Global Faith Leaders and World Bank Group President Jim Yong Kim on Call and Commitment to End Extreme Poverty

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World Bank Group President Jim Yong Kim
Media Teleconference Call with Faith Leaders
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Transcript

REV. WALLIS: Welcome to all those who have called in. This is a conference with faith leaders representing global faith organizations around the world, and the President of World Bank, Jim Kim.

We are glad to be here to talk about a call and commitment. Let me start by saying there’s an old biblical text that is often misinterpreted that says “The poor, you will always have with you.”

We’re changing that now. This is a historic moment for us because it is now possible to end extreme poverty by 2030. That’s a goal that we now have and we share. For us in the faith community, this is a moral purpose and a cause rooted in our scriptures and our love for God who has made a priority for the poor critical to what “faith” means.

This is a new alliance between faith leaders and the World Bank, very diverse faith communities. Jim Kim came to us some time ago, we have been talking for quite some time, and this is more than religious outreach, it is really a new covenant, a new alliance between us.
I think the World Bank provides what we need, what I’d call the “evidence,” for what really works and doesn’t work to end extreme poverty. The World Bank has done so much work on that, and they know now what works and what doesn’t.

What we provide in the faith community is the moral narrative, what I would call the “prophetic voice,” a prophetic ethic, to mobilize many people.

We are very pleased that Dr. Kim has reached out to us. We have had several conversations, very hopeful, and very practical, and very professional.

We are combining the evidence with the moral imperative, and both are needed to mobilize people around the world. In particular, a new generation of faith leaders is really eager to join this cause for which they would call a “mission.”

We want to introduce the faith leaders. They will introduce themselves. Each will speak representing their tradition, their constituency, and Dr. Kim will respond at the end, and then we will take your questions and try to tell you why we are so excited about this. This really is a new historic moment for all of us, both in terms of what’s possible and what we are going to do together.

Ruth Messinger, would you start out for us?

**MS. MESSINGER:** Thank you so much, Jim, and thank all of you who are on this call. It is tremendously important that we come together and that we have you to hear about the work we are doing.

I’m Ruth Messinger. I’m the President of American Jewish World Service, an organization that is motivated by the Jewish commitment to justice that is rooted in Jewish values and Jewish historical experience. We are committed to realizing human rights and ending poverty in the developing world.

Nothing has been more exciting to us in the last year than the collection of faith leaders who have drafted and endorsed this moral imperative statement, recognizing that now it is possible to end extreme poverty. We are going to work together to do it.

I would just share with you one observation from the Jewish community, for Rabbinic commentary, which says as follows: “There is nothing in the world more grievous than poverty. It is the most terrible of all sufferings. If all troubles were assembled on one side and poverty on the other, than poverty would outweigh them all.”
That’s why we have made this organizational commitment. It is why we are part of this interfaith effort, and it is why we are determined to see it through to success.

REV. WALLIS: Our next speaker, please.

REV. LUBAALE: Nicta Lubaale from the Organization of African Instituted Churches. We are an organization that brings together the African Instituted Churches across Africa, but we are also part of the interfaith initiative.

Ending extreme poverty is part of the call of our ministry, a mission in society. For long, we have worked in caring for the poor and the suffering, caring for those who have been battered by war and many other situations which cause poverty in Africa.

As we look at the evidence that is around us, it’s clear that we can end poverty, and we are going to be more sympathetic to the situations of war, hunger, and all that has kept the people in Africa and the rest of the world suffering in poverty.

We are here and encouraged by what is happening and the commitment to work with the faith communities across the world to end extreme poverty. We know it is possible. That is why we are involved in the process of financing for the World Bank, knowing there are adequate resources in Africa and around the world for us to end extreme poverty.

This is the moment for us to dismantle the foundations of poverty so that the people God created can move in abundancy.

REV. WALLIS: Thank you, Rev. Lubaale. Thank you, Ruth. We are now going to Ms. Bani Dugal. You are going to hear many voices, diverse voices, but you are hearing us all with a central message and theme. Bani Dugal, please.

MS. DUGAL: Bani Dugal, Baha’i International Community. Recognizing the significance of (this initiative), the World Bank's initiatives, the Baha’i International Community is pleased to be a contributor too, and endorse the statement. We believe faith has the capacity to tap the deepest reservoirs of human motivation and therefore release the collective will and raise consciousness of people in a way that brings the moral dimension of poverty to come to the fore.
All individuals have the responsibility to assist people living in poverty, the societies and the institutions are responsible for creating the conditions that poverty can be eradicated. Baha’i communities around the world are contributing to eradicating poverty with grassroots efforts to build capacity through education and other processes, with a goal of enabling individuals everywhere to become protagonists of their own progress and development.

At national and international levels, we participate in these courses that emphasize the spiritual dimension of social progress and development. These initiatives also encourage individuals to consider their social responsibilities towards others. So measures to promote the wellbeing of all has been blocked largely but (by) the pursuit of self-interest and overall disunity that, sadly, seems to characterize many of our individual and institutional pursuits today.

So, we believe we need a new vision of society where cooperation is the dominant mode of social and economic interaction, and where recognition of our underlying oneness and interdependence is firmly upheld.

We thank The World Bank for taking the leadership in this enterprise.

**REV. WALLIS:** Thank you very much. Our next voice is Dr. Sayyid Syeed.

**DR. SYEED:** Thank you. This is Sayyid Syeed, from Islamic Society of North America, the oldest and the largest Islamic organization in America. The Quran tells us very clearly that God invested human beings with a sensibility, and our Prophet warned and said, this dignity could be lost, human beings could lose that kind of self-respect and that kind of divine spark, if they are inflicted with poverty, that’s why poverty is an enemy of religion, spirituality and human sanity.

So we have created from city to city in North America a sense of solidarity with Christians and Jews during our month of Ramadan, when every Muslim fasts the whole day, and creates that sense of compassion with those who don’t have anything to eat. And the Fifth Pillar of Islam is -- the Fourth Pillar of Islam is Zakat, giving your donations and so on.

So I am also on the Executive Committee of the World’s Religion for Peace, and in that capacity we have also endorsed this statement. So, we believe that it is critical for us to explore all the possibilities and the potential. God has given us a potential today that we
can eradicate poverty. It is possible. And when that has risen, the realm of (the) possible, then we want to mobilize. People of all faith, people of all backgrounds, and help them to play a historical role in implementing this agenda that we have created, that The World Bank has created. Thank you.

REV. WALLIS: Thank you. The statement Ruth mentioned at the beginning, is available to you, there are 30-some signatories already. They are global and they are national in countries around the world. David Beckmann is our next speaker from the U.S.

MR. BECKMANN: I'm Reverend David Beckmann, I'm President of Bread for the World. We are a faith-based advocacy movement here in the United States. We organize Christians of all stripes to lobby Congress on hunger and poverty issues. But our faith communities have long been active in advocacy on issues that are important to people in poverty.

In this country over the last five years, we've mainly had to play defense. Powerful political forces have pushed for deep cuts in all the government programs that focus on people in poverty. But in the end, thanks be to God, the cuts to poverty-focused programs has so far been minimal. And that's partly because a broad coalition of faith communities have insisted on maintaining a circle of protection around these programs.

U.S. funding for international development assistance has actually increased in each of the last four years. And now that it has become clear, that it is feasible to end extreme poverty, faith communities are committing ourselves to ramp up our advocacy and to help build a movement, a global movement that will translate this wonderful possibility into political commitments.

The unprecedented progress that the world is making against hunger and poverty is in my mind, an example of our loving God, moving in today's world. And I think God is inviting all of us to get with the program.

REV. WALLIS: You've heard a few voices. There are many more who signed this; I think very powerful statement. More coming out all the time, and this began with Dr. Jim Kim, I think reached out to many of us to build relationships with the faith communities. So, this isn't just a coalition, based on a growing relationship, and so I'm very appreciative Dr. Kim did that, and I'm thankful for our growing friendship with many at the table.
So, Dr. Kim, tell us why this effort to combine the evidence that you bring with the moral narrative that we try and bring is critical to the kind of movement David Beckmann just talked about. Movements to change history, as only movements do. How can we build that kind of movement?

**DR. KIM:** Thank you, Jim, and I feel simply so fortunate being here and being able to listen to this group of leaders. I’m deeply inspired. We have our very busy spring meetings coming up, but I think I’m now fully inspired and ready to go for a tough week ahead. The most important thing is that faith leaders and now officially the World Bank Group share a common goal, a world free of extreme poverty by 2030. The Moral Imperative Statement is an inspirational document grounded in individual leaders’ commitment to take action to end poverty. The world has had great success in reducing extreme poverty over the last 25 years from nearly 2 billion in 1990 to fewer than 1 billion today. That is astounding progress.

But to reach our goal, we really need to do two very important things. The first is to gather all the evidence that we and others have gathered on what works in reducing poverty and then use that evidence to implement critical initiatives. But the second, which I believe is just as important, is that we need to build a movement to end poverty. I believe that some of the most important leaders in the movement to end extreme poverty will be people of faith, people who are motivated fundamentally to help the most vulnerable among us.

The World Bank Group, of course, is a secular organization, but we’ve had alliances with many groups, including faith-based organizations, that do heroic work in developing countries. Our alliance with faith leaders to end extreme poverty is rooted in our understanding that we need prophetic voices to inspire us just as we need evidence to guide us. The moral imperative we believe will help drive the movement to end poverty by 2030 by inspiring large communities to act now and to advocate for governments to do the same.

These commitments from religious leaders come at just the right time. We believe that the faith-based community can play a critical role in helping hundreds of millions of people lift themselves out of poverty.

Thank you very much to all the speakers and we are I think now open to take your questions.
REV. WALLIS: When we came through the lobby today for this event, downstairs at the World Bank it says "What will you do to end poverty?" It's almost an altar call. This is about a call. This is about a time to turn a moment into a movement. That's our intention, a moment into a movement, evidence and the prophetic energy here. So let me invite you to ask questions and we'll answer them the best we can representing our colleagues. We're not here but to help shape this document and are ready to move now around the world. Please tell us who you are, give us your name, and we'll take your questions.

OPERATOR: We may now begin our question-and-answer session of today's conference. To all our audio participants, to ask a question please press "star 1" on your touchtone phone and make sure that your phone is muted. Record your name at the prompt because your name will be required to introduce your question. To withdraw your question, please press “star 2.” One moment, please, for the first question. Our first question comes from Dennis. Dennis, your line is now open.

QUESTIONER: Hi, this is Dennis at Catholic News Service. A question regarding climate change and how that tremendous challenge is going to affect getting people out of poverty because there’s problems with land becoming arid, there’s problems with rising seas. How do you use that to -- how do you encounter that to get your message out to reduce poverty?

MS. MESSINGER: Jim, this is Ruth Messinger, so let me give a quick response to that. One of the strengths of many of the groups on the call of endorsing the moral imperative is that we work with the people who are most directly affected by these kinds of changes. There’s important discussion about climate change in the capitals of the world, but if you’re a farmer whose land is being flooded or a farmer whose land has suddenly lost water, you are directly engaged in this work. And by working with indigenous groups by bringing their message of what actually has made them for generations great stewards of the land and how that effort should be continued to allow them to move out of poverty is critical. Frankly, otherwise people will be making top-down decisions, some of which I think are not in the interest of dealing with climate change and some are, but unless they can consider the poorest people affected by these changes in climate, too many of the “solutions” will move in the wrong direction.

REV. WALLIS: Thank you, Ruth. One of the mistakes we’ve often made is seeing climate change as another issue and where does it sit on our priority list. If you look at our concerns about poverty, hunger, water, health, education, conflict, climate change impacts
every one of those issues. So it touches everything. That’s why climate change is central to all of our work to overcome poverty. Another question?

OPERATOR: So far we do not have any questions in queue. Again, for the participants if you would like to ask a question, please press “star 1” on your touchtone phone. One moment, please.

DR. KIM: While we’re waiting for it -- this is Jim Kim from the World Bank Group. We invested about $11 billion in climate-related activities last year and the fundamental reason is that the poorest will without question be the most impacted by, for example, the increased intensity and number of extreme weather events. And also we know that right now where there’s still hunger in the world, when you lose, for example, 40 percent of arable land in Africa, which is the prediction by 2050, the pressure on us to think of a food system that is on the one hand related to a kind of agriculture that will combust carbon in the air, which we know is possible, all the way to making sure that everyone has food, we actually think there’s a way to do that. We think there’s a way to implement more climate-smart agriculture as we call it that will put more resilient strains into the world and manage water more effectively. But we feel that that must be linked to a plan to feed everyone on the planet -- and we’ll be announcing one very soon -- a plan to feed the world by 2030 that at the same time can tackle climate change. I think the really critical thing for us is to find these win-win strategies where we can both tackle climate change and, for example, feed the world.

REV. WALLIS: It’s also a great example of this new alliance between evidence -- what is smart climate change policy -- and the prophetic issue, which you just raised with what you asked. Those who are most impacted are the ones who have been least responsible for climate change. That’s a moral issue. That’s a religious issue. So, this alliance of evidence on the one hand and a moral narrative on the other is central to what we’re doing here today.

Let me invite some other questions. Don’t be shy. Who has a question?

OPERATOR: Once again, for all our participants, if you would like to ask questions, please press *, 1 on your phone, and make sure that your phone is muted.

One moment, please.

REV. WALLIS: While we’re waiting, let me ask David Beckmann a question. Bread for the World, Sojourners -- my organization -- the Circle of Protection, as he talked about -- we
work in Washington, D.C. on policy issues. And that’s taught us that unless you have a grassroots movement around the world, you can’t move policy. So, this is not just a campaign to do policy work in Washington, D.C.; it’s to build a constituency. When Dr. Kim raised this relation with us, he said, “We need moral authority and moral constituencies to change the facts of poverty.”

So, David, when you say we need a movement, what do you mean by that?

MR. BECKMANN: I think we’ve already seen a movement starting to emerge. This doesn’t just start today. Over the last 15 years, we’ve had the Millennium Development Goals, and they’ve had a big influence, for example, among white evangelical Christians in the United States.

I think if you look back 15 years ago, those communities weren’t doing much on global poverty advocacy. But they got engaged, first on the AIDS issue, and then on the global poverty issue, and, increasingly, on the issues of poverty in the United States itself. And it’s partly because they’ve had an awareness that we can really make a difference. It’s partly because they’ve read the Bible; partly because they had this already with the MDGs. It’s become clear that we can make dramatic progress against poverty.

And so I think we’ve also seen among, I mean, Ruth Messinger’s organization, among Jews, there’s much stronger advocacy, among organizations of Jews than there was 15 years ago -- or among Muslims, certainly. Those have been areas of change.

And then, in my mind, in this, it’s got to be not just about what’s going to happen in Africa or someplace, but, also, as African-Americans organized, insist that black lives matter -- or as Latinos in this country organized for immigration reform. That is part of this broader effort -- to insist that we do what we can do everywhere to end extreme poverty.

REV. WALLIS: Since Africa’s mentioned, Reverend Nicta Lubaale, talk about, as a General Secretary of African Churches, how could this campaign being talked about here in Washington, D.C. impact things on the ground in Africa?

REV. LUBAALE: Well, I think it will be an alliance between people and organizations in Africa and the organizations in the U.S. I think it’s more of the linkages with what the Organization of African Instituted Churches will bring for the world, and for us to bring our experiences from the South, especially Africa, and, also, to learn from what is going on in the U.S.
But, also, I’d like to talk about an emerging movement in Africa, which the Organization of African Instituted Churches is part of. That is the Africa Interfaith Initiative agenda. This is a continent-wide movement bringing together the Baha’i community, the Hindu community, the Muslim community, the Christian community, as well.

We merged last year, and we agreed that, really, poverty is a scar on our conscience, and we can’t accept to live with it, and we can’t accept to keep walking in a way that does not move people away from poverty.

So, we want to strengthen our direct initiatives to support the people living in poverty, to get them out of poverty, but, also, a movement to speak to the issues around conflicts, the issues around hunger, the issues around governments, the issues affecting young people, gender issues, issues around HIV -- so that we speak and come with a more critical but constructive voice that engages governments.

And we are talking about moving towards engaging with governments more constructively, moving towards engaging multilateral agencies, like the World Bank and the U.N. more constructively, and working together to end poverty.

So, the whole issue of a movement or movements is critical, and working in a fresh way. We are not coming around the table to battle, but we are coming around the table with evidence, and look at how we can use the prophetic voice with the evidence that is around us.

REV. WALLIS: I see Dr. Sayyid at interfaith tables all over the world all the time. So, do you think as you talk to people of other faith, do you see us moving together on this question?

DR. SAYYID: You use the right word for this, that this is a movement. It’s not someone sitting inside a church and shedding tears for the hungry and the deprived or some Muslim giving sermons to their own people that this is their (inaudible) pillars of their faith are (inaudible) that the deprived and the poor.

But, it has taken us beyond that, in the sense that in America we have seen -- for example, I was talking about the month of Ramadan, fasting. Fasting is something that -- you fast, you don’t eat. Or, you are not eating because you don’t have. You are starving. So, this act is not -- cannot be externalized. But, in America we have found that this pillar of Islam has
become the most manifest, displayed. People know about it. From White House to governor offices around the country, in mayors’ offices. The event is celebrated.

Muslims in America have been reassured and really enjoy their sense of confidence that this part of their religion, that it’s imperative to go out and feed the hungry. This has become such a visible expression of their faith, and this has, at the same time, helped them to connect with their neighbors, to connect with churches.

So, we have recently had this end of hunger here, which are these activities, preparing food for the hungry and sending out to different countries in hundreds and thousands of quantities. So, this is done now by collectively -- Christians, Jews, Muslims, in synagogue, in Islamic centers, and in churches.

The best manifestation was last year when we had our annual convention, where we get 30 - 40,000 Muslims together. And, we worked with this End Hunger Program. And, while the people who attended the convention, they listened to lectures, workshops, interfaith dialogue, but this was a new dimension -- collectively preparing meals and sending them over to -- thousands of meals were prepared.

So, I’m saying that it has become such a dynamic expression of faith against poverty. And, I’m glad that now we have a message which is so powerful, which is so deliverable, and we are behind it.

REVEREND WALLIS: I’m going to give our many people a last chance to ask a question. Operator, could you instruct them one more time.

OPERATOR: Sure. We have next question that will come from Jerome. Sir, your line is now open.

QUESTIONER: Thank you. This is Jerome Sokolovsky (phonetic) from the Voice of America. I will have the pleasure of moderating a panel next week at the World Bank spring meetings on this very topic. And, I just had a very kind of incidental question which is that I often see or read about how poor people are attracted, both in America and in places like Africa, are attracted to the prosperity gospel.
And, we recently saw a (inaudible) pastor in Atlanta soliciting donations from his following to buy himself a $60 million jet. So, I’m wondering if there’s any role that prosperity preachers can play in this initiative.

REVEREND WALLIS: You’re going to get me in trouble here, Jerome. (Laughter) I think the prosperity gospel is really a biblical heresy. The Bible just doesn’t teach that. And, you know, when Jesus gave his first sermon, he said the spirit of the Lord is upon me because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. But, we’re there as evangels for good news. What Evangelicals are supposed to be is from that word evangel, good news. This initiative here, I think, is good news to the poor, all over the world. What we’re doing here will be good news to the poor. So, those of my brothers -- they’re usually brothers -- who preach this message, have to show that their message is good news not just for that jet plane but good news for the poor.

The test, the criteria, of our message is whether or not our lives, our message, and our use of resources is good news for the poor. That’s, in my view, the gospel test, from my tradition of what it means. So, prosperity gospel people have to show that their prosperity -- God likes prosperity as long as it is shared. The biblical notion of economy is there is enough if we share it. If we don’t share it, then we’re in trouble. So, that’s what I think -- I want to go back to the Bible with my, uh, prosperity preacher brothers.

REVERAND BECKMANN: This is David Beckmann. I just want to add -- it depends on what you mean by the prosperity gospel. If you’re an alcoholic who’s been driven to homelessness and you go to an A.A. meeting and they can help you get your act together, and 5 years later you have a family and you’re able to support a family, that’s prosperity gospel that really is a gospel. And, a lot of really poor people around the world, partly when they go to church, they’re looking for help with the -- help with poverty in their own lives. So, if their preacher helps them to think about -- um, it’s a tough climb -- but, helps them to think about what they need to do to climb out of poverty and to get a little prosperity in their life, that’s the kind of prosperity gospel that’s very consistent with -- that is the gospel to the poor. If it’s about buying a jet or a car for the preacher, that’s not. (Laughter)

EVEREND WALLIS: So, is there prosperity? Sure. Dr. Kim, do you want to share.

DR. KIM: Yes –
REVEREND LUBAALE: I’d like to talk about that, since Africa is mentioned. I think that the hot issues that believe that -- they are too extremes, the prosperity gospel and the gospel that tells the people that so long as you love God, even if you are in poverty, God loves you, and you are okay. So, they are both extremes.

I think what we are looking at in Africa is how do we find the Scriptures in a way that empowers people. David has talked about how people can climb out of poverty but also looking at the ethical issues around that you don’t simply drive the biggest, most expensive car around and then you prosper, but also to question how are people making their wealth, so that we don’t celebrate stolen wealth from Africa in the church. But, also, knowing that the gospel empowers people to have divinity and for them to aspire for prosperity. And, they agree with the theme of the World Bank to share the prosperity, not about how people are individual -- there are two extremes, the first (inaudible) gospel, and the gospel that tells the people as long as you love God, (inaudible) and poverty, God loves you and you are okay.

So, they are both extremes. I think what we are looking at in Africa is how do we handle scriptures in a way that empowers people. David has talked about how people can climb out of poverty, but also looking at the ethical issues around that that you don’t simply drive the biggest, most expensive car around and then you prosper, but also to question how are people making their wealth, so that we don’t celebrate stolen wealth from Africa in the church. But also knowing that the gospel empowers people to have big (inaudible) and for them to aspire for prosperity and they agree with the theme of the World Bank to share the prosperity, not about how people as individuals can come through and prosper.

So, we have to look at that. It spread so fast that certainly there is enough in the scriptures for us to enable people to look at prosperity in a more balanced way in their families and also in the communities. I think moving towards communal prosperity, which is shared prosperity, is the best way for us.

REV. WALLIS: It’s a really theological conversation at the World Bank.

DR. SYEED: But when you organize this workshop next week here in the World Bank, make sure that you have at least one speaker from the Islamic legacy, from the Islamic theology because our brother spent his whole life, on the one hand, organizing people, making sure that the values of integrity, values of austerity, they are engrained in every believer.
Because, ultimately, what is the purpose of it? I mean, Islam has five pillars and among those are two (inaudible) pillars of (inaudible) and self-denial and experiencing poverty and hunger and then the other thing is giving 2.2 percent. Christians have offered you 10 percent, but still it is such a requirement you cannot avoid it if you are a true believer.

But, at the same time, the saying of the prophet that I began with started this whole discussion it says, so these are two sayings of the prophet. On the one hand, he says, (inaudible), I’m proud of being (inaudible) poor. His sense of pride in being poor, so this is inculcated in every believer, that if we don’t have the riches, if I don’t have abundance, I should be proud of that and move forward.

But at the same time, the other thing that I used in the beginning, that is, (Inaudible), that poverty has the capacity and the strength of depriving you of the dignity that God has given to every human being. So, between these two sayings, we have to make a living, make a role and establish our leadership and models to the world.

**REV. WALLIS:** Thank you. Anymore questions, operator?

**OPERATOR:** No, no further questions on the line. And, again, for all our audio participants, if you want to ask questions, please press *1 on your touchtone phone and record your name.

**DR. KIM:** I think we’re going to close it at this. This is Jim Kim. I just want to thank especially the faith leaders, but I want to thank everyone for being on the call and I think a transcript will be available. Thanks very much, everybody.