

Florida man puts his stamp on 'Offering of Letters' campaign

WASHINGTON — By now, Peter England has it down to a science.

An enthusiastic supporter of the Bread for the World Christian citizens anti-hunger lobby since it was introduced at his parish, St. Louis, in the Miami suburb of Pinecrest, Florida, nearly 30 years ago, England marshals the efforts of members of his 3,000-household parish to take part in the organization's annual "Offering of Letters" campaign.

Bread for the World's campaign engages churches, campuses and other faith communities in writing letters to Congress.

Last year's letter count was "slightly in excess of 1,500," England said about his fellow parishioners' effort. "They get a fact sheet, a blank piece of paper and a pen."

It's not quite that easy.

Bread for the World — commonly called just "Bread" by those familiar with the organization — selects a theme each year and a series of talking points that can be used in letters to U.S. senators and representatives. This year's theme is "For Such a Time as This," which brings domestic and world hunger and food-access issues into sharper focus. It references Chapter 4 of the Book of Esther; Esther used advocacy to save her people from destruction.

England lays the groundwork each year by inserting a talking point or two each week in the parish bulletin. He pulls them all together by the time his parish is ready; he's already selected the weekend of May 4-5 for his parish's Offering of Letters; most of the 3,000 Christian congregations that are members of Bread for the World, half of which are Catholic, write their letters during Lent.

"The thing I admire most about Bread is before they arrived, we did have a ministry

in the parish called Peace and Justice. It was great. Fine folks. We'd get together once a month, wring our hands about what's wrong with the world and get absolutely nothing done," England told Catholic News Service during a Feb. 16 telephone interview from his home in Palmetto Bay, Florida, a village adjoining Pinecrest.

"But Bread picked the subject, mobilized the grass-roots following and got things done," he added. "That to me was tremendously impressive and energizing."

England said the organization's approach is "not 'please write a letter because I'm asking you to,' it's 'please write a letter because it's important.'"

In a world of instantaneous communications, using pen and paper may seem quaint, but it works. "A lot of people have not sat down to write a letter in decades. We find that has the greatest impact," England said. That's the way we do it. There's no pre-written letter."

Nor is it a matter of counting on parishioners to address, seal, stamp and mail the letter. England described to CNS "a technique we have worked on over the years."

"We bundle the letters, we put them in envelopes and we hand-deliver them to the (local) offices. They're ready for them, because they do it every year," he explained. "Not only do they appreciate the letters, but then they FedEx the letters to a staff member at their home address in D.C. and they actually carry the letters to the office."

It's almost necessary to send mail that way, he added, because "since the anthrax scare (following the 9/11 terror attacks in 2001), they are folded, spindled and mutilated, and by the time they get to the member, they're in pretty sorry condition."

Parishioners send letters to both of the state's U.S. senators, Republican Marco Rubio and Democrat Bill Nelson, and to two House members whose territory includes part of St. Louis Parish: Ileana Ros-Lehtinen and Carlos Carbelo, both Republicans.

Does all the letter-writing work? "We have great relationships. We don't always

share the outcomes we're looking for. It depends on the issue," England replied.

"Sen. Rubio, who can be pretty conservative on domestic issues, is a huge champion of humanitarian foreign aid, which is a rare commodity in the Senate. Ileana is very supportive. Bill Nelson is almost always voting in the way Bread would like him to. Carlos has come around. He's become a believer."

The concerted letter-writing becomes key, said Eric Mitchell, Bread for the World's director of government relations. "What we have to do is keep the pressure on Congress to prioritize international food aid and domestic food programs."

Mitchell added, "We feel our Offering of Letters, at a time like this, that definitely is true. We see tremendous threats to low-income program. We need a huge grass-roots campaign such as an Offering of Letters to get constituents to write their congressman on key policy issues and hold them accountable."

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