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Woodpeckers, Politicians, and Poor People

A Commentary by Rev. Ken Horne, Executive Director, Society of St. Andrew

If you have enough friends you can accomplish almost anything. Consider for a moment the fact that the Ivory Billed Woodpecker is successfully competing in the public arena with the biggest of the special interests. Thought to be extinct since the mid-forties and recently discovered in a swamp in Arkansas, the woodpecker in question has drawn the attention of millions of citizens and federal funding in the millions of dollars. Ten million dollars, with more to come.

However, the Ivory Billed Woodpecker is not the only endangered species in the Mississippi delta. Living in the same swampy regions, struggling to find enough to eat, adequate shelter and most of the time raising its young on sub adequate supplies of both, we find Homo sapiens. That's right, us! Well, not exactly us, but others quite like us, who differ from us primarily in how prosperous they are (they aren't). In fact, most of them (unlike the Ivory Billed Woodpecker) have a great deal of trouble maintaining a place to live and keeping the family fed all at the same time. The Mississippi delta is one of the poorest regions in the country (if you happen to be a human being).

Unlike the aforesaid woodpecker, the humans have a very difficult time acquiring federal money to help them in their struggle for survival. In fact, there has been more federal money granted for the preservation of a previously unknown woodpecker (\$10,000,000) than the entire federal anti-poverty budget for the whole Mississippi delta region (parts of eight states comprised of some of the poorest areas of the country) for the entire year! The federal budget for humans in poverty in this same region for 2005 totals \$6,000,000, and that was grudgingly given.

Why do the woodpeckers do so much better than poor people when it comes to federal funds? The answer is disarmingly simple. Woodpeckers have an effective lobby and poor people don't. The reason the woodpeckers' lobby is effective is because a large, vocal, and committed movement of citizens concerned about the environment stands behind it, and our representatives in congress know it. When the brave souls from our churches and other concerned groups lobby for the needs of poor people, very few citizens stand behind them, and our congressional representatives know that, too.

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It's not that we as individual people don't care about poor people, it's that we aren't united in any recognizable way. Every faith group has its own outreach to the poor. All of them are functionally independent of one another. Dozens of private sector research and lobbying groups, hundreds of national and thousands of local charities, and millions of concerned citizens confront the realities of hunger and poverty every day in our country. Each one fighting its own individual battle with a problem we could so easily overcome together, if we would just get together!

But there is hope. National Hunger Awareness Day (celebrated on the first Tuesday in June for the past four years) has grown into an event of truly national significance. This year's celebration in our nation's Capital combined an all-faiths convocation service at the National Cathedral, a massive food distribution and a full day of lobbying on Capitol Hill by over one thousand participants. Hunger Awareness Day 2005 represented the coming together of representatives of the dozens and hundreds and thousands and millions of people and groups who have been so long struggling in solitude. By the end of our days of praying and lobbying and worshiping and feeding people in Washington, DC, the folks who can find money for woodpeckers but not poor people knew, in no uncertain terms, what God would say about all this: "Thanks for saving my woodpecker, I've always loved that bird. But I love my people, especially the poor ones, a lot more."

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Ken Horne is co-founder and Executive Director of the Society of St. Andrew, a national nonprofit hunger-relief ministry based in Big Island, Virginia. The Society gleans (saves) fresh produce that will otherwise go to waste and donates it to the hungry nationwide. It has national and regional offices in five states and gleaning offices in 21 states. Each year, with the help of as many as 40,000 volunteers, the Society of St. Andrew saves 30-40 million pounds of fresh, nutritious produce from farm fields and orchards, providing 90-120 million servings of nutritious food to hungry Americans at a cost of about one cent per serving.

Photo of Ken Horne Available. Contact Carol Breiting: 800-333-4597;
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