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He writes the wrongs of hunger

Soft-spoken scientist from Indy takes reins of group that uses letters to lobby on behalf of poor

Author: Robert King, The Indianapolis Star

When it comes to fighting hunger, Dave Miner knows most people think of canned food drives, working in soup kitchens or writing checks to relief agencies.

Miner supports those things, too. But the 53-year-old chemist from Indianapolis has spent the past 30 years using another tool to fight hunger --letters. More precisely, letters to Congress.

As an activist with Bread for the World, a Christian grass-roots organization that lobbies against hunger, Miner has been part of a letter-writing army that has influenced Congress on some big issues, including supporting food stamps and aid for poor women, infants and children, and supporting relief for foreign countries plagued by famine.

Now, Miner has been chosen to lead Bread for the World as chairman of its governing board -- a board whose members include two sitting U.S. senators, former Republican presidential nominee Bob Dole and former White House chief of staff Leon Panetta. It's an unpaid, volunteer position.

Miner, a soft-spoken scientist who works for a division of Eli Lilly and Co. that makes pharmaceuticals for animals, might seem an unlikely choice. But those who have seen him work say he is perfect for the post.

"He thinks hungry people are important to God, and he thinks they ought to be more important to Congress on a day-to-day basis," said David Beckmann, who oversees Bread for the World's day-to-day work in Washington as its president. "What he does very effectively is make hungry people a little bit more important in the political process."

Bread for the World is a unique special interest group.

Rather than throw campaign contributions at politicians, it throws mail at them, phone calls and personal visits. Its only real influence is a good argument that tugs at their consciences.

"One of the great things about being an American is that that is often enough," Miner said. "Nobody ever argues by saying, 'I think hunger is fine.'"

Miner joined the cause while a graduate student at Purdue University. A friend gave him a copy of the book "Rich Christians in an Age of Hunger."

Miner was a devout young Methodist at the time, and it struck a chord. He had grown up in a middle-class family that never knew hunger. And he felt "convicted" by the book's central point -- that people were starving in a world where food is plentiful.

So Miner decided to act. From a list of hunger organizations in the back of the book, he picked Bread for the World. "My involvement has grown over the years," he said in an understatement.

Bread for the World's 56,000 members, scattered across the country, don't try to sway every member of Congress, just the one in their district. Indiana members write to Indiana congressmen, and so forth.

Miner meets monthly to deliver the latest bill information from Washington with two local Bread for the World groups. He gives people at these meetings talking points for their own letters to Congress. And he visits Capitol Hill to call on Indiana's delegation.

"When the government decides, the decisions for them are in the tens and hundreds of millions, or even billions of dollars," Miner said. "Every church in the United States could do their best, and we could never raise that kind of resources."

Bread members also take special issues to their local churches, asking for an annual "offering of letters" on Bread's latest pet issue.

Last year, it was foreign aid to poor countries, something not always politically popular. "People think we actually as a nation spend a lot of money on that," Miner said. "In fact, we spend very little -- on the order of one percent of our national budget."

This year, Bread for the World is focusing on the delicate issue of farm subsidies. "The popular notion is that this is going to family farmers, and the reality is that some goes to family farmers but a lot is going to huge corporate operations," Miner said.

Hunger enters the picture when poor rural farmers and their communities struggle, Miner said, and when farmers in developing countries must compete with American agricultural corporations that are subsidized by the American government.

Miner and Bread for the World have been frequent visitors to the office of Sen. Richard Lugar, R-Ind., whom Miner says has been helpful in anti-hunger efforts.

Lugar's press secretary, Andy Fisher, said Miner is known to the senator's staff as being someone who does his homework, and Bread for the World has a reputation as "an honest advocate for the hungry." Their success, Fisher said, is not based on campaign contributions.

"When you have the issues with you," Fisher said, "you don't need to throw around a lot of money."

Fran Quigley, a Bread for the World volunteer from Indianapolis, is excited that Miner has taken a leadership role with the organization. He describes Miner as an inspiration to others because of his humility.

"He is the personification of the Gandhi statement that your message is your life," Quigley said. "This guy just very quietly has devoted himself to working for hungry people for dozens of years."

Connie Wick, an 84-year-old volunteer who rallies letter writers at Robin Run Village, a Northwestside retirement center, said no one is more capable to lead -- and inspire -- than Miner.

"To him, practically nothing is impossible." Wick said. "He gives you that feeling when he speaks and talks. In his own quiet way he is very contagious."

Miner, now a member of Fairview Presbyterian Church, said his faith instructs his work. Jesus, he said, had compassion for people, feeding them both spiritually and literally.

"We used to sing the song 'Jesus loves the little children, all the children of the world,' " Miner said. "I really believe that."

Call Star reporter Robert King at (317) 444-6089.

Bread for the World and other humanitarian groups continuously lobby Congress for increased U.S. aid for programs serving the poor. Determining the influence of a single group can be difficult. But here's a look at efforts by Bread for the World (www.bread.org) and their outcomes.

2006-07 -- Bread for the World urged members and their churches to write letters seeking more aid for the world's poor. Earlier this week, Congress approved a \$1.4 billion increase in that area in programs that combat HIV/AIDS and that help African farmers produce more food.

2005 -- It opposed changes to the Food Stamp program that would have reduced the number of working poor eligible for benefits.

2004 -- It campaigned for more aid to the world's poor, particularly efforts to fight HIV/AIDS, tuberculosis and malaria. Congress approved a \$1 billion increase.

2003 -- It supported new funding for hunger, poverty and disease in the developing world. Congress added \$2 billion to the effort.

2000 -- It supported the Hunger Relief Act and an increase in the federal minimum wage by \$1 over two years. Food stamp benefits were increased.

SOURCE: Bread for the World

About Dave Miner

Age: 53.

Home: Indianapolis.

Family: Wife, two adult children.

Church: Fairview Presbyterian.

Education: B.S. in chemistry, University of Delaware; Ph.D. in analytical chemistry, Purdue.

Job: Global quality leader with Elanco, a division of Eli Lilly and Co. that makes pharmaceutical products for animals.

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