

Briefly noted

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After days of protests during their Hong Kong talks in December, the 149 members of the World Trade Organization hammered out a scaled-down agreement on global commerce. But many Christian and civil society groups fighting for trade justice predicted that the deal will do little to help the world's poor. "Those talks might not have crashed as spectacularly as those at Seattle and Cancun. However, the deal will have as little impact on the world's poor people," said trade analyst Claire Melamed on the Web site of the British aid and trade justice advocacy group Christian Aid. The main development came December 18, the final day of the WTO Ministerial Conference, when rich nations settled on the year 2013 as an end date for agricultural export subsidies. U.S.-based Church World Service officials were dismayed. "The wealthy industrialized countries squarely refused even to consider the global impact of their \$300 billion in domestic agricultural subsidies, and only grudgingly agreed to end a mere \$5 billion in export subsidies on agricultural products by 2013," observed Rajyashri Waghray, director of the CWS Education and Advocacy Program. Domestic farm subsidies, rather than export subsidies, are the major reason why exported U.S. and European goods unfairly force down the prices of cotton and basic grains such as corn and rice, explained Waghray. Referred to as "dumping," this practice can bankrupt small farmers and devastate rural employment in developing countries.

Robert A. Schuller, the son and longtime heir apparent to his father's pulpit at the Crystal Cathedral, officially became the senior pastor of the glass megachurch this month. Robert H. Schuller, 79, announced in a New Year's Day sermon at the Garden Grove, California, church that his 51-year-old son would succeed him January 22 and also take over the widely seen *Hour of Power* televised services at the Reformed Church in America-affiliated congregation. His father remains as chairman of the board of Crystal Cathedral Ministries and will be designated as founding pastor of the 50-year-old church. "My father and I will continue as pulpit partners on many Sunday mornings for years to come," predicted the younger Schuller, a graduate of Fuller Theological Seminary.

Bethlehem has celebrated its most festive Christmas since a Palestinian uprising began in 2000, with the largest turnout of pilgrims visiting the town of Jesus' birth in more than five years. More than 30,000 pilgrims descended on the Palestinian-ruled West Bank town for the holiday. The number was twice that of 2004 but far short of the 150,000 visitors who inundated Bethlehem for Christmas in the 1990s. Braving chilly weather and pouring rain, pilgrims and local Christians crowded along Manger Square to watch the traditional Christmas Eve procession by church leaders from Jerusalem to Bethlehem. The town's restaurants, souvenir shops and hotels were crowded with pilgrims who spent much-needed tourist dollars in a town that's suffered from deep economic depression since 2000.