

NATIONAL PRESS CLUB LUNCHEON WITH REVEREND DAVID BECKMANN

SUBJECT: ENDING HUNGER: THE PEOPLE AND CONGRESS

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ALAN BJERGA: (Sounds gavel.) Good afternoon, and welcome to the National Press Club. My name is Alan Bjerga. I'm a reporter for Bloomberg News and the President of the National Press Club. We're the world's leading professional organization for journalists and are committed to our profession's future through our programming and by fostering a free press worldwide. For more information about the Press Club, please visit our website at www.press.org. To donate to our professional training and scholarship programs, please visit www.press.org/library.

On behalf of our members worldwide, I'd like to welcome our speaker and attendees at today's event, which includes guests of our speaker as well as working journalists. I'd also like to welcome our C-SPAN and Public Radio audiences. After the speech concludes, I will ask as many audience questions as time permits.

I'd now like to introduce our head table guests. From your right, Paul Minehart, head of corporate communications for Syngenta North America; Paul Mojdadidi Rodriguez, managing director for media at Burson-Marsteller; Michelle Vu, *Christian Post* and a guest of the speaker; Mark Heller, Washington correspondent for the *Watertown Daily Times* of Watertown, New York; Michael Gerson of the *Washington Post* and a guest of the speaker; Andrew Schneider, chairman of the Speakers Committee, and associated editor for Kiplinger Washington Editors.

Skipping our speaker for the moment, Rodrigo Valderrama, an independent opinion writer with Plantation International, and a member of the National Press Club's Board of Governors; Bob Abernathy of *Religion and Ethics News Weekly*, and a guest of

the speaker; Karen Coble Edwards, consultant to the World Initiative for Soy and Human Health; and Moira Whelan, deputy administrator for public affairs with USAID. Thank you. (Applause)

Last year, the United Nations reported that the world had reached a dubious milestone. For the first time, more than one billion people were experiencing hunger. While traditionally food in secure regions such as sub-Saharan Africa remain hardest hit, the global economics slowdown has affected the United States as well. In 2008, about one in six Americans, a record 49 million, lived in households that struggled to afford food at some point in the past year, according to the U.S. Department of Agriculture.

Our speaker today has spent more than 20 years fighting to reduce those numbers in the U.S. and abroad. The Reverend David Beckmann is the first clergyman to win the World Food Prize, an annual award established by Nobel Peace Prize laureate Norman Borlaug to honor individuals who make vital contributions to food and agriculture. The Reverend Beckmann shares this year's award with Jo Luck, President of Heifer, International.

As head of Bread for the World since 1991, the ordained Lutheran minister and economist also serves as president of Bread for the World Institute, and is the founder and current president of the Alliance to End Hunger. The World Food Prize, in awarding Beckmann last spring, cited the organization's effectiveness in its advocacy. Under his leadership, Bread has grown to an organization that through its members engage more than one million Christians in its advocacy to end hunger. Next month, he'll be honored at the Annual World Prize Symposium in Iowa, and releasing his new book, *Exodus from Hunger: God is Calling us to Change the Politics of Hunger*. Today, he is discussing how people and Congress can end hunger and eradicate global poverty. Welcome to the National Press Club Reverend David Beckmann. (Applause)

REVEREND DAVID BECKMANN: Thank you very much. Thank you, Alan. I am grateful to be here, and I appreciate the interest that all of you have in what we can do to end hunger. I want to start by telling you about a visit that I got to make last year to a really remote part of Mozambique, down on the Pacific coast of Africa. We went up to a little island in Lake Nyasa on a tiny airplane and then we took an old wooden boat over to some lake shore settlements along the lake there in Mozambique. These are really remote places. They were at least 100 miles from the nearest road.

Our first stop was a little settlement, not really a town, just a settlement of about 40 mud houses, called Ntembwe. And each house had its own casaba field. The truth is, if your casaba field fails, your family goes hungry. There's very little trade, no electricity, no transportation. As we came to the lake shore, there were about 50 people waiting for us, and they were singing hymns and praise songs. And then we landed and they danced us up to the top of a hill above the lake. And up at the top of a hill is a church that they had made, a mud church. And the woman who had arranged for our visit, then, we had a little preliminary meeting, and she said, "Well, tell these visitors from America how your

lives have improved here in Ntembwe.” Well, it wasn't obvious to me that their lives had improved very much.

But then somebody said right away, “Well, we're at peace.” Because in Mozambique, they have just been through a 16 year civil war. All of these people were repeatedly brutalized, they were repeatedly forced into refugee status in neighboring countries. Now, Mozambique has a good government. Somebody else mentioned their school because ten years ago, they didn't have a school in Ntembwe. Now, almost all the kids, even the AIDS orphans, go to school.

And later, we met three women who had been on death's door because of AIDS. And they are now getting anti retroviral medications funded mainly by the U.S. government. And they're able to take care of their children, they're able to farm, and they're part of the-- the church has a group that goes around and does education on HIV and AIDS, and they're part of that group, helping other people deal with HIV and AIDS.

So I was really profoundly encouraged, and I think all of us, in fact, can take real encouragement from what has happened in this really poor place in remote Africa. And the same kind of story can be told in hundreds of thousands of communities around the world. Because the world has made dramatic progress against hunger, poverty and disease over the last 30 years. Across Africa, there are a lot more kids in school. There are 30 million more African kids in school today than were in school ten years ago. The World Bank estimates that in 1980, there were 1.9 billion people in extreme poverty; by the same measure, there are now about 1.4 billion people in extreme poverty, that's still way too many poor people. But I'm struck that hundreds of millions of the world's poorest people have been able to work their way out of poverty.

And since I'm a preacher, I see this as God moving in our own history. This is our loving God answering prayers for hundreds of millions of people. I see this as a great exodus in our own time.

Now, in our own country, as richly blessed as we are, we have not made sustained progress against poverty. But it's clear that if countries as diverse as Bangladesh and Brazil and Great Britain can reduce their poverty rates as they have, the United States can do that if we want to do it. Also, we have in fact been able to reduce poverty in the United States when we tried. The clearest example was from the 1960s and early '70s. It was a period of very low unemployment. President Johnson and then also President Nixon expanded anti-poverty programs, and it worked. We cut our poverty rate in half. But we haven't sustained that level of effort. And so, in fact, even before the recession hit our poverty rate is about what it was in 1970.

Now, the economy has caused a huge setback with a big increase in the numbers of hungry and poor people certainly in our own country. Because of high unemployment, one in four children in our country now lives in a household that sometimes runs out of food. The government's going to release its new poverty data on Thursday. We know that the data will confirm that there's been a big increase in poverty in our communities. And

the setback has been global. Now, more than a billion people, as Alan said, more than a billion people in the world are undernourished. That's more than a billion people who can't afford enough calories to make their bodies function properly.

Now, we have clear opportunities right now to moderate the hunger and poverty that this economic problem has caused. And those same changes would position us for rapid progress against hunger and poverty once the economy starts to recover.

I think God is calling us to change the politics of hunger. Why politics? Because if we're serious about reducing hunger, we need to get our government to do its part. Not that the government can do everything, but we need to get our government to do its part. You may remember that in early August, Congress passed a bill to provide financial aid to the states. I think it was a good bill. It'll keep a lot of teachers from being laid off, and my wife's a teacher. But, at the last minute, really, they decided to finance that bill partly by cutting \$12 billion from future funding for the food stamp program. \$12 billion is a lot of groceries. In fact, in that one decision, Congress took away from needy people twice as much food as all the food banks and charities in the country will be able to mobilize in a year.

And there wasn't much public fuss. That's why we have to change the politics of hunger. Congress is coming back into session today. And on September 30th, the Child Nutrition Bill expires. So, they have to decide in the next 20 days what they're going to do about the policies of our child nutrition programs. So, are we going to provide more nutritious lunches at school for our children or not? At a time when a quarter of the kids in the country are living in households that run out of food, are we going to strengthen the programs that get food to low income kids or not? That decision is being made right now. The House version of the Child Nutrition Act is much better for hungry kids than the Senate version. But the House leadership hasn't figured out how they want to pay for it. And the Senate is proposing to improve school lunches for kids by making deeper cuts in the food stamp program.

So, I would like people to call your member-- call one of your members of Congress and ask them to pass the House version of the Child Nutrition Act. If you haven't got a pen, you might want to get one out because I'm going to give you the phone number in a few minutes.

There are some other issues that are hanging fire for hungry people right now, and they're very feasible things that we could do to help. First to their great credit, the Obama Administration has launched a world hunger initiative. They are investing in poor farmers all across the world, helping them produce more food and the initiative has a special focus on child malnutrition. They're using a relatively small amount of U.S. money to leverage investments by other governments around the world, including governments of the countries concerned. Congress is not now on track to provide the money that the President's requested for this world hunger initiative.

Second, on this issue I'm less enthusiastic about the Obama Administration. We need to make our foreign aid programs more effective in reducing poverty. And the administration has done some things to make our aid programs better, but they have moved slowly. And it seems that they are seriously considering merging our development programs more fully into programs and efforts that are really focused on our own short-term self interests. That is a bad idea. And again, the way to get to them is to get through Congress.

The biggest poverty issue that's hanging fire right now is tax credits for the working poor. I know a young mother who's working two part time jobs. She has a three year old boy. Last year, she was able to use her tax rebate to enroll in a program to learn how to be a dental hygienist. This is what we want; to reward people who are working but are poor and to help them move forward with their lives and the lives of their kids. But the tax rule that benefited her last year will expire unless Congress acts. So in this big debate about taxes, let's not forget the tax credits for the working poor. So have you got your pencils ready? Also people watching on C-SPAN, I hope. The number of the capitol switchboard, I'm serious, is 202-224-3121. It's easy. You call, you ask for one of your members of Congress. You'll get a staffer and you tell him or her that you want to see passage of the House version of the Child Nutrition Act by the end of September.

And if you want more information on that issue, or these other hunger issues, here's another thing you can mark down. Bread of the World's website is bread.org. You can find out more and you can become more active in changing the politics of hunger by contacting us.

Finally, we've got a big election coming up this year. November 2nd is important to all of us and it's really important to hungry and poor people. And as we decide who to vote for, one consideration should be which of these candidates is going to be good news for hungry and poor people? It's not guesswork, you ask them. "What do you think about the Child Nutrition Bill? What do you think about the World Hunger Initiative? What do you think about foreign assistance reform. What do you think about tax credits for the working poor?"

What we need is a much stronger constituency for hungry and poor people. And I think a lot of that surge in constituency power needs to come from people who are moved by our consciences, or by our God. Now, a lot of-- I think virtually all religious people know that if you want to get close to God, you've got to do right by the poor. It's hard to miss that. We don't all do it, but it's hard to miss the message. But a lot of religious people do not get the-- they don't get the idea that God is concerned not just about our individual behavior, but also about our laws and about how we behave as a nation. That is all over the place in the Bible. But for example, when Glenn Beck convened people on the mall a couple of weeks ago, when I read through his speech, this is a point that he just didn't make. That part of what we need to do as religious people is justice for poor people.

Some religious people do get this. Bread for the World itself includes about a million people, mostly Christian people who understand that God is calling them to help poor people and do it in big ways, structural ways. I think the best way for me to tell you about Bread for the World is to tell you about my friend, Pat Pelham, in Birmingham, Alabama. Pat was a young mother in the late '90s and in her morning prayers, one morning, she felt that God was calling her to do something for Africa. Well, she had little kids, what was she going to do?

But her minister suggested, well why don't you help get our church involved in Bread for the World? So she did that and she, together with her friend, Elaine van Cleve, they developed a relationship with their member of Congress, Spencer Bachus. He's a conservative Republican, but he did some things with Bread for the World because of them. And then in early 1999, church people all over the world were energized by the idea that we could write down some of the unpayable (sic) debt of the world's poorest countries, the Jubilee Campaign. And at the same time, Spencer Bachus was named chair of the International Committee of the Banking Committee. So, I called Pat. Within two weeks, Pat and Elaine came up to Washington. They go to the Presbyterian church, but they brought letters from Our Lady of Sorrows Catholic Church to Mr. Bachus. And they convinced him that this was something that ought to happen. And Spencer Bachus became the most effective advocate for debt relief in the U.S. Congress. It's not just a one-time visit. They kept up pressure back home; they recruited other churches, they celebrated his leadership.

At the end of the whole process, there was an appropriations bill. President Clinton signed that appropriations bill and at the signing ceremony he said, "Mr. Bachus, you're from the other party, but we wouldn't be here if it weren't for you." And I used my two minutes to talk about Pat Pelham and Elaine van Cleve and Father Martin Muller, and tens of thousands of other people of faith across the country who had dared to push Congress to do something for poor people when it seemed politically impossible.

What's Bread for the World? We're a collective Christian voice for hungry people. We organize in all kinds of Christian churches, and then we have a secular affiliate, the Alliance to End Hunger, which includes Jewish and Muslim groups, and all kinds of secular organizations. We are bipartisan. We are consciously respectful of people who disagree with us. And maybe most importantly, we win. We win big changes for hungry and poor people. So over the last decade, we helped to triple development assistance to poor countries. We more than doubled nutrition assistance to hungry families in our own country. On both those things, we did a lot of work with President Bush.

Of course, Bread for the World is just a small part of the broader constituency for poor people. And I think we need to say that over the last couple of years, Congress has done some good things for poor people. And at each step of the way, people of faith, people of conscience have been part of the process. In my judgment, the big bills that President Bush introduced right at the end of his term, and that President Obama pushed early in the term to deal with the financial crisis, I think those bills saved us from

depression. And we were especially supportive of the Obama stimulus package because half of that money went to programs in which low income people participated.

We and many other groups helped to win support for that bill. I think health insurance, the expansion of health insurance, is going to keep a lot of people from being pushed into poverty. And it's that logic that led Catholic religious women across the country to support the healthcare bill. It was a tough issue for Catholics because they weren't very satisfied with how the abortion issue was treated. But the support of Catholic religious women was crucial to the passage of the healthcare bill. And so when President Obama signed that bill, he gave the first pen to Sister Carol Keenan.

When Congress took up financial reform, another coalition including a lot of faith groups worked to restrict financial institutions that work with low income people to reduce the exploitation of low income people by banks and other financial institutions.

On the Child Nutrition Bill, the food banks, lots of faith groups have been working hard for a couple of years. They're campaigning intensely now. The Jewish Council on Public Affairs has hosted child nutrition Seders across the country. The Lutheran church asked its people to write to Congress on empty paper plates about the Child Nutrition Bill.

Let me just tell you one more story. Maine is an important state because the senators and representatives from Maine are relatively moderate people. So they're often swing votes on these issues that are important to poor people. And I want to tell you about three people in Brunswick, Maine; Helen Small, Ted Bradbury, Christine De Troy. Because they could see how important their representation in Washington often was, they have done a lot to strengthen Bread for the World's network of individuals and churches all across Maine. And they have got a lot of people writing to their members of Congress on issues that are important to hungry people.

Just a few weeks ago, Hellenist Church, which is St. Charles Borromeo Catholic Church in Brunswick, Maine, took up an offering. But it wasn't an offering of money, it was an offering of letters to Congress about the Child Nutrition Act. Now, let me be clear. We do not now have enough political oomph to achieve the changes for hungry people that we should achieve. That's why I'm asking you and other people to become more active on these issues. We're going to try to use the World Food Prize, the book that I've got coming out, to stir up a stronger constituency of conscience on issues that are important to hungry and poor people.

For starters, just take one step, like really do call-- let us do call our members of Congress about the Child Nutrition Act. Or, pick out a candidate that you think is a good candidate and help that person to get elected on November 2nd. Or, if you're a journalist, write about some of the issues that are important to hungry and poor people. God uses our modest steps to move through history, to move the world. Jesus said, "You don't even need much faith. If you just have faith the grain of a mustard seed, you can move a mountain." That's my experience.

In our own time, God is moving to overcome hunger and poverty, and I think God is calling us to change the politics of hunger. Thank you. (Applause)

MR. BJERGA: And thank you for speaking today, Reverend Beckmann. And if you are a member of the audience, please do not hesitate to come forth with your own questions. We'll be jumping into them right now. In your address, you spoke to the number of hungry individuals both in the U.S. and in the world. Given the changes in those numbers and the change in global dynamics, how has the face of hunger changed in the last 20 to 30 years?

REVEREND BECKMANN: Well most of the people who are hungry are just poor. They're just poor. So globally, we tend to focus on these disaster situations, and they are important. But 95 percent of the hungry people are just out in remote Mozambique, and they are just damn poor and the kids die, and there are no TV cameras there. That's the way it's always been. So that hasn't changed. And it's true in our own country, too, that there's this big interconnection between hunger and poverty.

What has changed is in our own country, there are a lot more people who are hungry because there's unemployment in the family. There's a very strong correlation between the poverty rate and the unemployment rate. So that's the factor. People can't get jobs, or they can only work-- they get a half time job, they can't work 40 hours, nobody will give them 40 hours a week. And so in those families, or they get crummy jobs. So in those families, a lot of the kids don't have enough to eat.

And globally, probably what's new is over the last few years, food prices have surged. In 2008, they went down a little bit. They're going back up again now. This is especially the prices of basic grains, like wheat and rice. And an average poor family in a developing country may spend two-thirds of all the money they've got on a bowl of rice, or a couple of bowls of rice a day. So when that rice price, or the wheat price goes, up, people go hungry. And that's what changed. The new element is the volatility of grain prices.

MR. BJERGA: On the topic of grain prices, we've seen export bans announced by Russia in recent weeks. There has been drought in Russia, Kazakhstan, I think Ukraine has been having floods. And we saw the first food riots of 2010 in Mozambique, which you referenced in your speech. To what extent is hunger a food production problem and to what extent is it a food distribution problem?

REVEREND BECKMANN: People are hungry mainly because they're poor. They don't have resources to buy the food they need. It's typically not a food production problem. The trade restrictions that you're talking about, that is part of the problem because over the last few years with the volatility of food prices, many governments have put up trade restrictions that prevent the export of food when they've got it. And so that's exaggerated the effect of the food price volatility. So just moving forward toward a more market oriented agriculture in the world would actually help a lot.

MR. BJERGA: How effectively do multilateral development banks mobilize financial and other resources to reduce poverty and improve local community sustainability?

REVEREND BECKMANN: Well, I used to work at the World Bank and when I went to work at Bread for the World, people looked suspiciously at me, that I was coming from the World Bank to Bread for the World. But I think multilateral development banks are pretty good bureaucracies. They're big, powerful bureaucracies. Any big powerful bureaucracy is manipulated by big, powerful interests. And that happens at the multilateral development banks. But I think these are good institutions. And in fact, they have become much better institutions over the last 20 years since I left the bank. I don't know if there's causality there, that maybe me leaving the bank, the World Bank made it into a better institution. But I think they do a good job.

One thing that they really do well is the resources that they've got for poverty reduction are allocated mainly to poor countries. That's a novel idea. For the U.S. bilateral program, the resources that we've got don't go mainly to poor countries, they go to countries that are allied to the U.S. government.

MR. BJERGA: But if you take a look at, say, World Bank investment in agricultural development, I think it's dropped something like 12 percent in 1980 to about 4 percent today. Does a redirection of resources need to be made to encourage that basic agricultural development that then leads to food resources?

REVEREND BECKMANN: Absolutely. I mean, the whole world, almost the whole world, neglected agriculture in developing countries for a period of decades. During that time-- in fact, I'm proud-- that Bread for the World campaigned to try to reverse that trend. And the surge in food prices in 2008 just shocked people and so that seems to have, in fact, turned the trend so the World Bank is investing more in agriculture. Since you're pushing on this, I think I'm also really impressed that World Bank and the World Food Program have done a really great job with the sudden increase in world hunger, of flagging that issue, diagnosing the issue, helping poor countries in the rest of the world do our best to invest more in agriculture, to invest more in nutrition and other things that can moderate the crisis. So I think the bank on that issue's been outstanding, actually.

MR. BJERGA: What is the role of trade in alleviating global hunger? And how important of a factor is it compared to other considerations?

REVEREND BECKMANN: You're not asking any questions about the politics of hunger and all those church people. So you got to-- Because that's really what I know about, and I think that's really where it's-- I mean, I really do think that the problem-- why haven't we reduced world hunger? It's not because we're not smart enough, it's because we don't care enough. That's the problem.

But on this issue of trade, I think trade is really important, in fact, to progress against hunger and poverty in our country and around the world. Trade isn't very popular right now, but I think we need to engage in world trade in ways that protect and encourage the growth of incomes among people everywhere, including working people in our own country. But if we can do that, trade is really important to growth, and we need growth. In particular, agriculture trade is just fundamentally important. Almost every country has a protectionist system in agriculture. In our country, we protect-- we give subsidies to mostly wealthy landholders. They're protectionist subsidies. That system needs to be reformed. It's not going to happen right away, but we do need to reform that system as part of the process of getting the world economy back on track, opening opportunities for poor farmers around the world, improving life in rural America and ending hunger.

MR. BJERGA: In the next farm bill, because of the budget outlook, there's a tension between nutrition programs, i.e. food stamps and child nutrition, and farm subsidies. How is that resolved, and more broadly how do farm subsidies affect world hunger?

REVEREND BECKMANN: In the last farm bill, Bread for the World campaigned to get a broad reform of U.S. food and farm policies. Because what we've got now is not good. We've got these protectionist subsidies to rich people. If you go to rural counties, none of the money's coming into the people who really need help. I come from Nebraska, and I visited a little town maybe 70 miles from Lincoln. And we met with a group of farmers. My hosts were an elderly couple, they should be retired, but they can't afford to retire. So he's got a few cattle and she's doing embroidery to help them stay alive. They get nothing from the farm bill.

The guy at the table who gets money from the farm bill is a guy who has a big spread of corn and soybeans. He's on the board of the ethanol plant, and he gets a big check. Now, he's one of the biggest contributors to the Lutheran church, so it's a little tough to criticize him. But, it's true in every county, almost every county, that the money comes to the people who least need it. So we can reform the farm policies in a way that would do a lot more good for rural people, farm people who are really struggling; free up money to reduce our taxes, put more money in nutrition programs, do a lot of good for hungry people around the world.

It's also tied up with obesity. That, you know, virtually everybody in our country's obese or overweight. Obesity's a plague around the world. We ought to be working for a food and farm system that provides healthy food for everybody. And what we've got now is anything but.

MR. BJERGA: What could the White House do to raise the profile of hunger issues?

REVEREND BECKMANN: Well, the President needs to talk about hunger. During the campaign, he promised to end child hunger. And in fact, during the campaign,

the campaign put out a policy paper that was really well thought through. What you do, he said, was you strengthen the nutrition programs, you strengthen what communities are doing to reduce hunger and get better interaction between those community activities and the national nutrition programs. And then you need to do things like tax credits for the working poor to reduce poverty.

And if we would do those three things, certainly when the economy is back in shape we could end child hunger in a hurry. But he hasn't talked about it since he's come to the White House, even with the First Lady with her talking about healthy children or healthy children initiative. The message of that has been mainly eat your green beans and run around the block. And really, she has not given a lot of emphasis to the fact that a quarter of the kids in the country live in households where they don't have enough food. And when they do have food, it's not very good food, it's cheap food.

So the President could talk more about hunger. You know, I don't blame him too much for not doing it. He is convinced that the voters don't want to hear about hunger. So the way to change that, for him and for other politicians, is to make it clear we'll vote for him if they talk about the things we think are important.

MR. BJERGA: What proof do you have that voters do care about hunger?

REVEREND BECKMANN: Well, there's all kinds of-- the public opinion polls, the Alliance to End Hunger has done a series of public opinion polls all through the last decade. So we know that there are-- it depends on how you ask the questions. But two-thirds to 80 percent of voters want our government to do more to help hungry people, especially when it comes to hungry kids in this country. If you talk about better improved school lunches, better nutrition programs for children in our own country and you make it clear that you're going to be careful about not wasting money, 80 percent of Americans are in favor of that. And Republicans and Democrats come out about the same.

So there is a lot of public good will to do things for hungry and poor people. It's you have to explain to people that we're talking about efforts that will help people get on their own feet so that they can provide for themselves. And you have to make it clear that we're talking about programs that are efficient, that aren't going to waste tax dollars. But with those provisos, there is very broad support for doing things to reduce hunger.

And that's really the grounding for a long bipartisan tradition on these issues. Going way back, it was Bob Dole and George McGovern. But now, it's Joann Emerson and Jim McGovern. There are people on both sides of the aisle in both the House and the Senate that we can count on to provide leadership for hungry people. And that is grounded in the fact that it's the right thing to do and that voters on both sides of the aisle want us to do it.

MR. BJERGA: It does seem that there has been a reduction in the profile, media and otherwise, of anti-poverty activism since, say, the 1960s and '70s when you had Martin Luther King, the poor people's march and events such as that. Why is this?

REVEREND BECKMANN: Alan, I'm not sure it's true. There's a study done by a guy named Tom Freedman at Freedman and Associates, showed that press coverage of poverty issues in the 2008 election was way more extensive than in the 2004 election. I think that's both an indication of the interest of journalists and, in fact, what then Senator Obama and Senator McCain were talking about. So, we don't have the kind of excitement and concern that we had in the '60s, that's for sure true. But I think we're actually better off in terms of attention than we were ten years ago, especially on global poverty. You know, the last ten years, I got to know Bono and Angelina Jolie and Brad Pitt. Who would have expected that we'd have help from the rock stars and the mega rich on global poverty? So there's been a real shift in how Americans think about poor people around the world. It's a much, much more supportive environment.

MR. BJERGA: When you listen to some political discourse, there seems to be significant anti-government sentiment out there that says the government cannot spend tax dollars effectively. Government programs don't work. What is your response to that in terms of the evaluation of government effectiveness in hunger programs?

REVEREND BECKMANN: I think that's a really major problem. And there's some truth in it, of course, that the government's clunky. Duh. Now, my post office is pretty good, but they're not as good as some companies that I deal with. So there is some truth in the fact that government is somewhat clunky. And we set up safeguards to make sure that everybody's treated the same, and so forth. And those safeguards that keep the government from favoritism can also make it more clunky.

I think that that picture is exaggerated. That, in fact, I know a lot of people who've been in leadership positions, both Republican and Democrat administrations in government. I'm impressed by these people, they're public servants, by and large. And as I talk to civil servants down the ranks, it seems to me there are a lot of people who are doing good work in government. And I think the way we make government-- now, Americans have always been skeptical of government; that's not going to change. But the way we make it more effective is to push for change. So that's why Bread for the World is mounting a big campaign to make foreign aid more effective. We want them to use those dollars better. We want it to be better coordinated assistance, more responsive to local people, more focused on poverty. Because if we fight to make the programs better, then we can, with good conscience, ask for the money. But I don't think you do one or the other.

In the case of the nutrition programs, both the Clinton and the Bush Administration did really good work to make the national nutrition programs, especially food stamps, a much more effective program. There aren't any food stamps anymore, it's a debit card. It's a much more efficient program, much less misuse by the convenience stores, used to steal from the program. Some drug addicted people used to steal from the program. That's pretty much done. And it was done partly because both administrations worked on it, partly there are a lot of advocacy groups that work on those programs and

insisted on quality programs. So, I think it comes back to don't just grumble, lobby. Talk to your member of Congress about some ways to make government work better.

MR. BJERGA: In general, is U.S. society becoming more or less compassionate towards the needs of the poor? And has the current recession affected this?

REVEREND BECKMANN: Maybe I'm Pollyanna, but I think the polling data is pretty clear, that Americans are very compassionate toward poor and hungry people, and more compassionate toward poor and hungry people now. Because we all know that there are a lot of people who are really suffering through no fault of their own. I think one thing that has happened in the recession is that there's been some tilt where people are saying, "Gees, how long can we help Haiti? We've got to make sure we're taking care of things at home." So, I think that's a-- it's not all just more, more, more support. But, broadly, Americans want to do right by hungry and poor people in our country and around the world.

And if political leaders can show them a way to do that that's not going to waste their money and also that's going to help people, don't just give them money, but help people get up on their own feet so that they're earning enough money to provide for their own kids. With those provisos, we do have a very generous country. And we ought to be able to organize the pool oomph to do what we need to do to end hunger.

MR. BJERGA: This questioner states, the issue of the poor and hungry is usually associated with mainline churches. What kind of argument would you make to conservative evangelicals that the issue of poor and hungry people should be up there with abortion and gay marriage on the agenda list?

REVEREND BECKMANN: You know, it's just not true anymore. I mean, the argument to make is it's in the Bible. That's the argument to make. I mean, you start with Moses. The way that God revealed himself in the Old Testament was primarily Moses. And Moses, God did not send Moses to Pharaoh's court to take up a collection of canned goods and blankets. And then in the New Testament, our Lord Jesus Christ cared about laws. He cared about the Sabbath law. This was the law of the land. And he cared that the Sabbath law was being implemented in a way that marginalized people, that kept people from getting healed.

So all the way through the Bible, if you just read the Bible, certainly read the Hebrew prophets, Amos, Josiah, Jeremiah, Isaiah, it's really clear that God is concerned about justice for poor people. So when I talk at-- there has been a real change on this in the thinking of many evangelicals, especially young evangelicals over the last 15 years. When I speak on evangelical campuses, it's really wonderful because typically there are five or ten young people who come up after a speech and say, "Oh, I'll change my life." There's a fervor among evangelicals that's really wonderful.

So if they see that this is really in the Bible, and it is, that they're ready to go. "What do you want me to do?" And it's just not true anymore that it's a mainline issue.

In fact, some of the church bodies that are most strongly supportive of Bread for the World are the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship, the Evangelical Covenant Church. We get good support from the Willow Creek Network. There's been a big shift on that. And I think it's important, because many evangelicals are conservative people who are concerned about abortion, so it's not just that these are liberal Democrats at prayer.

But there's a very strong advocacy streak, and it's a fervent advocacy streak among American evangelicals, thanks be to God. Also among organized Judaism. I think we're seeing much more-- I mean, it's clear that there are a lot of Jews who care a lot about social justice. But in terms of the organized structures of Judaism, the Jewish Council on Public Affairs, MAZON, American Jewish World Service, are now very active in advocacy for hungry people in a way that they weren't ten years ago. And we've had really wonderful experiences with the Muslim American community over the last ten years. The Alliance to End Hunger helps, five Muslim American networks publish an annual guide on how to help hungry people during Ramadan. And I think it goes to 200,000 people. I may be wrong on that, but a lot of American Muslims get that.

And our experience has been that American Muslims, because they feel somewhat under attack, are really eager to work with Jews and all stripes of Christians in advocacy for hungry people.

MR. BJERGA: The vast majority of hunger and poverty reduction in our lifetimes has resulted from sustained economic growth in India and China. Economic growth requires that countries be reasonably stable and functional. How can we better address these issues in Africa, where we are making some progress against hunger, but progress remains fragile and uneven?

REVEREND BECKMANN: That is absolutely right. But over the last ten years, roughly half the countries in Africa have made very rapid economic progress. They've reduced poverty. Nearly all of them are democracies. So countries like Mozambique, Ghana, Botswana, they have shown the way. What tends to show up on our TV screens are really gruesome screens from places like eastern Congo and Somalia. There's a certain newsworthiness about the grim realities of the part of Africa that still is floundering. But many African countries, in many African countries, people have managed to get their act together and they're doing really well.

You know, if you run an emerging market fund, I'd open up a window for Africa because they're going to make a lot of money.

MR. BJERGA: Throughout many of these discussions, population seems an important issue in development but seemingly gets little attention. Comments?

REVEREND BECKMANN: It is important. Countries like Kenya have 3 percent a year population growth. It's really hard for a country to keep up with the rapid growing need for social services, also for families. If a husband and wife have six, seven kids, it's really hard to provide for those kids. So, getting population growth down to

more sustainable levels is important in many countries. There's the whole issue of family planning and abortion, which is important to many Muslims, many Catholics. But I think there are ways, even with those concerns of conscience, to promote family planning in a way that respects the consciences of individual people. And then the most powerful contraceptive, actually, is teaching girls how to read. If girls learn how to read and write, add and subtract, the population growth drops more than any other thing you can do.

And then the second most important thing you can do is deal with the legal issues, legal justice issues for women. So if women can own land, and that sort of thing, that also reduces the population growth. Those things change the politics within every marriage. So rather than the woman just being a beast of burden, she's got a life. She can think, she's got dignity. She can read, she's making money. And doing things for girls and women is more important than anything we can do to reduce population growth.

MR. BJERGA: On foreign aid, how do you assess the effectiveness and the appropriateness of using the U.S. military to deliver versus foreign aid?

REVEREND BECKMANN: That's a really important-- when are you going to get to the political things? You got all these policy questions. But that is an important policy issue. In fact, Secretary Gates, the Secretary of Defense, thinks we have over-relied on the military to deliver foreign assistance, development assistance. There are situations in the middle of a war situation in Afghanistan or Pakistan where civilians can't operate. And so it may make sense as part of the war effort to distribute funds to the municipal government, to try to build some things, to try to win hearts and minds. But that's really part of the war effort.

And also, let's not kid ourselves. It's probably not going to do much to help poor people. It may help to win the war. But if you were trying to help poor people, doing that kind of win the hearts and minds stuff in the middle of a war, is not going to do as much as investing in poor farmers in a country that's at peace. But those are the situations in which I think it really makes sense for the military to operate humanitarian and development programs. Also, when there's a huge natural disaster, something like the tsunami, the military has more logistical capacity to get things and people to the other side of the world than any other institution in our society. So I am grateful for what they did in the tsunami and the Haiti earthquake to get supplies and do some of that emergency work in the first couple of weeks.

But for the long haul, Secretary Gates agrees that it ought to be civilian agencies, especially the U.S. Agency for International Development and the other development agencies, that are running development programs. There are all kinds of problems when you have the military do it. First, they're good at what they do, not this. Also, for example, if the military is involved in passing out relief supplies, then there's a blurring of the distinction between humanitarian agencies and the military. So then the guys on the other side come up and shoot somebody who works for Save the Children because they can't tell the difference between what's humanitarian and what's military. So, I want to keep a pretty clear line between the military and development.

MR. BJERGA: What role should food companies, beverage companies and restaurant chains play in fighting hunger and promoting better nutrition?

REVEREND BECKMANN: Well, some of them are doing some really interesting things. HEB is a big chain in Texas and Mexico, a grocery chain. They are a spectacular company that's helping food banks all across Texas and Mexico promoting philanthropy. They're signing up people for child health insurance in their grocery stores. They have their staff signing people up for the health insurance program for low income kids. Other companies, I think Cargill is a company that has long had a real interest in world hunger. And they speak out on issues that are important to hungry people, especially the trade issues, but also development assistance issues, increasingly. Or Sodexo is another one.

We need more help from business, that's the truth. You know, there are some companies that really are serious about the environment. And they go to the Hill with environmental groups and help to lobby for environmental policies. There are very few companies that go to the Hill and-- you know, they'll give a charitable gift to a food bank, and that's good. But, we need them to help us change the laws and structures that keep people hungry on a much larger scale. We need that to happen among countries.

Secretary Vilsack, the Secretary of Agriculture, just helped to convene a group called Corporate Coalition Against Hunger. And I have high hopes that something may actually come of this.

MR. BJERGA: We are almost out of time, but before asking the last question, we have a couple of important matters to take care of. First, to remind our members and guests of future speakers. On September 29th, in this room, we'll have Josette Sheeran, the Executive Director of the World Food Program, undoubtedly picking up some of the threads of this conversation we've had today. The next day, on September 30th, we will have Senators John Cornyn, who's the Chair of the National Republican Senatorial Committee; and Senator Robert Menendez, of the Democratic Senatorial Campaign Committee giving completely opposite views of the 2010 elections.

On October 12th, General Norman Schwarz, Chief of Staff of the U.S. Air Force, will be speaking. And on Friday, October 15th, former Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice will be here before we have our big Fourth Estate award dinner honoring Bob Schieffer that evening. Lot of exciting things going on at the National Press Club. And we are very excited, once again, to have you here, Reverend Beckmann. And for this, we'd like to give you the traditional token of Press Club appreciation, the National Press Club mug.

REVEREND BECKMANN: I am very honored. (Applause)

MR. BJERGA: And our final question. Both as an ordained minister, as an economist, one theme that often will come out at several points in the Bible is the theme

of doubt. You've been working for decades now in anti-poverty and anti-hunger efforts. But undoubtedly, doubt arises. And I'm just wondering, how do you deal with doubt? Is there a memory, is there an image, is there an ideal that keeps you going?

REVEREND BECKMANN: Well, I rely heavily on the grace of God. So, really, I'm struck by the passage from Jesus that you don't have to have much faith. I mean, we know that the Bible's really clear that to have a good relationship with God, in the end you don't have to be a very moral person. Whew. You know, it's true, that God's grace embraces us. And even if we screw up in lots of ways, God is for us.

And then you have this passage from Jesus who says, "You know, you don't even have to have very much faith. If you have the faith of a grain of mustard seed, you can move mountains." So I don't think whether you have some faith or not, whether you're doubting or not, really I just think what we know of-- what we think we know of God is that God is good and that God will use us whether we believe very strongly or not. I don't think you have to be a Mother Teresa. Just get up in the morning and do the next right thing. Thank you very much. (Applause)

MR. BJERGA: And thank you, again, Reverend Beckmann. This meeting of the National Press Club is adjourned. (Sounds gavel)

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