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My Neighbor Has AIDS

Will Humanity's Greatest Crisis Mark a Turning Point for Your Church?

by Lynne Marian

If you keep quiet at a time like this, deliverance for the Jews will arise from some other place, but you and your relatives will die. What's more, who can say but that you have been elevated to the palace for just such a time as this? —Esther 4:14 (NLT)

The American Church is experiencing a crisis of relevancy. As we have already seen in Europe, secularization has put God and religion on the backburner. In his 2001 book, *Boiling Point*, researcher George Barna stated, "The Christian church is potentially one of the most powerful agents of influence in our society, but recent decades have seen the impact of the Church wane to almost nothing."

And in the U.S., news headlines report daily about yet another reference to God being pulled from the public arena in the name of political correctness. Churches are struggling to make an impact in communities where faith in Christ is often viewed as simply another lifestyle option, on equal footing with political affiliation, vocation or club membership.

Juxtapose this troubling spiritual landscape with what world leaders have called "the greatest humanitarian crisis in history"—the global AIDS pandemic. With 40 million infections worldwide, 28.2 million deaths to date and 14,000 new cases reported each day, the disease is no where near its apex. World governments and social service agencies globally acknowledge that no single entity has the resources and breadth to address the AIDS problem alone. According to the latest United Nations global AIDS report (released July 2004) the virus is continuing to outpace the global effort to contain it.

"The virus is running faster than all of us," said UNAIDS chief Dr. Peter Piot in a statement to the Associated Press.

"AIDS is the greatest public health crisis since the Bubonic Plague but the biggest humanitarian crisis in history," said Sandra Thurman, president of the International AIDS trust and former director of the White House Office of National AIDS Policy.

A GOD-SIZED PROBLEM

The disease is simply too big for any one organization or group to battle—except, just perhaps, a unified, multi-national body of Christ. This pandemic is truly a God-sized problem. Even those outside the traditional Church recognize the role that the Church could play in addressing the crisis. Singer and activist Bono has toured the U.S. in an effort to rally response among the American Church and others.

"Christ's example is being demeaned by the Church if they ignore the new leprosy, which is AIDS," he told Cathleen Falsani of the *Chicago Sun-Times*. "The Church is the sleeping giant here. If it wakes up to what's really going on in the rest of the world, it has a real role to play. If it doesn't, it will be irrelevant."

In another statement, Bono said, "The Church will be remembered in history for how it responds to this devastating epidemic."

And with this responsibility, perhaps the Church has also been given a spiritual opportunity. Could it be possible that, like a terminal patient, the death sentence of AIDS may even prompt our infirmed world to seek salvation?

God has given the Church the opportunity to provide the only real hope and to follow in the example of Christ to provide compassionate care to the “least of these.” Has the 21st century Church been called for “such a time as this?”

A KINGDOM EMBRACE

The sun is just coming up over the arid landscape of the southern African kingdom of Lesotho. A few feet away, an 11-year-old boy trudges up the road barefoot carrying a heavy jug of water. Wearily, he drops it, not on his own doorstep, but on the doorstep of a neighbor who will pay him a few cents this week for making the daily trek. Throughout his short life, the boy, Mantebaleng, along with his three brothers and one sister, cared for their dying parents—until a year ago. Now they’re alone—five of the now 15 million children orphaned by AIDS.

Peering through the broken window of the children’s small, block house, you see a single bag of cornmeal—a donation from the local World Vision Area Development Project. The half-empty bag of meal is this orphan-headed household’s only food.

Across a continent and an ocean, the Wilsons rush their teenagers into the minivan and off to church—almost a mindless Sunday morning routine. But this Sunday’s different. Their pastor, fresh with passion from a recent trip to Africa, shares the heartbreaking and hopeful stories of innocent AIDS victims he has just seen and heard. Within a morning, this ordinary pastor creates a groundswell of compassionate action in his previously complacent congregation. After the service before climbing back into the minivan, 17-year-old Anna Wilson walks to the World Vision child sponsorship table and selects a packet. As she looks into Mantebaleng’s face, the miles melt away. In heaven, a hug is exchanged.

SPEED OF THE LEADER. SPEED OF THE TEAM.

Mantebaleng’s and Anna’s story is now being duplicated in congregations and communities across the U.S. Since launching its C2C (Church to Child/Church/Community) program in 2003, to date World Vision—one of the world’s largest Christian relief organization operating in 4,500 communities in almost 100 countries globally—will have taken over 100 church leaders abroad to gain a vision for the global AIDS pandemic by the end of 2004. Within weeks of these visits, transformed church leaders are mobilizing their congregations, other churches and even communities to be the hands and feet of Jesus to the victims of AIDS. They’re changing lives—perhaps most significantly—their own.

“We’re like a lot of churches. We did ‘missions,’ but I don’t think we really had a heart for it,” says Pastor Ray Armstrong of Calvary Community Church in Sumner, Wash. “We would do little projects and support our denominational missionaries, but there was no real sense of purpose and no real drive to make a difference.”

In April 2004 Armstrong visited South Africa and caught a vision for leading his congregation to become global Christians.

“Bill Hybels once said that the Church is the hope of the world. I’ve lived with that and thought that my church was my little corner of the world. But that’s not it,” Armstrong explains. “The Church is the hope of the world—the big world.”

Within a month of Armstrong’s return from Africa, the members of Calvary Community Church sponsored more than 600 children and currently are mobilizing to underwrite a number of significant community-based projects in the town of Mapoteng, Lesotho.

Armstrong, like many pastors who have gained this global perspective, report that this refocusing has actually infused their congregations with an increased sense of significance, mission and community.

“If someone catches a vision for the world they realize they have a deeper sense of mission, a deeper sense of purpose,” he says. “In our church, more people are showing up to feed the homeless on Friday nights, small groups are growing—it’s a domino effect.”

However, in many communities the impact of a global focus, specifically the AIDS crisis, is making an impact even beyond the walls of the Church into the community.

World Vision Senior Vice President Steve Haas is seeing this focus transform churches and communities nationwide.

“What’s happened in those U.S. churches that are engaging with the global AIDS crisis is nothing short of a real revolution,” he says. “When a congregation engages in an appropriate way with global needs, their community basically begins to say, ‘You’re relevant. You’re relevant to the world. You’re relevant for the Gospel.’ ”

Churches like those in Elk River, Minn., (see page 45) are actually flying point on a communitywide initiative to provide AIDS relief. They’re engaging community leaders, schools and the local media in the fight and in the process are sharing a message that the Church is unified, relevant and full of compassion.

“About a month ago we had a launch banquet. Nearly 175 key city leaders got together, and the pastor cast a vision for a citywide partnership,” explains Greg Pagh, pastor of Christ Lutheran Church in Elk River, Minn., representing a coalition of churches from that community. “It’s going to have a sweeping effect on the whole Elk River area. I think it will bring our city together around this common vision.”

Calvary Community’s Armstrong echoes these thoughts: “I believe our missions program will snowball, and it will begin to touch even unchurched people,” he says. “Non-Christians may not all like church, but they all like the idea of reaching out to those who have less.”

Armstrong says he’s thinking about running an ad in his community showing him holding an AIDS orphan he met in Africa. “The ad would say something like, ‘My name is Ray Armstrong. I’m pastor of Calvary Community Church. Maybe you’ve heard of us, maybe you haven’t. We’ve been a church for 16 years, but we’ve come to realize that we want to change the world. Now you may be a Christ-follower or not, but if you want to change the world, too, we’ve got a way for you to help.’ ”

WHY AIDS?

With the overwhelming needs agenda in the world, in every community, why is the global AIDS crisis a cause that merits the attention of the local church? Why not hunger, homelessness, literacy, healthcare or access to clean water, for example?

“In many ways, addressing the AIDS crisis addresses all of these needs at once,” says World Vision’s Haas. “These issues negatively collude making this particular disease especially toxic and lethal.”

He continues, “Worldwide, people are at greatest risk for HIV/AIDS in communities where poverty, food security, medical services or lack of potable water are most desperate.”

“I’ve learned that everything is connected to something else,” Armstrong says. “We have to feed, to educate, to help develop employment. All of those things help the HIV/AIDS problem; it’s all tied together.”

For Mecklenburg Community Church in Charlotte, N.C.—a fast-growing megachurch with national influence—missions had never been a significant focus for the young congregation.

“Mecklenburg, like a lot of new church starts in the eight- to 12-year range, are just now surfacing after our planting phase and are really ready to explore missions,” says Pastor James Emory White. For him, the answer was obvious.

“You’d have to be on another planet not to know about the AIDS crisis,” White says. “It’s something I’ve been wrestling with for some time both in terms of ‘What is a Christian response?’ but also ‘What will be my personal response?’ ”

According to White, the fact that the world already cares about AIDS made him realize that it was time for the Church to care about AIDS.

“I think a lot of us in the evangelical community were shamed into action by, quite frankly, those outside the Christian community or at least those outside the mainstream evangelical community whether it was Elizabeth Taylor or Bono.”

Today, Mecklenburg has launched a comprehensive, long-term relief effort, including child sponsorship, community-based projects, and relationships with churches and a World Vision area development project in Zambia.

CAN WE TURN THE TIDE?

It's October in India and though the upstairs room is crowded and hot, it's also joyful as the sounds of singing voices float out into the humid afternoon. The sari-draped women, many with small children in their laps, sit on a concrete floor covered with a traditional woven mat. Soon, they will hear a lesson and Scripture reading, but the women plead repeatedly to sing just one more song.

If this was a church meeting in the southern Indian town of Chennai, this scene might not be so unusual, but instead it's a gathering of HIV positive women—many of whom are commercial sex workers. Most are either Hindu or Muslim.

In India's discriminatory culture, meetings like these are the only places where hurting and downtrodden women can be open about their HIV status and receive love and acceptance. Many of these women now know Christ because of that love. Several have also found a way out of their life as prostitutes, helped by the staff at this World Vision Area Development Project.

Across a continent and an ocean, children in a Sunday school class pass a crayon-decorated box to collect coins and crumpled dollars each week to support Sinda, an Indian girl. The children are learning to be global Christians while the donated money benefits Sinda who is HIV-positive, as well as her HIV-positive mother, who is participates in this women's support group.

Some 4,000 miles away in Lesotho, Southern Africa, a group of American pastors watch from a distance another emotional scene. It is late September 2003. Today, Mrs. Mamokhethi Rathebe is burying her husband Ha Ralatsai, a victim of AIDS. Wrapped in black from head to toe, she weeps silently, grieving and fearing her own future as well as of the futures of her HIV-positive children.

Fast-forward six months to April 2004. Another group of American pastors are visiting the HIV/AIDS clinic at the Mapoteng area development project and taking in what they see. The coordinator, Agnes, buzzes with excitement over the once bare cabinets now full of nutritional supplements, medicines and the costly home healthcare kits she is now able to provide for her patients— funded by First Baptist Church in Lodi, Calif., whose associate pastor of outreach and discipleship, Glen Barnes, had visited only six months before.

In a nearby building, a large group of HIV-positive men and women chat happily as they work on income-earning projects. Due to the support they receive at this ADP, they now live openly with their HIV-positive status. In the corner, Mrs. Rathebe, still dressed in black, talks and smiles with a friend as they weave a wool tapestry.

Across a continent and an ocean in Lodi, Calif., Pastor Barnes, leads his congregation in prayer for the people and places he has recently seen—Agnes, the Mapoteng ADP and the HIV-positive people who will be using the supplies the church funded.

“The AIDS crisis is so huge it's hard to know what to do or if you can really do something meaningful. But by focusing our efforts on one community, Mapoteng, we've already received reports of the impact that our one church has had,” says Steve Newman, senior pastor at First Baptist Church in Lodi, Calif.

Newman continues, "We've sponsored more than 100 children and have provided medical kits that have significantly impacted dozens of families living with HIV. I think, at least in this one community, we're beginning to turn the tide of HIV/AIDS."

WHEN DO YOU PLANT A TREE?

Currently, Africa represents the epicenter of the global AIDS pandemic. However, by 2010, according to the UN and World Health Organization this epicenter will shift to Asia. Due to the population density in India and China, the migration is a major concern to health officials, Haas says. The world's fastest-growing and most populous countries have now been identified as also the fastest-growing AIDS hotspots. To put it perspective, in 2003 6.5% of the African continent was infected with HIV/AIDS or an estimated 56 million. That same percentage in China alone would equal 84 million; in India it would be 70 million.

However, where the U.S. Church was slow to respond to Africa, the opportunity now exists to intervene sooner in India, China and other parts of Asia, helping to avert the human devastation that could make the current African crisis look mild in comparison. Moreover, while the African continent is over 40% Christian, Asia is less than 8%.

The church is late, but not too late. Africa has a proverb: When is the best time to plant a tree? The answer of course is, "20 years ago." So, when is the second best time to plant a tree? "Today."

WHAT SHOULD OUR AIDS RESPONSE LOOK LIKE?

Twenty years have passed since the AIDS pandemic began globally ravaging Africa, the U.S. and other nations. However, today American churches have begun to awaken to the need, engage in the crisis and are starting to make a significant impact in individual communities around the world. But what, exactly, should that response look like? Actual needs and our perception of the needs are often very different things.

"We came to Africa servant-hearted, but I think it's hard not to have a preconceived notion of how you would like to serve," Mecklenburg's White says. "If we were honest, it would be something that would be gratifying to us, be rewarding to us as servers.

"We're already learning that to really serve and to minister you need to have such absolute, utter servant-heartedness that it doesn't matter how we serve, only providing what is needed."

MUST YOU SEE TO BELIEVE?

Many churches have launched their AIDS response after their leadership visited a developing country, but is it the only way? World Vision's Haas doesn't think so. "I don't believe every senior pastor needs to go to Africa to engage in HIV/AIDS. Sure, many do, but I don't think everyone should," he contends. "If we do that, we actually create a greater imbalance. Save the money for the plane tickets and turn them into ministry dollars."

Haas suggests that churches use multimedia or bring in guest speakers who have been on the field—resources, he believes, that can be equally valuable in generating a response within a congregation or church leadership.

MAKE IT A PRIORITY

Haas also encourages churches to make AIDS a priority within their missions/outreach program. "I think every church needs to make AIDS part of their church or mission experience, evangelism experience and community care experience," Haas says. "AIDS doesn't need to be the only missions thing you do. But it does need to become part of every church's missions strategy."

TAKING ACTION

While the AIDS response channels will be unique to each church, many relief organizations are encouraging

churches to consider some of the following:

- **Child sponsorship:** Perhaps the most simple, direct and significant ways to help is to initiate a child sponsorship campaign at your church focusing on children in a community heavily hit by the AIDS crisis. Several organizations, partner regularly with churches to promote these types of campaigns. Child sponsorship also provides a support base, which in turn benefits an entire community or town.
- **Ministry/project support:** Partner with a frontline ministry or organization to fund a ministry project that addresses needs in an AIDS-impacted area. Due to the systemic nature of AIDS, projects can range from direct assistance such as orphanages or medical support to broader projects such as water and food development. See page 52 for a list of organizations that offer partnership.
- **Act globally/Act locally:** It can be easy to focus on the needs of an AIDS-orphan in Africa while ignoring the HIV-positive AIDS victims in our own communities. Concurrent with any global relief efforts, explore the way the AIDS crisis is impacting your community and reach out there as well.
- **Be a Voice:** People are not used to seeing compassion and advocacy for AIDS-related issues come from the Church. What impact would a compassionate response to AIDS make on your community? Advocacy can include raising money for a local AIDS hospice or clinic; offering your church for HIV-positive support group meetings; writing government officials about AIDS policy and partnering; or partnering with secular-based organizations to provide awareness and care.

A VIRUS OF COMPASSION

World Vision's Haas exhorts the Church simply, to act. "The Church has a mandate, through the Old and New Testament to care for the vulnerable, to provide a covering, to provide community, to follow the greatest commandment to love," he says. "HIV/AIDS is the greatest orphan and widow creator of all time. We've got the worst virus in the history of man but, if the Church were to meet it head on, also potentially the greatest virus of compassion."

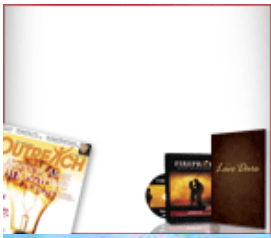
Calvary Community's Armstrong echoes Haas' challenge: "I think the Church needs to realize that we're not here to solve the problem ourselves. We're to do what we can to partner with those who are on the frontline. "As the American Church, we're not the 'great white hope' anymore, if we ever were. We're just people whom God has touched and called to help—to do what Jesus did. How simple can it be?"

Pure and lasting religion in the sight of God our Father means that we must care for orphans and widows in their troubles, and refuse to let the world corrupt us. —James 1:27 (NLT)

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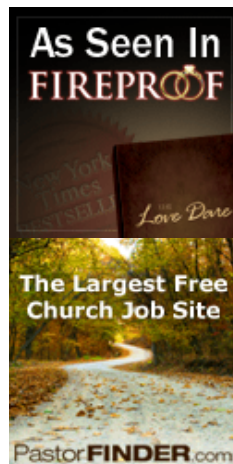


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