

World AIDS Day 2009

By **Katharine Jefferts Schori**
 Presiding Bishop
 The Episcopal Church



December 1 each year is World AIDS Day, an occasion both to remember the 25 million beloved children of God who have lost their lives to the pandemic over the past three decades, and to rededicate ourselves to building a future without AIDS. This year, new challenges both at home and abroad remind us again of the costly work that remains in the world's fight to eradicate AIDS.

In poorer countries around the world, stemming the spread of HIV/AIDS has proven the most difficult of the eight Millennium Development Goals and the one that threatens to undermine progress toward all the others. More than 33 million people continue to live with HIV/AIDS around the world, and nearly three million are newly infected each year. The global economic crisis has made matters worse, pushing as many as 100 million more people below the poverty line. Their futures are more at risk than ever, yet their interests have rarely been considered in wealthier nations' political conversations about the economic crisis.

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President Obama's first federal budget, released earlier this year, failed to keep pace with Congress's 2008 financial commitments to fighting AIDS abroad, and slowed the growth of those efforts from previous years. As we approach a new federal budget cycle this winter, Americans must send a clear message to the Administration that in spite of economic challenges at home, our nation cannot retreat from our commitments to fight poverty and disease abroad.

In the United States, HIV/AIDS has lost much of its visibility in the past decade with many Americans growing complacent about the threat of the disease. It is not always immediately obvious who in our communities is suffering from HIV/AIDS, and the stigma of diagnosis further isolates and alienates those who need our love and support. As Christians, our ministry to those living with HIV/AIDS in our communities is more essential than ever. World AIDS Day is an excellent opportunity to evaluate the ways in which your congregation and community are welcoming and serving those living with the disease.

President Obama announced an enormously encouraging initiative, Act Against AIDS, earlier this year as a five-year, \$45 million effort

aimed at enhancing AIDS awareness within the United States. While the initial funding is small, this initiative is a much needed response to the diminishing public awareness of the AIDS crisis in our own communities.

The Episcopal Church has shown distinguished leadership on this issue through the years and, despite current challenges, I fervently hope that our combined witness and advocacy will continue to grow. I urge all Episcopalians to join our Church's advocacy efforts by becoming members of the Episcopal Public Policy Network (www.episcopalchurch/eppn), and I commend the work of the National Episcopal AIDS Coalition (www.neac.org), which, for several decades has helped to keep this issue visible within The Episcopal Church.

Christians around the world enter the season of Advent this weekend, and together we wait in hope for the coming of the Redeemer. An ancient antiphon for the season addresses the coming Christ as "the King of the nations, and their desire, the cornerstone uniting all people." Let our prayer in this holy season be that the God who dwells among us, suffers and dies, yet rises again, will unite the will of all peoples to work toward finally conquering HIV/AIDS.

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