

COVER STORY: There Is No Room for Political Complacency Anymore

Have you ever experienced a life-changing moment? A moment when you knew you would never look at the world the same? Or maybe it was a moment of insight that would forever eliminate your automatic, learned responses? For me, that moment came while visiting Kenya in 2007. After starting a new job with the U.S. Agency for International Development, Convoy of Hope invited me to tour a part of Nairobi called the Mathare Valley.

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Everywhere I looked, I saw orphans. Children who had lost their parents to HIV/AIDS scrounged through the garbage dumps searching for food. Most of the homes, if you can call them that, were mere shacks with mud walls and tin roofs. There was no electricity, no running water and no sewage system. It was so dangerous there and the poverty was so extreme that the police and the fire department would not respond if called. It was truly one of the closest things to a man-made hell I have ever seen on earth.

Our African guide, Rev. Peter Nuthu, had been the pastor of a large church in a wealthier part of Nairobi; then one day, he and his wife visited Mathare. His wife encouraged him to start a one-day-a-week feeding program for the children there. Quickly, they realized that this food was the only real meal many of the children had all week! So Rev. Nuthu and his wife gave up their nice home and church in the better part of town

and moved their ministry to the edge of Mathare.

As we stood in the courtyard inside the gates, the reverend explained that we were going to a dangerous place because the people there were so desperate. We were instructed to leave any of our jewelry behind and to tuck our cameras inside our jackets. Then six strapping young men armed with billy clubs surrounded us to provide protection. As Rev. Nuthu led us outside the safety of his compound through a back gate, I felt like I was walking through a portal into another world.

From Avoidance to Action

As we walked deeper into the valley, the sights, smells and sounds of human suffering were the most tragic I have ever witnessed or could have even imagined before my visit. Rev. Nuthu led us deeper and deeper until we reached a fetid mountain, a 50-foot-high accumulation of garbage, excrement and death that had been building for years. I stopped in my tracks as he started leading everyone to climb up that enormous mountain of garbage. I hung back with one of my staff members and decided to stay behind until the rest of the group returned. I did not want to go farther up because it looked so unpleasant and possibly unsafe, but Rev. Nuthu noticed I was not with them and turned back around to get me. With an almost desperate look in his eyes, he took my hand and said, "Please, come with me; I need to show you something." I mustered the courage and followed him.

We climbed for several minutes and were about halfway up when he stopped and suddenly pointed to something at his feet—a pile of rotting goat intestines that were turning black and were covered in flies. The smell made me nauseous. It was simply disgusting to even look at them. I stared at the reverend with complete bewilderment. He could see that I didn't understand why he was showing me this, so he looked into my eyes, pointed again with great fervor, and said, "*This* is what they eat!" I stared at him in disbelief. He said it

again. "If we don't feed them, this is what the children will come and eat." My mind began to race as I understood the unbelievable horror and gravity of what he was explaining.

My instinct was to run as fast as I could from this place. Run back to my hotel, with its hot water and a bed with nice clean sheets, and then back onto the plane home. But my feet were lead, my heart was heavy and my eyes held back tears, for that was the moment—the moment that I knew inaction was no longer an option. To shake my head and offer my meager prayers would never be enough. I knew that, just like Rev. Nuthu, I had to get involved and personally help make a difference.

Now, reflecting on that experience years later, that is exactly how I feel about the current state of American politics. While the political facade in America may not be as jolting as a slum in Africa, the reality is much more fetid than most Americans know.

From Africa to American Politics

When I returned to my hotel room that night after visiting Mathare, I reflected on something that had moved me deeply when I stood next to that huge mountain of garbage in one of the worst slums in the world—and it has stayed with me ever since. In the heart of that desperate place, the *only* people I saw responding to the needs were Christians. When I looked around, I didn't see any movie stars speaking out about the injustices. I didn't see anyone from the local media. One thing stood out in a place where even the fire department and the police wouldn't respond to cries for help. The people I *did* see there, helping those in need day in and day out, were true people of faith who weren't afraid to get involved.

I was raised in the church, and my career path is the result of continual prayer and a desire to serve. Having worked as a major gifts officer for more than one large Christian nonprofit, I have come to know personally several high-net-

worth individuals, many of them deeply committed Christians. In early 2019, I attended a fundraising dinner at a beautiful hotel in downtown Washington, D.C. In an elegant ballroom, I sat next to a man and his wife who have a personal net worth greater than the gross domestic product of most third world countries. The husband spent a large part of the evening lamenting to me about the state of the country, telling me at length how worried he was for his grandchildren and how he wished we could have better people in leadership.

I had no idea that night that less than six months later, God would make it clear to me, after a great deal of prayer and fasting, that I was to run for Congress. For some time, I had held the dream of serving in public office, and suddenly an opportunity to do just that arose. Unexpectedly, a seat was about to be vacated that had previously looked like it would remain occupied for a long time. For me, the decision came down to a question of obedience to God. I didn't know if I was supposed to win; I just knew I was supposed to run.

I filed the paperwork and hired a team of consultants and was told that if I had any hope of winning, I needed to raise at least \$750,000. That amount seemed overwhelming, but because I know so many strong Christians who care deeply about the country, I firmly believed that with their help, I could raise the amount needed to be successful.

Serious questions existed about the integrity of my main opponents, and thousands of dollars were being poured into their races. The consultants believed that I had a good shot at winning if I could raise enough money to let people know they had a solid, honest alternative who would stand up for faith and family values. I had spent years working on Capitol Hill as a legislative staffer, and I knew how to get things done in Washington. My great desire was to put my knowledge and experience to work to help the people I would represent. But if the voters didn't even know who I was, none of that would matter.

From Inaction to Involvement

I called the man I'd had the honor of having dinner with just a few months earlier. After excitedly explaining to him what God was leading me to do, I asked him if he and his wife would donate some of the critical funds I needed to have a real fighting chance at winning. After all, I was a Christian like him. I was highly trained, shared his values, and he and his wife knew me personally.

I almost dropped the phone when he said, "Terri, I'm sorry, but I'm not going to be able to help you. My wife and I decided a long time ago that we just don't get involved in politics. We only give our money to Christian nonprofits. We don't give money to political campaigns."

I felt my knees buckle as I weakly stammered out a thank you for his time and hung up the phone. I couldn't believe it.

I am disappointed to say that over and over, people told me, "I'm sorry; we just don't get involved in politics." This came from *strong Christians*—friends, colleagues and people from church or Bible study groups. Many of them said things like, "Politics is just so nasty," "Everyone is so corrupt" and "You really can't change the system." And on the criticisms went. When I looked back at the end of my race, only a few solid, committed people had stepped up and said yes. Their friendship and support meant everything to me and still does. It mattered to them because they *got it*. In their minds, they were investing in the kingdom and in me. That was the paradigm shift.

I was determined to not let them down. I gave my race everything I had. My team and I left it all on the field, but unfortunately, I did not win. My opponents outspent me by hundreds of thousands of dollars, and as my consultants explained, it was a numbers game. If you don't have the money, you are almost guaranteed not to win.

After my race ended and I had some time to reflect on what happened, I was truly the most aggrieved by how incredibly hard it is for anyone to get elected who is not willing to take money from special interests. Our system seems to be slanted more and more toward candidates who are willing to compromise heavily to get money. In addition, if you have a very short lead time to raise money, as I did, how can you possibly compete with someone who can bring in millions of dollars?

Unless you have a major force behind you, such as a huge amount of grassroots support or many people willing to donate, fundraise and personally get involved in other ways, it's not possible. And that major force is what I believe God wants to stir up through the body of Christ.

The same way that Rev. Nuthu and his wife realized they could not ignore the truth and do nothing, you as well will realize that you must get involved. Inaction is no longer an option. Your life and the lives of your children depend on it. If our nation continues to consume the garbage that is the fruit of corruption, selfishness and bad decision-making because we sit back and do nothing, our country will die.

As James 2:20b says, "Faith without works is dead." Putting that faith into action is powerful. I want to help you see that you have power, a power you may not realize, to change the world, starting with your city or hometown and spreading throughout the rest of your country. Our country. One nation under God.

As Christians, we are personally responsible for government at the local, state and federal levels. If we don't like what we see, it's our job to change it. Authentic Christians have divorced themselves from politics and government for far too long out of fear, apathy or ignorance. We must be educated regarding what the Bible says about our involvement in government and then train and support others who want to make

a difference.

You simply don't have the luxury of merely voting at the ballot box anymore. You also need to vote with your wallet, time, influence and personal involvement.

Terri Hasdorff is a former congressional candidate and is an executive-level leader. She served on Capitol Hill for six years, then ran for the U.S. House to represent Alabama's second district. She has a bachelor's degree from Samford University, is a graduate of the senior executives program at Harvard University's John F. Kennedy School of Government and is currently in the executive MBA program at Oxford University. Her recent new book, *Running Into the Fire: Why More Christians Need to Be Involved in Politics*, is available at .