

After Katrina, pleas for a focus on poverty: No to cuts in antipoverty programs

by [John Dart](#) in the [October 4, 2005](#) issue

After Hurricane Katrina produced vivid images of poverty in America, leaders of five mainline denominations renewed their call on Congress to oppose deep cuts to programs serving the working poor, children and seniors.

On the day that New Orleans flooded, the Census Bureau said that the number of Americans living in poverty had risen for the fourth straight year. “Our denominations have mobilized and are responding in prayer and financial support and direct service to those in need,” the leaders wrote. “Yet, just as disaster struck the Gulf Coast, the U.S. Census Bureau reported in very particular detail that poverty in the United States is growing.”

The plea in mid-September by Episcopal, Methodist, Presbyterian, Lutheran and United Church of Christ officials coincided with broader political pleas for serious attempts in Washington to prepare for future disasters—both natural and human-produced—that take the heaviest toll on people with few or no fallback resources.

“September 11 made Americans aware of our national security vulnerability,” said Andrew Kohut, president of the Pew Research Center, as quoted by the *Los Angeles Times*, “and there is a good chance that Katrina will raise the public’s consciousness about the weakness of our social safety net.”

John Edwards, the 2004 Democratic vice presidential nominee, said on a CNN program, “One of the things that I hope we will do is look at this as an opportunity . . . to shine a bright light on poverty in America and do something about it nationally.”

And on ABC’s *This Week* program, Senator Barack Obama (D., Ill.) said the crisis should move the two parties to overcome “the false dichotomy” over whether the key to reducing poverty is more government help (Democrats) or greater

responsibility among the poor (Republican). Both are required, Obama said.

If awareness of the sharp political divisions in the nation's capital were not enough to invite some cynical shrugs regarding such hopes, the United Nations summit against poverty a few days later elicited skepticism because of the way it has been overshadowed by the UN's oil-for-food scandal and disagreements over proposed reforms of the international body.

Religious leaders who met earlier at the Washington National Cathedral are urging national leaders from around the world to live up to their responsibility to cut the rate of extreme global poverty by 2015, an aim of the Millennium Development Goals agreed to by the UN in 2000. They also seek a partnership between governments and religious institutions on development problems.

At the cathedral, former U.S. secretary of state Madeleine Albright and others decried on September 11 suggestions by John R. Bolton, the U.S. ambassador to the UN, that the United States wants to downplay the importance of the Millennium goals. As reported by the *New York Times*, Bolton initially proposed—though he subsequently relented—deleting any reference to specific goals for reducing poverty, hunger and child mortality and combating such pandemics as AIDS, preferring instead to cite broadly stated goals.

Some 30 Christian leaders from Anglican, Protestant, Roman Catholic, Orthodox and other traditions issued a statement prior to the UN gathering that said, among other things, "The increasing concentration of wealth in our world, while so many suffer, is a scandal that impoverishes us all."

Ishmael Noko, general secretary of the Lutheran World Federation, said: "Those who have reaped the benefits of globalization are increasingly afflicted by what has been called 'influenza.' This condition distorts the values of life in fundamental ways, often leading to relativization of human dignity."

Meanwhile, mainline denominations in the United States continued to press for revisions in the president's proposed federal budget for 2006, which Episcopal presiding bishop Frank Griswold called unjust earlier this year.

Following Hurricane Katrina, "It is clear that greater burdens on these programs such as Medicaid and the food stamp program will occur," said John Johnson, domestic policy analyst in the Episcopal Church's Office of Government Relations. "Congress must . . . recommit itself to the values that Americans share in standing up for the

poor and disenfranchised in our country.”