

The case for condoms: Bishops versus the pope

by [John Buchanan](#) in the [June 2, 2009](#) issue

In March, when Pope Benedict XVI, on a flight to Cameroon, declared that the use of condoms is not the answer to the AIDS epidemic in Africa—that, on the contrary, it “increases the problem”—I thought immediately of Francis Ntowe. I met Ntowe years ago when he came to the U.S. from Cameroon. He became an elder in the Presbyterian Church. He cared deeply about the HIV/AIDS epidemic rampant in his native land and throughout Africa. (Of the 33 million people who live with HIV/AIDS, 22 million of them are in Africa, according to the World Health Organization.) Ntowe talked to anyone who would listen about the problem of AIDS in Africa.

One person who listened was another Presbyterian elder, Bernard Blaauw, a medical internist. Together with members of the Chicago church I serve, the two founded the Cameroon America AIDS Alliance (CAAA), which operates an AIDS clinic in Kumba, Cameroon, attached to a hospital operated by the country’s Presbyterian Church. Blaauw heads up the clinic and is in residence in Kumba several months of the year. Members of my congregation support the clinic financially and volunteer at the clinic. Northwestern Memorial Hospital has donated equipment and furnishings worth more than \$100,000.

In addition to treating patients living with HIV/AIDS, the clinic focuses on prevention. In a culture in which public discussion of sexuality and sexually transmitted diseases has been very difficult in the past and where condom use is low, the CAAA and Blaauw have conducted workshops for community leaders and pastors to equip them to speak openly about how AIDS is contracted and how it is prevented. There is a poster in the Presbyterian synod office in the city of Buea, Cameroon, that states the ABCs of AIDS prevention: A) Abstinence in the single life; B) Being faithful in married life; C) Condoms.

The pope is wrong about condoms. The overwhelming evidence provided by the World Health Organization and other health organizations is that proper condom use

is the most effective way to prevent AIDS other than sexual abstinence. The Catholic Church's prohibition on artificial means of contraception has very little effect on the behavior of American Catholics. But its stance endangers millions of lives worldwide.

Blaauw was distressed by the pope's comment. He said that even though the mores of Cameroon discourage the use of condoms, they serve to save lives and prevent diseases and unwanted pregnancies. Blaauw said his clinic sells condoms for 22 cents. He would like to put out a bowl with free condoms in his office.

Despite the pope's statement, Roman Catholics are having a vigorous discussion on condoms. According to Catholics for Choice, Januário Torgal Ferreira, bishop of Portugal's armed forces, said, "I have no doubt that . . . prohibiting condoms is to consent to the death of many people." Bishop Manuel Clemente of Portugal commented that for people with HIV, condoms are "not only recommended, they can be ethically obligatory." Bishop Hans-Jochem Jaschke of Germany deplored the pope's comments and said, "Anyone who has AIDS and is sexually active . . . must protect others." Bishop Kevin Dowling of South Africa declared, "Abstinence before marriage and faithfulness in a marriage is beyond the realm of possibility here. The issue is to protect life." And in Cameroon, Cardinal Christian Wiyghan Tumi defended the use of condoms: "If a partner in a marriage is infected with HIV, the use of condoms makes sense."

I admire the courage of the bishops who speak out on this issue. And I am going to write a check to help Blaauw with that condom bowl in his office.