

Lewis blasts government, offers hope

By Francie Healy

In the midst of “endless heartbreak”, there is a “glimmer of hope” in the fight against the world’s most terrible pandemic, Stephen Lewis, United Nations special envoy on HIV/AIDS in Africa told a packed St. George’s Cathedral in September.

He said non-governmental organizations, agencies “on the ground” and celebrities were the moving force for change. And he lambasted

governments for their lack of political will in the fight against this “indescribable human holocaust”.



Jeanine Vanheyst led African Voices preceding the speech by Stephen Lewis.
Photo by Francie Healy

He applauded Doctors Without Borders, The World Health Organization, Hollywood stars, famous musicians including Bono and Elton John, Oprah, former U.S. president Bill Clinton, the Primate’s World Relief and Development Fund (PWRDF), nurses everywhere, especially in Africa (“There’s no more admirable profession”), Partners in Health, British Finance Minister Gordon Brown, Jeffrey Sachs (author of *The End of Poverty*) and “extraordinary philanthropists” such as Bill and Melinda Gates for “injecting massive amounts of money” in response to the AIDS crisis.

“Thank God they’re on our side,” he said. “But what if they weren’t?” He said their donations help fill the void caused by a “serious lack of political response”. But he worried about a world in which the philanthropists, and not political leaders, decided the fate of history. “We’ve never been in this situation before,” he said.

Celebrities rally to raise money and awareness about AIDS, but “they will never be able to compensate for the vacuum that has been created by the lack of political leadership,” Lewis told his audience.

A huge part of the “glimmer of hope”, he said, came out of the 2006 AIDS conference in Toronto. Delegates learned about new steps forward in science and research. It may soon be possible, for instance, for women to use, without having to tell their partners, a gel to prevent transmission of the disease. (In Africa, gender inequality is so desperate women have no sexual rights at all.) There is also hope that the treatment might also be a form of birth control. Mr. Lewis said the gel (or cream or foam) wouldn’t be available for about five years, but that was sooner than the estimated 10 years or more for a vaccine.

He said hope is on its way in the form of research about how to prevent infection by targeting the highest-risk groups with “pre-exposure prophylactics”.

He added hope is in the availability of generic anti-retroviral drugs (thanks to the aggressive efforts of the Clinton Foundation); hope is voluntary testing, which he said is becoming more common and acceptable throughout Africa.

But he lamented that hope isn't as apparent yet for the children of Africa, who are, he said, “heartbreaking beyond measure.” Pediatric drugs are starting to be developed. But until recently, caregivers – who could be 8-year-old siblings – had to guess how much to give a child, based on what adults received.

The children, said Mr. Lewis, are desperate, confused, frantic. They desperately want someone to touch them. They hang on to visitors and won't let go. Their eyes tell you they need a place; they need to feel safe. But “when you go to a funeral every day after school”, he said, you are obsessed by death.

The majority of children, if they live past the age of five (many are infected with AIDS *in utero*) watch their parents die of the disease. They are often raised by older brothers and sisters – sometimes younger than 10. Or they are raised by their grandmothers.

The Stephen Lewis Foundation put out a call for Canadian Grandmothers to link up with African Grandmothers for financial support, empathy and solidarity.

It brought 100 African grannies to the AIDS conference in Toronto. They led the discussions and planned the agenda. “It worked wonderfully,” Mr. Lewis said. “They were magnificent.”

Now, he said, “the Foundation is drowning in Grandmothers.” Canadian Grandmas responded with such immediacy and enthusiasm that the Foundation has to hire someone to work full time just with them.

Close to 100 Kingston grandmothers, most of whom were part of a new group called the Kingston Grandmother Connection, gathered in another part of the cathedral after the Lewis speech. He met with them before leaving for his evening speech at McArthur Hall. “Something remarkable is happening,” he said. “African grandmothers are holding the continent together. The spin-off of your help cannot be understated. Anything you do will have real reverberations in Africa.”

He was moved by the Canadian grandmothers' determination to help.

“It's exhilarating, in the middle of so much sadness, to see such energy, purpose and focus.” He added the group of Kingston grandmothers was the “most impressive gathering” of grandmothers he had seen.

Mr. Lewis was invited to speak in Kingston by Bishop George Bruce, who has spent several months working with young people of the diocese in their determination to join

the fight against AIDS in Africa. The event was organized by an ad hoc diocesan committee called the Stephen Lewis Working Group, chaired by Debra Fieguth, Social Action Co-ordinator for the Diocese of Ontario. Money raised from the event at the cathedral, and at a later speech the same evening at McArthur Hall, Queen's University, amounted to \$41,678 through ticket sales, sponsorships, donations, and a youth "coin challenge" project. It will be split between the Stephen Lewis Foundation and PWRDF.

Stephen Lewis had special praise for PWRDF.

"In Africa," he said, there is enormous strength, courage and resilience at the grass roots. Making a contribution to PWRDF gets right to those grass roots. It's the faith-based organizations on the ground that can transform a continent. They care. You can trust them. They make it possible for us to have an avenue to express our wish to help. They show us we can do something. We don't need to feel helpless and impotent."

He said he was also proud of his own foundation. It was born out of despair, when he was at the lowest of the low, almost suicidal, over Africa. And then a friend said: "Stop whining. Create a foundation."

He didn't expect the response.

"I was stunned by the generosity of Canadians," he said. In three years, the Stephen Lewis Foundation raised \$14 million, and launched 157 projects in 14 countries. "There's no historical precedent for what is happening in Africa. To be part of the solution, to engage in help," he said, "is the most noble act of caring about the human condition."