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## Ragsdale: New Orleans turns focus to poverty across U.S.

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### Poverty forum

Is poverty linked to race or social class? What are the implications of local poverty? These issues will be discussed at an open, free forum sponsored by the Iowa Council for International Understanding at 7:30 p.m. Oct. 21 at the Hotel Fort Des Moines in Des Moines. For more information, visit [www.iciu.org](http://www.iciu.org). To register, call 287-8700.

In January, a survey commissioned by the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops found only 5 percent of Americans believed poverty and homelessness were important problems for the country.

That was before the Katrina disaster, and people too poor or too weak to flee the hurricane filled the New Orleans Superdome and the city's convention center.

Americans — including President Bush — were forced to acknowledge the chronic poverty in the richest nation in the world.

Poor people were always out there, struggling to survive. But soothed by tax breaks and harboring a "If I can make it, anybody can" mind-set, some better-off Americans have averted their eyes from the plight of the most vulnerable among us.

"The poverty of the people who were victimized by hurricanes Katrina and Rita should lead us to ask why these people are living as they are living," said the Rev. Denny Coon, pastor of Trinity United Methodist Church.

We don't need to go to New Orleans to find families in desperate need of help. And poor people in Des Moines and New Orleans have more in common than most people may suspect.

According to the U.S. Census Bureau, the American Midwest and South saw the greatest numbers of people entering poverty in 2003.

The number in the Midwest rose from 6.6 million to 6.9 million, while the South rose from 14 million to 14.5 million people.

In the Midwest, 10.7 percent of all people live in poverty, compared to 11.3 percent for the Northeast, 12.6 percent for the West and 14.1 for the South. Central cities and the suburbs saw the greatest rise in poverty.

Coon's congregation is active in ministering to needs of people in Des Moines' poorer neighborhoods. Last week, someone came to the church and asked for diapers. Another person needed help with rent. Another needed gas money until the next paycheck. All but one of those asking for help was employed.

"I'm glad they came to the church and that we could respond in a charitable way," Coon said. "They're trying to make a go of it."

For nearly 15 years, the Rev. Bob Kem, pastor of St. Anne's Episcopal Church in Ankeny, has been taking charitable assistance to Kyle, S.D., a 95 percent American Indian community about 50 miles north of the Pine Ridge Indian Reservation. The median value of housing there is under \$10,000.

"The people of Kyle are even poorer than the people living on the reservation," Kem said. "For many families, the annual income is only about \$1,200 a year; 85 percent of people are unemployed."

Kem said the hurricane victims and Kyle residents are equally isolated in communities with limited jobs, poor schools and limited access to the mainstream.

"They may own land they don't want to leave, but the jobs are elsewhere," Kem said.

Both pastors believe the only way out of poverty is employment that will give people new purpose and meaning in their lives.

The pastors said if President Bush wants to do something to give the people from the Superdome, inner-city Des Moines and Kyle a leg up, he will promote programs that will provide education and jobs for have-nots. Even if the haves pay more taxes to support them.

It might do his approval rating good. Another survey cited by the U.S. Catholic bishops found nine out of 10 Americans believe the federal government has a responsibility to alleviate poverty.

Kem hopes the Bush administration will push tax incentives for companies willing to invest in America's pockets of poverty. But he's not waiting for the feds to find Kyle, S.D. He's working with a business and the new Kyle Chamber of Commerce to redirect jobs formerly outsourced to China back to Kyle. He wants Oglala Lakota College to provide training.

Kem knows several hundred jobs paying a living wage could turn around any downtrodden population and make places shunned by industry seem more plausible for investment.

That's in line with proposals to help hurricane victims by linking job training for poorer residents to efforts to rebuild their communities. Give them preference when contractors start to hire.

Yet, for those people to succeed, a support mechanism must be in place, Coon said:

"For people to make the leap from merely subsisting to becoming self-sufficient, they need to pick up a skill or become better educated. They need the assurance that when they reach a hurdle, someone will be there to help them get over it. Otherwise, whether they're evacuees from New Orleans or single-parent families in Des Moines, they're going to end up back where they were."

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