the speaker said, may determine "whether man is the perfectible creature our Christian religion teaches him to be, or whether he is at heart a savage, with a thin veneer of civilization which drops away when the going gets tough."

Birth Certificate . . . Then Off to Arabia

"Dad, will you please send to me, a copy of my birth certificate" with that request and three weeks later, Dennis A. Meritt Jr. (former member of St. Andrew's Parish), general curator at Lincoln Park Zoo in Chicago, was on his way to Saudi Arabia.

A large architect firm in Chicago, working with the government of Arabia, was ready to submit plans for a multi-million dollar natural habitat zoo. Meritt, with the approval of the Chicago Zoo director, was to act as consultant in the presentation.

One of the stipulations put forth was that the contacts between the United States team and the foreign government, was to be by Christians.

Meritt, who has been with the Lincoln Park Zoo for the past six years, was an adviser to the architects when the Chicago Zoo was modernized and enlarged.

Contacted at his home, Dennis was enthusiastic in describing the 9,000-mile trip. The people of Arabia were excited to work with the American team. Meritt

convinced the overseas zoologists to conduct a physical specimen inventory in the field of endangered species, something that had not been done before.

To find a suitable zoo site, the municipality pilot offered a helicopter flight of the area.

With more than 900,000 square miles, with a rainfall of less than one inch per year, and with no visible water of any kind above ground, the proposed plans had to be in keeping with the climatic conditions that vary from 85

degrees to nearly 120 degrees temperature.

Jokingly, Meritt quoted the price of water at more than the price of a gallon of gasoline. (The price of gasoline is about 12c per gallon)

Dining with the prince, with a menu consisting of camelburgers, the American team was hosted by the Saudi Arabian government zoological members.

Meritt is married to the former Gail Fitzpatrick. They have two

daughters, Laura Ann and Jill Marie. The Meritts were employed at the Rochester General Hospital in the fields of research, eye bank, and radiology before moving to the Chicago area.

DANCE AT K OF C

Hornell — St. Ignatius parishioners are invited to the Nov. 30 dance and buffet to be held at the K of C building on Main St. Tickets are \$4.00 per person. The rectory number is 324-5811.