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Don't overlook the poor in Wall Street bailout, clerics say

by Chris Herlinger by Religion News Service

NEW YORK -- Religious leaders are warning that the global financial crisis threatens progress made against poverty and world hunger, and urged political leaders not to ignore the poor while debating how to solve the current international financial panic.

"It's a teachable moment to move the agenda of hunger and inequality in the world," said Lorraine Dickerson, an anti-hunger advocate with the African Methodist Episcopal Church. "It's a moral imperative."

Dickerson was one of some 75 religious leaders and representatives who attended a Wednesday (Sept. 24) interfaith consultation on global hunger. The summit parallels a meeting at the United Nations to evaluate progress on a set of development goals adopted by the U.N. in 2000.

While the religious leaders maintained a sense of hope about progress that has been made in fighting poverty, they also expressed frustration about what they saw as a disproportionate amount of money being proposed to bail out U.S. financial institutions.

"The U.S. government can come up with \$700 billion for the financial system, but religious communities have been working for decades to stop hunger and poverty for pennies," said Rev. David Beckmann, the president of the Washington-based anti-hunger group Bread for the World.

World Bank figures indicate that the number of poor people in the world has dropped from 1.9 billion in 1981 to 1.4 billion in 2005. That is proof that one of the key U.N. Millennium Development Goals -- halving extreme poverty from 1990 levels by the year 2015 -- is a possibility, he said.

However, Beckmann added that that success is "now being undercut by higher prices, particularly of food and oil."

The religious leaders said they must now pressure governments and remind their own religious constituents of the moral imperative to keep fighting poverty amid the worsening global economy.

"Religious leaders don't have much political power, but we do have moral influence," said Sr. J. Lora Dambroski, the president of the Leadership Conference of Women Religious.

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