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Plea to candidates: Pledge to carry on Africa AIDS fight

There is without a doubt an HIV/AIDS crisis in Africa, since, even with the revised statistics announced last month, we still are seeing about 7,000 new infections a day.

Children are growing up without parents, their lives ending prematurely from AIDS. Then many HIV-positive children are losing the battle against the deadly disease themselves.

At one time, many Christian leaders refused to talk about AIDS. But, as pastors and congregations increased missions and witnessed firsthand the reality of hunger, death and the AIDS pandemic, they understood the crisis that was growing before them.

Today, churches across America and the world along with many other faith-based organizations are making more and more mission trips to Africa to provide aid, doing it in a way that builds countries' capacity to help themselves. Missionaries help get food to the hungry, clean water to the thirsty and medical attention to the sick. They educate mothers, fathers and children in ways to mend the problems in their communities—moving mountains one stone at a time. And they pray with them and for them. They do this because they feel—regardless of their partisan leanings—the call to care for those in need. They are making a difference.

George W. Bush heard the call to help and responded with the President's Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief, known as PEPFAR. Faith-based non-governmental organizations have played a significant and vital role in this initiative, which by the end of next year will have provided care for more than 12 million people, including 5 million orphans and vulnerable children.

Care-giving ministries for orphans, children and parents living with HIV/AIDS and prevention groups have been financed through this initiative. Thanks to the support of the President's Emergency Plan, African organizations, including many churches, are having a broad-based impact by educating people in the areas of agricultural productivity and sustainability, medical care, community leadership and abstinence. The President's Emergency Plan is crucial in laying the basis for broader, sustained success by faith-based groups in fighting AIDS and other related health crises such as tuberculosis.

With the creation of this AIDS relief initiative, President Bush demonstrated his understanding that with our leadership role in the world comes the responsibility of protecting human life at all stages, and that extreme poverty impacts U.S. security. We live in an unstable world, and coping with extreme poverty and disease only adds to the fragility of governments in Africa and other regions. This fragility makes it even more important to ensure funds are used properly.

Fortunately, the President's Emergency Plan has clear procedures in place to audit the use of funds and to evaluate effectiveness based on lives saved and infections prevented.

But if this initiative is to expand to help ensure everyone who needs AIDS-related care can get it, we will need to see strong leadership after President Bush leaves office. That is why I believe that it is incumbent on all candidates vying to become the leader of the free world, regardless of their party affiliation, to explain in detail how they would carry the President's Emergency Plan forward during their term in office.

Thanks to President Bush's commitment to compassion, by the end of next year the United States will be providing AIDS treatment to about one-third of those who need it to survive. Will all candidates pledge to sustain that level of support if they are elected president?

The needs of our brothers and sisters transcend politics. Although great headway has been made through the service of Christians, the global Christian community's efforts on care for orphans and those suffering from disease still have a long road ahead. Our moral obligation and strategic imperative are to protect life and help those in need, and we will need presidential leadership to achieve lasting success.

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