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Thinking about those harder hit by hard times

Our position: Ecumenical effort for the hungry shows need for generosity even by those feeling the crunch.

As our candidates for public office never tire of reminding us, these are difficult and scary times for middle-class Americans.

Family budgets are strained, savings are thin, debt for college and other basics has swollen, job loss is a real threat. Wall Street's troubles are the average household's troubles, and recession looms.

Is now the time to ask the hard-pressed to lend a helping hand, as the Interfaith Hunger Initiative did on Thursday with its "Un-lunch Hour" on Monument Circle?

When we look around at the thousands of people in Indiana, and the millions worldwide, who awaken each day wondering where they'll obtain the basics of living, the question answers itself.

Property taxes, retirement accounts and well-paying jobs are legitimate concerns for hardworking Americans. They are not life-and-death issues. They are not food, shelter and basic medical care, always in critically short supply throughout the world and denied to more and more people every day by the same sick economy that pains the general population.

"If middle-income people are a bit pinched right now, think of those with very, very little," says James Morris, an Indiana Pacers executive who saw hunger at its worst in his five years as director of the United Nations World Food Program. "Difficult circumstances always hit the poor the hardest, and they fall disproportionately on the backs of women and children."

The beauty of nutrition assistance, he adds, is that small amounts pay dramatic dividends; and many givers means a light burden for each.

As a practical matter, poverty is everyone's problem because it displaces productivity and stability with dependency and unrest. As a moral imperative and an article of religious faith, feeding children is fundamental.

The latter was the theme of Thursday's program, in which representatives of Catholic, Jewish, Muslim, Protestant, Sikh and other faiths asked passersby to donate their lunch money. About \$2,000 was collected. The sum will supplement about \$100,000 already

pledged by the religious groups toward a goal of buying 2 million pounds of food for Gleaners Food Bank of Indiana and a year's worth of school lunches for 2,000 Kenyan children.

Education starts with full bellies and good health; and poverty ends only through education. There's no dollar better invested than that which goes to fight hunger, in America or in places where average "wealth" is a dollar a day. Nor is there any obligation more capable of uniting believers across the range of religious traditions. Only good can come of that shared spirit.