

# Every Three Seconds

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Let us begin by clicking our fingers together in rhythm every three seconds.  
Please join us. *[Pause while congregation builds a crescendo of clicking sounds.]*

## A Child Dies Every Three Seconds

By now, you are probably asking, why are we doing this? Well, we are not clicking our fingers in rhythm to illustrate that this church is the grooviest, hip-hoppiest congregation! And, no, we are neither auditioning for a new rhythm and blues choir for our church, nor are we even practicing some new beat before we break out in singing.

Instead, we are snapping our fingers ever three seconds as a vivid reminder that every three seconds a child dies as a result of extreme poverty in the world—somebody's daughter, somebody's son. Every three seconds, another gift of God dies because of the misery-go-round of hunger, disease, illiteracy, violence, and the other fruits of poverty in our world. And all of these deaths are unnecessary, and completely avoidable in the 21st century.

Every three seconds—twenty a minute, 1,200 an hour, nearly 30,000 a day, over 200,000 a week, nearly 900,00 this month, over 10 million children a year. So the beat goes on, day after day, month after month, year after year, as children die from preventable causes.

This is the equivalent of seventy-five jumbo jets crashing every day of the year, year after year. But the world, academia, and the church have become calloused to this catastrophe. Public officials turn a deaf ear to the cry of the people. A thundering silence prevails in too many places. Indifference triumphs over involvement and cynicism trumps compassion.

When actor Will Smith emceed the Live 8 concert in Philadelphia, he clicked his fingers, reminding his global audience via satellite that a child dying every three seconds is not just an African problem or an Asian predicament or a Latin American puzzle. It is a global human crisis of the highest magnitude.

## Facing Three Pandemics

In recent years, I primarily have focused my life and energies on three pandemics facing the world: global AIDS, world hunger, and human indifference. While I can and do decry the self-centered injustice perpetuated by politicians, my greatest concern has been to awaken university communities and the church of Jesus Christ from its slumbering apathy and into action.

Why do one billion people go hungry in a 21st century world that produces enough food for every man, woman and child? Why do millions of people die each year of HIV/AIDS and millions more become infected, when we live in a world with life-saving medicine and knowledge about sexual protection?

Apathy and complacency are not new. Centuries ago, theologians named it "sloth," or "*acadeia*." This indifference, inactivity or internal inhibition to respond to responsibility has been deemed one of the seven deadly sins. Economist Adam Smith noted hundreds of years ago that a person could hear about a famine wiping out millions of people in Asia, and yet go to bed and snore peacefully through the night. However, if the same person were to know his little finger were to be amputated the next day, his night's sleep would be spent restless, tossing and turning!



In an age when both idealists and realists, both Republicans and Democrats, can envisage both an AIDS-free world and a world where hunger is history, there is a new urgency to the old challenge of Jesus calling persons to feed the hungry, clothe the naked, and care for the sick. There is not a lack of food or clothing or medicine in the world, but a lack of leadership, political will, and personal compassion.<sup>i</sup>

What is urgently needed today is for persons of goodwill—Christians, Buddhists, Jews, Hindus, Muslims, and other persons of faith to, together, move toward the millennium goals set forth by the United Nations to end hunger, curb HIV/AIDS, and, in general, drastically reduce the world's wretched poverty in the next ten to fifteen years. This is not a time to dwell on despair, but to focus on hope—because, if we choose, we can make a difference in ending poverty in our own time.

### **Statistics: Numbers Without Tears**

As the former Secretary-General of the United Nations, Kofi Annan has noted that the world now stands at a critical crossroads in its response to this pandemic. For the first time in twenty-five years, “the world possesses the means to begin to reverse the global epidemic,” but “success will require unprecedented willingness” on the part of everyone to work together over the long term.<sup>ii</sup> The statistics are staggering. Over 65 million people have been infected, with 25 million having already died. Last year three million people died, and five million became infected. Of those infected, over 40 percent are women. In sub-Saharan Africa, women compose nearly 60 percent of those infected. More than 15 million children have been left orphaned, and predictions are that this number could leap astronomically in the next few years.

Reciting statistics is insufficient. This litany of numbers soon blurs our minds and deadens our emotional feelings, so usually we find it nearly impossible to remember them and rarely are we prompted to do anything about this global crisis. An African proverb suggests statistics are simply “numbers without tears.” As Archibald MacLeish once noted, “We are deluged with facts, but we have or are losing our human ability to feel them.”<sup>iii</sup> Missing are the faces of people struggling for survival.

My journey in recent years has led me to many places where I have met incredible people struggling to survive and thrive under the most difficult circumstances. I concur with Pete Whitaker, when he says, “There are certain spots in the world where you can stand that will change the way you look at things forever.”<sup>iv</sup>

I shall never forget a young mother I met in a large hospital in South India that served like a warehouse for more than 800 children, women and men dying of AIDS. “Why?” she asked me, “Can't we get medicine when the world offers heart transplants to people in need? Please tell the world we need help.”

Nor can I ever forget the conversation my wife, Bonnie, and I had in Soweto, South Africa, with a Lutheran psychologist. Originally, her assignment was to treat women suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder, after being raped during a period of civil conflict and violence. But soon, she discovered that 80 percent of her patients had HIV/AIDS and lacked sufficient food. Even as we talked, the walls of her small clinic were penetrated by the wailing mourn of a mother and grandmother who were grieving the death of their little baby. The psychologist's plea was, “how can we witness genocide by indifference and not speak out for justice and compassion?”

In Thailand, I came up close and personal with the tragedy of the more than 15 million AIDS orphans in this world. I joined a pastor making a home visit, and soon discovered myself in the stinking garbage dumps of Chiang Mai, Thailand. There, amid the rotting garbage, stood a broken-down wooden shack. Inside, we found a twenty-eight-year-old emaciated woman dying beneath a mosquito net. There was no food, no medicine, no sanitary supplies—nothing. Standing nearby were her two little boys, about to become orphans without anyone left in the world to care for them. We were too late to help her, but the pastor did find a new AIDS orphanage to take the boys that, thankfully, a Canadian woman had started. Yes, it is with a heavy heart that I

realize that due to stigma, discrimination, and fear, it is unlikely these two little boys—and the millions more in the world—will ever be adopted.

Yet another time, I sat on the floor of a wooden hut on the outside of Rangoon Burma, literally sharing bread and water with several young couples infected with HIV/AIDS. As their little children played nearby, they spoke of their impossible dilemma of living in a totalitarian country with no hope for getting anti-retroviral drugs. As I bade farewell to my hospitable HIV-positive host, holding his five-year old daughter and 15-month old son, my broken heart pondered their future and the fate millions more like them face throughout Burma and the world. Then suddenly I heard anew the injunction in Proverbs 31:8-9 to “Speak out for those who cannot speak . . . and defend the rights of the poor and needy.”

Around the world, millions of poor women, lacking education and opportunities for employment, simply have no choice but to sell their bodies in what I call “survival sex.” In Haiti, a twelve-year-old child involved in prostitution was asked whether she knew she could get AIDS. She answered, “I am afraid. But even if I get AIDS, I’ll live a few years, won’t I? You see, my family has no food for tomorrow.”<sup>v</sup> Without a doubt, poverty is both the primary cause and consequence of both HIV/AIDS and hunger. The globally impoverished are the most vulnerable to disease and malnutrition.

### **Prisoners of Hope**

God speaks to us not only during moments of prayer or times of Scripture reading. Sometimes, as the Irish playwright Sean O’Casey has written, God may be “a shout in the street.”<sup>vi</sup> Stories like these compel me to speak out for a broader understanding of world hunger and the global AIDS pandemic. Lest I simply become a tourist of tragedy, I seek to mobilize academic and religious communities, as well as our society, to greater compassionate action in terms of education, prevention, care and treatment.

I share these stories with the hope that individuals and the church of Jesus Christ will become constructively engaged with other partners in combating global HIV/AIDS and conquering world hunger. We live in an age of micro-compassion and too often we religious leaders still race by, in hopes that some Good Samaritan somewhere will come to the rescue.

I share these stories to offer a vision of hope that the world can be transformed. It is easy to succumb at any given time to the disciples of despair and to believe that the Berlin Wall is a permanent structure, Northern Ireland will always be engaged in civil war, the Middle East can never find peace, South Africa will never overcome apartheid, North and South Korea can never experience reunification, peace will never dawn in Iraq, hunger can never be abolished, or that we can never achieve an AIDS-free world. But to borrow the words of Archbishop Desmond Tutu, Christians are always “prisoners of hope.”

How one envisions the future makes a substantial difference in how one understands the present and how one preaches and teaches. The former Anglican Archbishop Robert Runcie recalls that his mother had a fondness for first reading the last page of detective mystery stories so she would know how all the clues fit together! The Archbishop suggested our Bible reading should begin with the Book of Revelation’s vision of “a new heaven and a new earth.”<sup>vii</sup> How we envision the future God is seeking helps us understand what we need to be doing in the present.

We live at a great moment in history. The perils and possibilities appear enormous. We have known for years that we have the technical and agricultural ability to end hunger in our time. Politicians and activists around the world are now proclaiming that dire poverty in a rich world is inexcusable. Slowly, the rich world is saying that we must find ways of sharing vital anti-retroviral medicines with the impoverished of the world suffering from HIV/AIDS. What still is lacking is a persistent political will and compassion without borders. We are called to think, feel, speak, and act, in partnerships with persons of good will everywhere, to make a world a better, healthier, and more peaceful place for all God’s people.

## **You Can Make A Difference**

My primary message today is that each of us can make a difference—whether we are a new graduate, a seasoned professor, a proud grandmother, a family farmer, a trained professional, or whatever. In our time we are rediscovering the “power of one”.

One individual can make a difference. One church can make things happen. One college can change a generation. A new Declaration of Interdependence being circulated by the rock star Bono and others asserts: “one person, one voice, one vote at a time” can “make a better, safer world for all.”

Mother Teresa was only one person, but she says because one day she made a decision to pick up one person from the gutters of Calcutta, she started a movement of mercy that swept around the world. The day I entered her first hospice in India, they were treating patient 77,842 that had been brought there. Her strategy was simple: “one, by one, by one.” When persons discover the power of God for good within themselves, the world can be changed.

Let me also point to Professor Joseph Mamlin, M.D., and his wife Sarah, as people who epitomize and embody hope. After retiring from the Indiana University School of Medicine a couple of years ago, they went to Eldoret, Kenya. Faced with a raging AIDS pandemic, where one of four Kenyans is infected with HIV, they have helped mobilize a partnership between the Kenyan government and Indiana University to combat both HIV/AIDS and hunger.

Now in a model program, they are reaching at least 70,000 people, providing them free anti-retroviral drugs supplied by the United States’ AIDS initiative (PEPFAR) in Africa. Since persons cannot tolerate powerful medicines on empty stomachs, and 30 percent of the people lack resources for food, they offer free food from the World Food Program and USAid for six months to persons infected, and their families. Additionally, they have established four farms to provide fresh fruits and vegetables to supplement the diet of imported grains. These farms also serve as teaching stations to train persons on how to raise their own food. This ministry and these programs are bringing new hope and health after more than a decade of despair and death.

I shall never forget meeting a young woman named Rose, who told me she once lay helpless in a hospital ward, but thanks to this caring doctor, she received both the food and antiretroviral medicine she needed. Now she is a productive citizen, helping manage an experimental farm and raising her three children.

Several years ago, a British newspaper published a story about Grace Matnanga, age thirty, a shoe seller in Lilongwe, Malawi, and how she was likely to die from AIDS since she had no medicine or assistance. Her husband and daughter had already succumbed to the disease, and she was on the downward dance to death because she lacked money for antiretroviral treatment. Fortunately, a woman doctor in the Netherlands was so inspired by this story that she sought the woman out on the streets of Malawi, and got her the medicine. This doctor didn’t just sing about “saving grace,” she literally “saved Grace” and started a foundation to help others. We too can find ways to make a difference. Let us remember the Grace Matnangas of this world and seek to become their “saving grace.”

## **In Conclusion: The Wind of the Spirit**

We can do far more than click our fingers every three seconds to remind ourselves that a child is dying somewhere in the world. Such behavior could lead us to simply nervous fretting, worrying, and even despairing about the future. It can lead to a paralysis of analysis rather than letting the power of *the One*—the Alpha and the Omega of all creation—work in us and through us to change the world.

Instead, with the snap of our fingers, let us make some decisions about what we personally are going to do and how we would like to see our church and society respond. With a click of our fingers, we can commit ourselves toward goals such as:

- Educating ourselves and our families about HIV/AIDS so that every person knows how to protect themselves against the virus.
- Speaking out against AIDS stigmatization and discrimination.
- Signing the new Declaration of Interdependence, committing “ourselves—one person, one voice, one vote at a time—to make a better, safer world for all.”
- Deciding to get involved in a hunger project that helps end hunger now in your own state and world.
- Finding ways to break the silence about global AIDS and joining others in contributing financial and other personal resources in combating this pandemic.
- Getting involved in raising funds to support the United Methodist Global AIDS Fund and other efforts to eliminate HIV and AIDS.

Rather than simply clicking our fingers, let us sing anew the song Bob Dylan made famous:

*How many times must a man look up  
Before he can see the sky?  
Yes, 'n' how many ears must one man have  
Before he can hear people cry?  
Yes, 'n' how many deaths will it take till he knows  
That too many people have died?  
The answer, my friend, is blowin' in the wind,  
The answer is blowin' in the wind.*

Friends, the wind of the Spirit is moving—let us join in God’s liberating and loving work in the world. Let each of us live with a global perspective as if humanity depended on us—because it does!

- i See Donald E. Messer, “The New Urgency of An Old Challenge,” in *Ending Hunger Now: A Challenge to Persons of Faith* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2005) by George McGovern, Bob Dole, and Donald E. Messer, pp. 16-27.
- ii Kofi Annan, “Declaration of Commitment on HIV/AIDS: Five Years Later; Report of the Secretary-General”, March 24, 2006.
- iii Archibald MacLeish, quoted by James Reston, *International Herald Tribune*, June 21, 1982.
- iv Source unknown.
- v Donald H. Dunson, *No Room at the Table: Earth’s Most Vulnerable Children* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 2003), p. 50.
- vi Sean O’Casey, *Drums of Father Ned*, Act III, 1958.
- vii See Donald E. Messer, *A Conspiracy of Goodness; Christian Images of Mission* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1992), p. 43.

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