



# Faithful asked to help fight world poverty

■ Empowering women, fighting disease also key issues for congregations

By Christine Morente

STAFF WRITER

SAN FRANCISCO — Unified as one voice, faith leaders from Bay Area congregations recently called for reform of the Foreign Assistance Act of 1961.

It is a system, some critics say, that is inadequate to deal with today's challenges — climate change, the

world's chronically hungry and the sick.

"When it was written, the biggest issue facing our foreign policy was containing communism," said Joel Rubinstein, leader of the San Francisco chapter of RESULTS, an international grass-roots lobby that works to eradicate hunger and poverty. "Now, we're worried about the proliferation of infectious diseases; the urgent need to empower the world's women; and eradication of

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poverty. There's also the issue of violence motivated by religious fundamentalism."

He and leaders from 26 congregations were asked to fight the moral disgrace of extreme poverty, and support the United Nations' Millennium Development Goals during an interfaith luncheon Wednesday at the University of San Francisco.

"God's work must truly be our own," said the Rev. Shari Young, chairwoman for the Interfaith Millennium Development Goals Coalition in San Francisco.

Members' tasks include reaching out into the faith community to educate others about what's going on globally — a mission the Peninsula Clergy Network will tackle, said Executive Director Rabbi Jay Miller.

Another task is for clergy to convince local lawmakers to support the design and enactment of a new Foreign Assistance Act.

This spring, legislators are taking steps to determine how to revamp the system.

David Gist of Bread for the World, a collective Christian voice urging lawmakers to end hunger at home and abroad, said that there has been a "spiritual contraction, or a step back from generosity" during the economic downturn.

"People are worried about jobs already lost," he said during the luncheon. "More are worried about layoffs and closing down of compa-

nies. At the same time, we don't want to be paralyzed by this."

The way to change foreign assistance is to invest in agricultural development, he said.

Gist would like to see farmers of Third World countries trained to produce enough crops for this year and the next.

Meanwhile, Rubinstein said food aid has not been very effective.

The 51-year-old San Francisco resident found that 65 percent of U.S. food aid dollars are spent on shipping costs rather than food.

Rubinstein said that by sending agricultural commodities, the practice undermines the commodity price for farmers in the developing world.

It cuts their incomes and denies them the ability to make profits and reinvest the profits in improving their agriculture.

"Foreign aid should address the needs of the world's poorest people and should help jump-start the economy of the developing world," Rubinstein said. "The money should not be spent on beltway bandits."

The World Bank estimates that 1.1 billion people live on less than \$1 per day.

In 2000, the United States joined 180 countries at the U.N. Millennium Summit in pledging to reach eight goals by 2015.

Those goals include eradicating extreme poverty and hunger, reducing child mortality and achieving universal primary education.

Two years later, President

George W. Bush signed the Monterrey Consensus.

It urged all developed countries that have not done so to provide 0.7 percent of gross domestic product as official developmental assistance to poor countries, according to the coalition.

In turn, developing countries promised reforms to improve transparency, democracy and anti-corruption efforts to ensure that increased foreign aid would reduce poverty.

So far, five nations are already at or above the 0.7 percent level. The United States contributes 0.16 percent.

Sister Marilyn Lacy of Santa Clara-based Mercy Beyond Borders said there is hope that President Barack Obama's administration will make development a high priority.

She added that it is time to forge new relationships, even with people perceived as enemies.

The 60-year-old Menlo Park resident, who is a Catholic nun with the Sisters of Mercy in Burlingame, has a keen interest in helping the people of Sudan. She was there in May.

"Religious leaders in this country have a tremendous responsibility to educate people in the pews ... and believe we are one human family," Lacy said. "Redesigning the Foreign Assistance Act is a good first step."

For more information, go to [www.point7now.org](http://www.point7now.org).

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