

Study Guide
for
Exodus from Hunger
We Are Called to Change the Politics of Hunger
by David Beckmann

Study Guide by Kathy Wolf Reed



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Introduction

In 2010, Lutheran pastor and economist David Beckmann was awarded the World Food Prize in recognition of his leadership in the global battle against hunger and poverty. Though his experiences in the realms of food, faith, and politics are varied, Beckmann's primary role for the past twenty years has been as the president of Bread for the World. Throughout his book *Exodus from Hunger*, Beckmann affirms the ways people of faith have contributed to fighting hunger (food banks, monetary support, can drives) while challenging them to further involvement in national politics. In his own words:

This book is designed to help spiritually grounded people be effective leaders in achieving changes through U.S. politics that would dramatically reduce hunger and poverty in our country and around the world. (p. 13)

This book is intended for any adult group with a heart for hunger and poverty issues. Regardless of how familiar your group is with Bread for the World, *Exodus from Hunger* gives helpful insight into the organization's history and mission and the greater context of world hunger. Beckmann's insistence that people of faith and faith organizations involve themselves in the U.S. political system offers great opportunity for groups to discuss their personal and communal understandings of faith and politics.

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Book Summary

Beyond the introduction, *Exodus from Hunger* is divided into three accessible sections:

Chapters 1–3: Where Things Stand Now

Chapters 4–8: Where We Want to Go

Chapters 9–11: How We Get There Together

While the book study is similarly divided, groups may decide ahead of time if they would like to alter this format. For example, if a highly involved and passionate group of participants is anticipated, it might be wise to stretch chapters 4–8 into two sessions, making this a four-week study instead of the formatted three weeks. If the study is being used in a retreat setting, groups may want to supplement the book study with other materials on food, faith, and politics and allow participants to draw their own connections between sources. (See the “For More Information” sections at the end of each session.)

Materials Needed

These items will be needed for each session:

- Copies of this handout (may be distributed ahead of time)
- Copy of *Exodus from Hunger*
- Bibles
- Whiteboard or newsprint
- Markers

Hints for Group Discussion

As with any book study, it is best if everyone has read the book carefully before the session begins. However, it may be helpful to appoint a leader or two for each session and have these individuals read with the study guide in mind, making notes as to topics or questions they think the group would enjoy discussing.

Do not feel pressure to complete all the activities or address all the questions listed below—pick and choose. Your group may prefer to spend its time on a few questions rather than on all of them. Go with the energy in the room!

If conversation begins to wander, help keep your group's focus by creating a "parking lot" on a whiteboard or piece of newsprint where thoughts and questions may be recorded and revisited later. Appoint one person to record these ideas throughout the discussion. This technique will help keep the session within the predetermined time frame as well as keep the conversation from straying.

Because *Exodus from Hunger* deals candidly with the subject of faith and politics, begin by acknowledging that there likely will be a variety of opinions in the room. Should discussion become tense, any participant has the right to invoke the use of mutual invitation during a session. In the process of mutual invitation, one person speaks while everyone else listens, and when he or she finishes, this person invites another member of the group to speak, until all get a turn. Each person may also choose to pass or pass for now.

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Session One: Chapters 1–3

Where Things Stand Now

Opening (5 minutes)

Goals for the Session

The group will begin to consider how Beckmann’s book approaches the ideas of individual faith in action versus communal faith in action through political participation. They will also explore how our personal awareness of hunger and poverty issues compels involvement in issues of justice and peace.

Brief Summary of Chapters 1–3

In his first three chapters, Beckmann offers readers a picture of hunger and poverty at the global level. Through personal profiles as well as economic statistics, readers learn of the widespread hunger issues that plague individuals of every gender, age, race, and creed. Beckmann explores the relationship between hunger and poverty, noting how women and children so often become the worst victims of “food insecurity.” Urging readers to become involved with hunger issues through the U.S. government, Beckmann concludes this section with success stories from nations around the world that have used governmental programs to fight hunger and poverty even under the most difficult circumstances.

Opening Prayer

*God of the hungry
of the poor
of the sinner
the weak
the forgotten.*

*God who comes to us in drought
who comes to us in famine
in confusion
in darkness
in death*

*Feed us now with your Word
with your wisdom
your strength
your Spirit.*

Amen.

Exploring (35 minutes)

Questions for Discussion

1. Beckmann opens chapter 1 with profiles of two individuals he has met. How do we approach political topics differently when we are familiar with the personal stories of those involved?
2. Beckmann seems to pay a lot of attention to individual versus communal participation. Does your faith community tend to emphasize one over the other with regard to issues such as addressing hunger? How does this play out, for better or worse, in your community?
3. Consider the eight Millennium Development Goals found on page 32. Beckmann states that half of Americans will hear these goals and consider them “utopian.” What struggles do Christians face as we try to preach justice and peace in a broken world? How might the words of Jesus to his disciples in Matthew 5:1–12 (the Beatitudes) speak to this struggle?
4. Read the following quote (on p. 39) from Beckmann’s colleague Jerome Sarkar: “Poverty is not a curse. Poverty brings us closer to Almighty God. Bangladesh is home to millions of poor people, and the poor know that God is with them. Who else do they need?” What strikes you about Sarkar’s take on poverty and faith? Do you agree with him?
5. In chapter 3, Beckmann illustrates the ways that seven countries have addressed hunger through their political systems. Do you see any similarities among these efforts? Can you imagine what successes or pitfalls programs such as these might see in the United States?

Possible Activities

1. Beckmann uses a quote (on p. 44) from Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., “There is no deficit in human resources; the deficit is in human will.” Divide into two groups and give each group a few minutes to summarize a position that is either in agreement or disagreement with this statement.
2. Appendix A (found at the end of this study guide) includes several questions about poverty and hunger in the United States. Divide into groups and choose a leader to read the questions, giving each group a few moments to try to guess the correct answer.

Responding (5 minutes)

Reflect on what in *Exodus from Hunger* (so far) feels hopeful and what feels daunting. As the study moves into session 2, “Where We Want to Go,” what questions will you bring from session 1? Record these questions in the “parking lot” and save them for future reference.

Closing (2 minutes)

Prayer

God, we pray today for communities of faith everywhere discerning to do your will.

We can do something about the world’s spiritual hunger for your Word.

We can do something about the world’s physical hunger for clean water and fresh bread.

But only with your help.

So help us, Lord—help us.

Related Scripture

Matthew 5:1–12

For More Information

- “Contact Your Regional Organizer,” Bread for the World, <http://www.bread.org/contact/regional.html>.
- “Feasts and Famines” issue, *@This Point: Theological Investigations in Church and Culture* 3, no. 2 (Fall 2008), <http://www.atthispoint.net/archives/>.
- L. Shannon Jung, “God’s Diet and the Retraining of Desire,” *@This Point* 3, no. 2 (Fall 2008), <http://www.atthispoint.net/articles/gods-diet-and-the-retraining-of-desire/191/>.

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Session Two: Chapters 4–8

Where We Want to Go Now

Opening (5 minutes)

Goals for the Session

Participants will consider what role helping others in need plays in the greater landscape of Christian faith. They will also use examples of celebrities' as well as everyday individuals' involvement in hunger politics to reflect on their own efforts in the fight against hunger. Finally, participants will imagine how today's hope for a "justice revival" has previously occurred in U.S. history and what faith communities today can do to bring about this revival.

Brief Summary of Chapters 4–8

The second section of *Exodus from Hunger* begins by using numerous Scripture references to explore how, throughout history, God's faithful have participated in justice toward the poor and vulnerable. Beckmann emphasizes that "work for justice is a way to connect to God," a means by which all God's followers "are invited to be part of what God is doing in the world" (p. 66). American readers are then encouraged to see participation in the effort to overcome hunger as a means of creating hope beyond the current struggles of our nation, a notion that Beckmann illustrates using historical examples.

The work and mission of Bread for the World is then used as an illustration of how people of faith can influence political leaders and systems, with many individuals' past efforts cited as evidence for success. Beckmann goes on to celebrate the influence of specific celebrities, church leaders, and political officials in the fight against world hunger, concluding with "an agenda for policy change." This agenda includes four specific issues of great importance and potential: child hunger, the global hunger and food security initiative, development assistance, and the next farm bill. Beckmann concludes this section by noting that the world is at "a pivotal point in the history of poverty" (p. 152), and God's faithful are called to act.

Opening Prayer

*Holy God,
each and every day you invite us to be part of your work in the world.
In this time now help us to be open to your calling
to do justice
and love kindness
and walk humbly with you.
In service to you and one another
may we accept your invitation with delight,
and go about your work with dedication and love.
Amen.*

Exploring (35 minutes)

Questions for Discussion

1. In chapter 4, Beckmann writes, “We can go to church and sing great hymns, but if we don’t help people in need, this is made-up religion rather than connection to the real God. We can read spiritual books and pursue a wholesome lifestyle, but if we don’t help people in need, our faith remains self-centered” (p. 77). Divide into two groups and have one group list the virtues of Beckmann’s statement while the other group lists what some find problematic with these words. They do not need to agree on their list. Then come together as a group to share your findings.
2. Have a volunteer read 1 Corinthians 12:14–26 to the group. Beckmann suggests that one of the greatest threats to U.S. stability is that “little progress has been made toward moderation of the deep and bitter divisions *within* U.S. society and politics” (p. 89). Consider what implications Paul’s words to the divided church in Corinth have for the divisions in U.S. society today. Have you experienced similar divisions in any church, civic organization, or other community where you have been a member? How did these divisions inhibit the progress of that community?
3. Citing the commitment of individuals such as Bono, Brad Pitt, Angelina Jolie, and the Gates family, Beckmann suggests that “their example is even more important than their money” (p. 119). Have a volunteer read Luke 21:1–4 (the Widow’s Offering) to the group. Consider your own community of

faith. What messages exist in your community about the act of giving? Is it about setting an example? Is it primarily a financial transaction? In what ways are members encouraged to give?

4. In chapter 8, Beckmann notes that “U.S. religious history has been marked by a series of revivals, starting with the Great Awakening of the 1730s. At these times, many people have been gripped by the gospel and drawn into a deeper relationship with God. Some of these revivals have also contributed to movements of social reform, and that’s what we should be praying and working for now—a justice revival” (p. 151). What are some other examples in U.S. history when individuals have been “gripped by the gospel”? As a group, imagine what a “justice revival” would look like in your community. What would have to change? What is already going on in your community that might give life to this revival? Have a volunteer record some of these images on the whiteboard or newsprint as ideas are shared.

Possible Activities

1. On pages 96–98 Beckmann tells the story of Pat Pelham, a young mother from Birmingham, Alabama. On page 103 he shares the story of Connie Wick, an elderly retiree from Indianapolis. Take a moment to study these women’s stories. Then, on the whiteboard or newsprint, list the ways these women were similar in their circumstances and their approaches to grassroots organization. Then list the ways in which these women differed. How are their lives like or unlike the lives of people in your group? How might their efforts offer hope to those looking to become involved with U.S. politics?
2. An activity to take home: The Cents-Ability program began in 1976 as the “Two-Cents-a-Meal” project of the Presbyterian Women. This practice encourages all to contribute a few cents at every meal as an expression of thanks for what you have received and a commitment to share God’s blessings with others. Place a bowl or jar at the center of the table where you normally eat your meals, incorporate this act as a part of your pre-meal blessing, and at the end of each week or month or quarter, donate the accumulated change to a food charity. This practice can serve as a wonderful educational opportunity for children and youth.

Responding (5 minutes)

Return to Paul's words in 1 Corinthians 12:14–26. Note particularly verse 26:

If one member suffers, all suffer together with it; if one member is honored, all rejoice together with it.

What of Beckmann's book that you have read so far gives you reason to rejoice? What causes you to suffer? How are the words and work of those associated with Bread for the World reflective of the greater Christian community?

Closing (2 minutes)

Prayer

*Lord, we know
that if one member of your body suffers
then we too are suffering
that you too are suffering.
And so we pray
that in any place we see hurt
you would help us to be instruments of your healing.
In any place we see struggle
you would help us to be instruments of your reconciliation.
In any place we see forsakenness
you would help us to be reminders of your hope.
Amen.*

Related Scriptures

Luke 21:1–4
1 Corinthians 12:14–26

For More Information

Learn more about Cents-ability and other programs of the Presbyterian Hunger Program at <http://gamc.pcusa.org/ministries/hunger>.

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Session Three: Chapters 9–11

How We Get There Together

Opening (5 minutes)

Goals for the Session

Participants will consider how the spirituality of their faith community is related to its practices of mission and outreach. They also will reflect on their personal faith journeys and share with one another how God might be calling them to action.

Brief Summary of Chapters 9–11

In the final section of the book, Beckmann reflects on his life experiences and the opportunities for service and advocacy that have shaped his faith. He considers how God has worked through family members, education, and career development to bring him to his current perspective. Beckmann then shares his sense of calling for his future endeavors. Chapter 10 offers broad ideas of how readers might become involved in the fight against hunger (prayer, direct service, and responsible food practices) as well as specific tools for engagement, such as particular books and organizations. Beckmann closes with a reminder that our greatest strength in the movement against hunger is the strength and love of God. As Christians, we are called to allow ourselves to be loved by God and used for God's purposes in the world.

Opening Prayer

*God of miracles,
God of joy,
God who moves among us
and interrupts us
in new and surprising ways.*

Interrupt us now

*and help us to see with new eyes
all that you intend for us to do
and all that you intend for us to be.*

In the name of your son, Jesus

*who will always be for us
what we cannot be for each other.*

Amen.

Exploring (35 minutes)

Questions for Discussion

1. Beckmann quotes Stokely Carmichael (of the 1960's Black Power movement), "Don't come to our communities to work. Go back to your own communities and change things there" (pp. 157–58). How would this philosophy of mission benefit your community of faith? How might it negatively affect your community of faith? What are some specific changes you think need to be made in your local community?
2. Reflecting on his own experiences, Beckmann says, "My experience of teaching about justice quickly convinced me that lack of information was not the main obstacle. The persistence of injustice was rooted in spiritual problems" (p. 158). Think for a few moments of times when you have seen injustices or conflict that were the results of spiritual problems. Do you see a situation in your faith community today that needs spiritual care or resolution? How do communities work to overcome spiritual problems?
3. The first step Beckmann offers in deepening one's personal involvement in the fight against hunger is to pray intentionally. As a group, say together the Lord's Prayer, but after each line allow several moments to reflect silently and carefully on the words in that line ("Our Father, who art in heaven . . . Hallowed be thy name . . ."). Allow the Spirit to guide the length of your pauses. When you have finished, share what felt different about praying this familiar prayer in this way. Did you find new meaning in any of the words?
4. In chapter 11, Beckmann observes, "When Jesus miraculously fed thousands of people, the crowd got really excited" (p. 184). Have someone in the group read John 6:27–35 to the

group. What do you think Jesus meant when he distinguished between “the food that perishes” and “the food that endures”? Do his words mean that we should not work to provide “food that will perish” for those in need?

Possible Activities

1. Beckmann spends an entire chapter tracing how God has been preparing him throughout his life for his current role of service. Draw a time line of your own life that includes significant moments in your faith journey. Reflect on how God has challenged, equipped, and prepared you for your current role of service. Share any thoughts you may have as to where God might be calling you next.
2. In chapter 10, Beckmann encourages readers to think about how the context in which they work and live might be an opportunity for education or service toward hunger and poverty issues. As individuals, consider your own context and how you might be able to creatively find ways to address hunger issues. Share your ideas with one another, then think about your larger faith community and opportunities to involve others.

Responding (5 minutes)

Return to Beckmann’s reflections on Jesus’ feeding of the crowds in John’s gospel. How did the crowd’s excitement over that miracle give life to the ministries that lie ahead? How does our own excitement give life to new ministries and opportunities for service in our faith communities? What will you take with you from the reading and discussion of this book?

Closing (2 minutes)

Prayer

*Living God,
out of nothing, you created
out of crumbs, you fed
out of death, you live.*

*In our lives together
may we see and truly believe
that nothing is impossible to you
that everything is precious to you
that we are forever indebted to you.
Feed us, so that we may feed others,
now and forever.*

Amen.

Related Scripture

John 6:27–35

For More Information

Barbara Kingsolver with Camille Kingsolver and Steven L. Hopp,
Animal, Vegetable, Miracle: A Year of Food Life (New York:
HarperCollins, 2007).

Appendix A

Hunger and Poverty Trivia

(Answers appear in bold.)

- In 2008, the average monthly cost of a two-bedroom apartment in the United States was
 - \$521
 - \$621
 - \$721
 - **\$821**
- What percentage of households in the United States are hungry or at risk of hunger?
 - 5–6 percent
 - 9–10 percent
 - **14–15 percent**
 - 19–20 percent
- A family with an infant and a four-year-old child face average annual child-care costs of
 - almost \$10,000
 - almost \$12,000
 - almost \$14,000
 - **almost \$16,000**
- What percentage of single mothers who head households work?
 - 36 percent
 - 56 percent
 - **76 percent**
 - 96 percent
- A person working full time at the minimum wage of \$7.25 per hour earns approximately how much in a year?
 - **\$14,500**
 - \$15,500
 - \$16,500
 - \$17,500