

Christians Mobilized to Combat AIDS

President Bush and U2's Bono have helped inform Christians about the disease's spread in Africa

The leader of the free world and a legendary rock musician have played an unlikely role in galvanizing Christians to help fight the spread of AIDS in Africa.

President Bush and U2 front man Bono are helping put AIDS on many Christians' radar by highlighting the region where some 6,500 people die every day of AIDS-related illnesses and another 9,500 daily are infected with HIV. Roughly 14 million children have been orphaned by the disease, with another 10 million projected to be parentless by 2010.

Bush's promise to earmark \$15 billion toward the global fight against AIDS in Africa and the Caribbean during his January State of the Union address led the National Association of Evangelicals to become "deeply involved" in the issue, according to a statement from the organization. Members lobbied Capitol Hill to ensure that a third of the funding would support sexual abstinence programs. And in June the group convened a forum in conjunction with the humanitarian organizations MAP International, World Relief and World Vision to examine evangelicals' role in addressing the pandemic.

President Bush's July tour of Africa, during which he again pledged to provide \$15 billion in aid over five years, brought further attention to the AIDS crisis, said Larry Warren, president of African Leadership (). The Franklin, organization offers pastoral training to African leaders and is developing health clinics to help care for the infected.

The week of the president's trip, Bono began a campaign to ensure Bush keeps his \$15 billion promise. The effort has drawn support from many in the contemporary Christian music (CCM) industry, who have become increasingly vocal about Africa's needs in the last two years. Christian musicians turned out in droves at a July meeting at songwriter-producer Charlie Peacock's Nashville, Tenn., home in support of Debt, AIDS, Trade in Africa (DATA), the nonprofit group Bono backs ().

Artists such as Steven Curtis Chapman, Leigh Nash and Matt Slocum of Sixpence None the Richer, dc talk's Michael Tait and saxophonist Kirk Whalum signed their names in a show of support to urge President Bush to send aid to Africa.

Singer Margaret Becker, who helps World Vision raise funds for its Hope Initiative () aimed at caring for AIDS widows and orphans, said the current level of involvement stands in stark contrast to the CCM industry's response nearly 10 years ago. At the Gospel Music Association's 1994 convention, she said the vast majority of attendees declined to wear ribbons expressing their support for the fight against AIDS.

"People had such an odd stigmatization about the disease," she said. "It was associated with liberal politics ... and left-wing leanings." The Christian music community "was sort of like, we're not about that. That's somebody else's problem."

While insiders say some Christian artists are motivated to fight AIDS because of Bono's involvement, others have taken ownership of the issue. Switchfoot's Jon Foreman, who also works with a group of Sudanese refugees, said his Christian pop-rock band raises awareness about AIDS at concerts and

included statistics about the crisis in the liner notes of its CD.

“When you look into the face of someone who is affected by the numbers, it’s no longer a statistic, it’s now a friend,” Foreman said. “The church ... has an ideology that obligates us to help. I really believe we are to lead in this.”

Christian rock group Jars of Clay founded Blood: Water Mission in April to educate Christians, especially its young fan base, about the epidemic and to raise funds to support grass-roots initiatives such as African Leadership.

“We don’t mind saying the things nobody wants to say,” said Jars front man Dan Haseltine, who visited three African nations in December.

“Some of that comes from going into the mainstream rock arena and doing what we do,” added guitarist Stephen Mason. “This is just one more risk that really kind of seems like a no-brainer.”

Jars is donating its proceeds from an upcoming children’s book called Scribblepotemus to Blood: Water Mission. It also contributed to Mission: Africa, a “field guide” to mobilize teens to fight AIDS.

The book gives detailed action steps for youth who want to get involved. Its proceeds will be split between World Vision and the aWAKE Project, a Nashville-based AIDS awareness and fund-raising effort.

“That was our goal, to educate and then motivate,” said project editor Kate Etue, who has been involved in the AIDS issue since 2001. “We felt the teens could be more revolutionary than the adults.” She added that musician Michael W. Smith and author Max Lucado, who appeal to an older demographic, are also drawing support for the issue.

The push comes not a moment too soon for World Relief president Clive Calver, whose Mobilizing for Life initiative () has been helping African churches respond to AIDS since 1997. “We’re 15 years late,” Calver said, adding that HIV infections decreased in Uganda because European churches supported Christians there.

He said Christians in Africa bear a heavy burden, caring for the sick and the orphaned. “The real need is to pray, and the real need is to give,” Calver said.

A 2001 study conducted by researcher George Barna found that just 3 percent of Christians were willing to give financially to a reputable organization fighting the spread of AIDS in Africa. But ministry leaders say that is changing.

“I think that if Barna were to do that study now, the percentage would be much higher,” Warren said. “There’s been a lot of awareness raised.”

During a July press conference, Bono told a group of reporters he has been surprised by Christians’ response to his campaign. “Particularly evangelicals, who seemed very judgmental to me over the years, turned out to be incredibly generous in their time and their support of the effort,” Bono said. “I’ve really had my view of the church turned upside down.”

Though the level of involvement is increasing, it does not match Africa's need, leaders say. The Rev. Jessica Ingram, supervisor of missions for the African Methodist Episcopal Church's 15th Ecclesiastical District, which includes three nations in southern Africa, is raising \$100,000 for a Balm in Gilead Center that will help care for AIDS victims in South Africa. She said many U.S. churches still are not tuned in to the issue.

Warren is familiar with her frustration, but believes the tide will turn. "Uganda cut their infection rate in half twice over an eight-year period," he said. "There's a clear example of how it was done. All we have lacked up to this point is the will to do it."

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