

World AIDS Day Marked Worldwide

From governments to church leaders, officials worldwide pledged to continue combating the spread of HIV/AIDS.



[] Across the globe on Monday leaders of churches and nations promised to help fight the spread of HIV while observing World AIDS Day—an international campaign launched in 1988 to improve HIV/AIDS awareness and education.

“Today is World AIDS Day, a day we reaffirm our commitment to fight HIV/AIDS at home and abroad,” President Bush said.

Before heading to the Saddleback Civil Forum on Global Health on Monday, where he would discuss the global AIDS epidemic with Rick Warren and other evangelical leaders, Bush announced that his President’s Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief (PEPFAR) was succeeding.

“[It was] one of the most important initiatives of my administration,” he said. “PEPFAR is the largest international health initiative dedicated to a single disease ... and it is bringing hope and healing to people around the world.”

Launched in 2003 with the goal of helping to treat 2 million HIV patients in five years, PEPFAR had exceeded its mission, Bush said. “The American people, through PEPFAR, are supporting lifesaving treatment [worldwide],” he said.

"We've also supported care for more than 10 million people affected by HIV, including more than 4 million orphans and vulnerable children."

With an estimated 33.2 million people worldwide infected with the HIV virus, including 2.5 million children, the United Nations Joint Program on HIV/AIDS (UNAIDS) reports that about half of the millions infected last year are 25 years old or younger.

In addition to measures that Chinese and South African officials took on Monday to reduce the stigma attached to people who are HIV-positive, one major U.S. denomination announced its own plan to help dispel negative stereotypes.

To encourage support for World AIDS Day, the head bishops of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA) will be voluntarily tested for HIV/AIDS at an upcoming convention.

Conceived by the ELCA committee on Ministry Among People in Poverty (MAPP), the bishops' actions will be presented as an opportunity for the church to raise awareness about HIV/AIDS "prevention, testing, treatment, care, stigma and discrimination."

The committee also encouraged bishops "to be supportive and involved with local events on World AIDS Day, Dec. 1."

"By personally engaging in and supporting actions on World AIDS Day ... ELCA

bishops can help encourage all people to 'know their status' by being tested and help break down the stigma surrounding the disease," ELCA leaders said in a statement.

Mark S. Hanson, ELCA presiding bishop and president of the Lutheran World Federation in Geneva, Switzerland, said the willingness of African religious leaders to publicly declare that they've been tested is helping to lessen stigma associated with the disease.

"I believe ELCA bishops being tested will be a similar act of accompaniment and encouragement for ELCA members and global companions," Hanson said. "This decision by ELCA bishops is one more sign of this church's commitment to respond to the HIV and AIDS pandemic." **-Paul Steven Ghiringhelli**