

Campaign Targets Black Christians to Help African AIDS Orphans

Pentecostal Bishop Charles Blake says African Americans have been positioned, like Joseph, to reach out to Africa

Seeking to replicate the level of commitment Jews demonstrate toward Israel, a bishop in a predominately African American Pentecostal denomination has launched a nationwide campaign to raise tens of millions of dollars for Africa primarily through black Christians.

The impetus for the effort is the AIDS and HIV pandemic, which thus far has killed about 17 million Africans and left 14 million children there orphaned.

Bishop Charles E. Blake Sr., senior pastor of West Angeles Church of God in Christ in Los Angeles, founded the nonprofit Save Africa's Children three years ago after touring the continent and seeing the ravaging effects of the disease on the population.

Now Blake, who supports orphans through \$3 million in contributions, is seeking to significantly broaden the program. With the United Nations projecting that the number of orphaned children will triple by 2010, Blake is pressing African Americans to ratchet up their commitment to Africa to make a bigger dent in the problem.

"I am appealing to African Americans—but not just African

Americans exclusively,” said Blake, who recently celebrated his 35th anniversary as senior pastor of the 24,000-member congregation and serves as first assistant presiding bishop in the Church of God in Christ (COGIC).

“The divine providential positioning of African Americans is like the divine positioning of Joseph, who was [oppressed] but ultimately came to power and prosperity and was able to help his people,” he added. “Our purpose is to reach back and become for Africa what Jewish Americans have become for Israel.”

Save Africa’s Children is supporting 28,000 children in 160 “orphan-care projects” across Africa. The orphan-care projects include families who agree to raise the orphans; “cluster huts,” which care for 10 to 15 orphans at a time; and orphanages.

“I saw the poverty of people whose income is \$200 to \$300 a year,” said Blake, who last visited the continent over the summer and recruited a delegation of doctors to examine and treat the orphans.

“I saw a continent of people who are hard-working and struggling to enhance themselves, but without the resources,” he added. “Most of the orphan-care projects had twice as many children on the waiting list as are in the program.”

By 2010 Blake wants to raise enough money to support at least 50,000 children in 1,000 orphan-care projects. Thus, he is appealing to the public on the Trinity Broadcasting Network, which regularly televises from his sanctuary, and to 60,000 black churches for support.

To further spread the word, the campaign will produce a documentary, an infomercial and public service announcements on the orphans, said Darrell Smith, the foundation's executive director. "Our goal is to help Africans help themselves," Smith said.

"The civil rights movement started in the black church," Smith said, adding that he hopes the campaign can mobilize African Americans in a similar way.

Meanwhile, Blake, who helped found the Pan African Charismatic Evangelical Congress, has sounded the Africa theme at his home church by hosting ambassadors from nations, including Uganda, Zambia, Kenya, Ethiopia and Tanzania, as well as cultural exchange programs.

And he has urged members to join the fund-raising drive. "This is our motherland; we have to help out," said Marcos Day, who has raised \$3,000 through \$5 and \$10 donations dropped into an empty five-gallon water bottle at his San Fernando Valley barbershop.

Blake, who was among about 10 prominent African American ministers who helped persuade President Bush in 2001 to pledge \$15 billion in aid for Africa, said: "We are more prosperous than any other black people on the face of the earth. When we use our influence, Africa will have a higher priority [among Americans] and will advance."

Dion Haynes in Los Angeles

For more information about Save Africa's Children, write to P.O. Box 8386, Los Angeles, CA 90008; call 1-866-313-2722; or e-mail info@.