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**Leaders meet on economic inequality**

**By Richard Ducote**

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Scores of Tucson community leaders gathered Friday to discuss what many see as a quandary of the economy in 2007.

Billed as a community summit, "Inequality and Opportunity in the New Economy" was designed to address why many Tucson families "feel increasingly insecure about their access to education, good jobs, health care and child care," said Mari Helen High. High is a member of St. Mark's Presbyterian Church, an institutional member of the Pima County Interfaith Council, which hosted the event.

The summit, held at Temple Emanu-El, 225 N. Country Club Road, included 50 members of the clergy and PCIC member institutions as well as 50 invited guests, including elected officials and other leaders.

In many communities, there are "lots of jobs but too many at poverty wages," said keynote speaker Ernesto Cortés Jr., southwest director of the Industrial Areas Foundation, a coalition of community organizations that includes the Pima County Interfaith Council.

Cortés warned that the shared prosperity prevalent in this country from the Civil War until the 1970s has been undermined, leading to greater disparity in incomes and a disconnect between rising productivity and the incomes of many wage earners.

Bishop Gerald F. Kicanas of the Roman Catholic Diocese of Tucson retold the story of David felling Goliath to remind the group of the power of an individual to face adversity. He noted that there are 37 million people living in poverty in the nation, equal to the population of 11 states.

"We can all be winners in the new economy," said U.S. Rep. Gabrielle Giffords, D-Ariz., who spoke at the morning session and hailed the recent passage by the U.S. House of Representatives of an increase in the federal minimum wage from \$5.15 an hour to \$7.25.

That increase, she said, will affect 40,000 households in the 8th Congressional District she represents, which takes in much of greater Tucson and the southeast corner of the state.

Another speaker noted the county's recent milestone surpassing the 1 million population mark.

While some hail that growth as bringing benefits, problems remain in broad areas, said Neal Cash, CEO of the Community Partnership of Southern Arizona.

Progress in expanding affordable housing, educational opportunities and access to health care are key to providing greater equity in the economy, he said.

Crime is another challenge to the community and one that is linked to poverty, several speakers noted.

Overall, the summit aims at collaboration among the area's churches, synagogues, schools, businesses and other institutions to help develop an action plan to address the problems.

The invitation-only meeting continues today.