

Politics plays role in hunger elimination, Beckmann says

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By Hannah Elliott

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AUSTIN (ABP)—The movement to eradicate hunger and extreme poverty for millions of people around the world is not a lost cause, the president of [Bread for the World](#) stressed.

In fact, despite the population explosion, the number of people who are undernourished is slightly lower now than it was in the early 1970s, David Beckmann said. He participated in the Ethics Without Borders conference in Austin, organized by the Baptist General Convention of Texas' [Christian Life Commission](#).



David Beckmann of Bread for the World says he believes it is possible to cut hunger and poverty in half before 2015. (Photo by John Hall)

Hundreds of millions of Chinese have escaped from extreme poverty and hunger in the last decade, and even African countries lacking much economic growth have made rapid progress in terms of child mortality rates and the number of children in school, Beckmann said.

“Based on that experience, the nations of the world in the year 2000 adopted the Millennium Development Goals: By the year 2015, we think it’s possible, and we intend to cut hunger and poverty in half in the world,” he said. “We think it’s possible to get virtually all the kids in the world into primary school, including the girls.”

The United Nations formed eight [Millennium Development Goals](#), which range from halving extreme poverty to halting the spread of HIV/AIDS, to be met by 2015. President Bush has embraced the endeavor, Beckmann

said.

A 2006 United Nations report showed some progress on the goal of halving poverty and hunger. In 1990, more than 28 percent of the developing world's population, or 1.2 billion people, lived in extreme poverty. By 2002, the proportion was 19 percent. In Asia over the same period, the number of people living on less than \$1 a day dropped by a quarter of a billion people.

Beckmann, a Lutheran clergyman and economist, said what excites him is the possibility in this century to overcome hunger and poverty.

"Those of us who read the Bible have to recognize this is the Lord God moving in our own time," he said. "God the Father and our Lord Jesus Christ hear the prayers of hungry mothers."

The gospel is a gospel for the poor, Beckmann said. "And, in fact, the gospel of Jesus Christ is good news to the poor. Always has been. It gives people dignity and hope."

Unfortunately, much of the poverty in parts of Asia and Africa remained unchanged, the 2006 millennium report noted. In sub-Saharan Africa, for example, the number of people living in extreme poverty increased by 140 million from 1990 to 2002.

More than 850 million people worldwide suffer from chronic hunger, Beckmann said. In the United States alone, more than 35 million people live in households that often run out of food.

Action against such poverty necessarily includes political means, Beckmann said. If Christians are serious about eradicating hunger, part of that action should be through implementing policies and changing laws that "keep people poor."

He suggested extending the food-stamps program and providing debt

reduction for the world's poorest countries as preliminary measures to that effect. Twenty-five million people in the United States use food stamps every month, he said.

On Feb. 14, the Senate approved \$463.5 billion to cover all domestic and foreign-aid spending for the fiscal year 2007. Poverty-focused assistance alone received a \$1.4 billion increase over the amount of money dedicated to it in 2006.

Jose Antonio Ocampo, U.N. under-secretary-general for economic and social affairs, said the participation of developed countries in enhancing debt relief has lent some hope to those in need.

"The data ... suggest that providing every child with a primary-school education is within our grasp," he wrote in the 2006 update.

"The handful of countries in sub-Saharan Africa that are successfully lowering HIV infection rates and expanding treatment demonstrate that the war against AIDS can be won. Step by step, we see that women are gaining in political participation that will one day result in their full equal rights."

Beckman likewise said poverty and hunger are intertwined with other topics discussed at the ethics conference, especially HIV/AIDS and U.S. relations with governments in the Middle East.

"Our relationships with the Muslim world would clearly be improved if we were more serious as a nation about trying to overcome poverty and hunger," Beckmann said. "There's a lot of poverty and hunger in even fairly healthy nations in the Middle East."

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