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Spotlight on hunger

Lunch-hour appeal on Monument Circle nets about \$2,000

HEATHER GILLERS

There was plenty of compassion and charity, but nothing edible on the menu at the midday kickoff for the Interfaith Hunger Initiative on Thursday on Monument Circle. Downtown pedestrians donated about \$2,000 to feed hungry Hoosier and Kenyan children at the two-hour event, put on by a coalition of about two dozen faith groups working to fight hunger. Muslim, Jewish, Catholic and Protestant leaders spoke, and local students sang and played music for workers on their lunch breaks.

"Our faith teaches us that, first thing, we have to serve," said Maninder Singh Walia, a trustee at Indianapolis' Sikh Satsang temple. "If we have bread to eat, we have to help others. It's not just me, me, me."

The Indianapolis Hunger Initiative's founders include Pacers executive Jim Morris, who returned to Indianapolis last year after five years as executive director of the United Nations World Food Program.

"I saw a couple billion people who were vulnerable and at risk around the world," Morris said. "Children die every day because of hunger."

Thursday's event encouraged passers-by to forgo lunch and give what they would have spent toward feeding the hungry. Few folks were willing to skip a meal, but that hardly lessened their generosity when it came to fighting hunger.

"I think people sort of forget about it," said P.J. Hinton, 39, Indianapolis, who spent \$8.72 on a sandwich but said he planned to fork over \$10 to the initiative. "But the way the economy is going, it's going to become a bigger problem."

DeAndra Edmond, 38, grabbed an Indianapolis Hunger Initiative leaflet on her way to buy lunch and resolved to donate \$25 online. She said she had come across the event just as she was considering the maxim that giving is better than receiving.

"I was coming out of my job thinking that I need to give something," said Edmond, Indianapolis.

The money raised -- which supplements about \$100,000 already pledged by the faith groups -- will go to hungry children at home and abroad.

An alliance between congregations in Indiana and western Kenya, the Global Interfaith Partnership will buy a year's worth school lunches for 2,000 Kenyan children. The group also pays for year-round meals for homes headed by children, and for uniforms and school tuition.

Gleaners Food Bank of Indiana expects the initiative to help pay for an extra 2 million pounds of food for its pantry, said President and Chief Executive Pamela Altmeyer. Gleaners supplies food to soup kitchens, food pantries, senior centers, youth programs, homeless shelters and other charities in 20 counties.

All the activity attracted Chanel Johnson, 40, who moved to Indianapolis from Louisiana a month ago.

"I come from a place where children are hungry, too," she said. "Anything for kids to me is a worthy cause."

See more photos Go to IndyStar.com/multimedia to see more from the Un-lunch Hour. Find out more To learn about the drive of local faith groups to fight hunger, go online to interfaithhungerinitiative.org.