

# Seeing '(RED)'™

## Can I Really Save the World by Going Shopping?

By Rob Shearer / PWRDF Youth Staff



I've been a huge U2 fan for a long time. The music changed my life; it deepened my faith, and it's partially responsible for my getting active in issues of social justice. U2's songs have consistently been passionate cries in a world in need of love, peace and justice - and they speak to the power of the heart to overcome oppression and pain - political, spiritual and personal. I have to admit that, growing up, all too often the sermon-in-the-song was more compelling (and, in fact, more Biblically-rooted) than I would hear on a Sunday morning.

On top of the music, I can't help but be inspired by the ongoing activism of U2's lead singer, Bono. His campaigns to stop HIV and AIDS have been a big part of making changes in the global consciousness - especially in the U.S. Evangelical Church and even in their government. I and many of my friends have become more active around stopping HIV and AIDS and active in other issues of poverty, oppression, peace and justice because of Bono's faith-filled witness. Bono, perhaps rightfully targeted for being an affluent rock star while advocating for the poorest of the poor, says "I see my role as raising the alarm. I have a very loud hailer. My bullhorn is plugged into a Marshall stack, and I can use this ridiculous thing called celebrity to the advantage of these things." So, good for him. God bless

him. At least he's trying to make a change from where he's at.

However, when I read recent stories of Bono, joined by Oprah Winfrey, shopping at the Gap in Chicago, I have to admit that I was a bit disappointed. They were there to launch the (RED)™ campaign (yes, 'RED' is supposed to be in brackets - U2 have always had a thing for putting song titles in brackets!).

On that day, Oprah was quoted as saying: "Bono and I are going shopping to help save the world."

(RED) was created by Bono and Bobby Shriver (of the Kennedy clan) to raise awareness and money for The Global Fund to fight AIDS, Tuberculosis and Malaria (see [www.joinred.com](http://www.joinred.com) and [www.theglobalfund.org](http://www.theglobalfund.org)), by teaming up with the world's most iconic brands to produce (RED)™ branded products. A percentage of each (RED) product sold is given to The Global Fund. The money helps women and children affected by HIV and AIDS in Africa.

Sounds good, doesn't it? I can help save the world by going shopping! Heck, I need a new iPod anyway. And it benefits everyone involved.

However, as I watch Bono and Oprah prancing around outside the Gap, (RED)™ bags in hand, a few questions come to mind: Should we as Christians make our key form of charity and/or justice-

seeking a trip to the shopping mall? Does our acquiring of more 'stuff' really help the global situation overall? Are the products that we're buying made justly - and are other products and practices of the corporation just? And, finally, really who is it that is feeling good about buying - and who is really benefiting from our buying (RED)<sup>™</sup>?

### MIND THE GAP

As Christians, we need to be prayerful, discerning, active and consistent in our actions for justice. The churches have, in recent years, taken a stronger role in stopping HIV and AIDS. And so they should (and they should, in fact, get even better at doing it).

But many of our Church bodies (and certainly our scriptures) have also said that as well as HIV and AIDS, the dignity and rights of every person must be respected, and that God's creation, the environment, needs to be cared for. So, it's here that my first concern with (RED)<sup>™</sup> emerges: Does partnering with and supporting corporations that have not been consistent in their 'life' ethic around these issues have ethical implications for us as people of faith?

It is well known, for example, that the Gap (one of (RED)<sup>™</sup>'s partner corporations) has a pretty patchy record around human rights - especially in the area of sweatshop labour and the environment (go to [www.buyblue.org](http://www.buyblue.org) and do a search on the Gap for both positive and negative articles). The marketing practices and environmental record of many of companies (and, in fact, the entire system of consumerism they are part of) are also questionable from a Christian worldview.

So, in other words, does doing a good thing (helping to stop AIDS) mean we shouldn't pay attention to the other negative aspects of a company that violates our Christian principles?

Hold it a second though. I've gotta give Bono and (RED)<sup>™</sup> a bit of credit here. The Christian Science Monitor recently reported that in Lesotho: "More than 7,000 jobs have been restored recently, thanks mainly to a growing demand for sweatshop-free clothes, like the Product Red label... Gap or Levi's - or any of the myriad brands that source here - can promise customers that T-shirts and jeans made in Lesotho were not produced by sweatshop labor, and that working conditions met high safety standards." (Christian Science Monitor, October 13, 2006)

There is little doubt that companies like the Gap, and other (RED)<sup>™</sup> partners such as Motorola have made leaps and bounds in the last few years in their social and environmental standards, but they still have a LONG way to go.

At least Gap's (RED)<sup>™</sup> clothes are ethically made (as are eduN clothes, another (RED)<sup>™</sup> partner which is a fair-trade clothing line developed by Bono and his wife Alison Hewson). These types of changes shouldn't be underestimated. Heck, maybe Bono does know what he's doing.

Jennifer Hollett, a former MuchMusic VJ, illuminates another aspect of this by putting a positive spin on (RED)<sup>™</sup>: "...in the West, AIDS is competing with cola for eyeballs. It's sad we have to market a disease, but we do, especially one with such stigma. The reality is that even established, powerful brands like Apple have to remind everyone how great they are with flashy ad campaigns."

**Cause Marketing or Cause-Related Marketing**, is a marketing strategy that (often, but not necessarily) links purchases of a product with awareness, education, and/or fundraising programs for a specific pro-social issue, charity/non-profit organization, or project that is deemed important by the sponsoring company or organization.

The over-arching goal of cause marketing is to create a situation that benefits both the sponsor and the recipient issue / charity / program. When effective, cause marketing reinforces and/or improves brand identity, nurtures community goodwill, and fulfills other sponsor missions.

(from answers.com)

And because of the bling RED campaign, more people will now know about The Global Fund and ARVs (anti-retrovirals). And hopefully they'll Google those words to find out more." (Toronto Star, October 22, 2006)

Yet, for me, as a person of faith, there still is the nagging question of consistency. But there is another voice that says maybe we need to cut some slack and hear what Jennifer is saying. Maybe we're asking too much from the Gap. And just maybe the Gap really is slowly moving towards justice in the conversations that they're engaging through the (RED)<sup>™</sup> campaign.

### **MAKE AFFLUENCE HISTORY?**

However, fairly produced and traded goods are not the only issues to consider here.

There are even deeper implications to the question of how (RED)<sup>™</sup> promotes consumerism and our (i.e. those in the North) acquisition of more stuff. People in 'developed' countries tend to have access to drugs that can treat and control HIV and AIDS.

Most of us in the Global North have consumer power that most of the world doesn't have - and getting more stuff isn't going to change this. In fact, it might even reinforce this reality.

Which begs the question: Does acquiring more stuff, buying more things, spending more money actually lessen the situation of global inequity? On top of this, does it actually help out our spiritual state in the North? Finally, is it a cop out for us to put down some cash (or more likely a credit card) and feel like we've done something faithful, just and giving?

These are all big questions.

I do believe that Christians who already are in the category of the 'haves' need to delve deeper into our charity and justice work than merely 'shopping to help save the world'.

Acquiring more stuff will not ensure that global resources will be distributed in a manner that respects the needs of all humans as well as God's creation. We need to ask some serious questions whether the solution lies in the purchasing of more things, or about whether it might be voluntary simplicity and simplifying our lives with less (thus freeing up more for others) that is more likely to bring about needed change.

The Make Affluence History campaign states: "We believe that the lifestyles in "developed" nations are unsustainable and that those of us living those lifestyles must change them and simplify our own lives. We believe that affluence hurts the planet, animals and people and that it is a very poor example to the world, a lifestyle that no one should be encouraged to attain" ([www.makeaffluencehistory.org](http://www.makeaffluencehistory.org)). As we're encouraged by rock stars to buy stuff to save the world, this is something for us to ponder.

### **WHO REALLY GAINS?**

Stephen Lewis, no stranger to most of us when it comes to HIV and AIDS, says that: "The companies are going to benefit a hell of a lot more from Bono's name than the Global Fund is going to benefit from the companies."

Certainly, the marketing benefit of being portrayed as a do-gooder company isn't hurting the Gap or Apple. This is especially useful for a company when they have a reputation for being not-so-ethical (does the Gap come to mind here?) It also benefits us as consumers. Heck, I got a new iPod or a swanky Gap shirt out of it. And so, both company and consumer feel good.

However, the benefit it has for the person in poverty or living with HIV is questionable. Stephen Lewis suggests that companies give 0.7% of their after-tax profits to the fund. But Ms. Tanguy of the HIV/AIDS business coalition says about such generosity, "It's not going to happen," in part because shareholders likely wouldn't agree. (Wall St. Journal, April 13, 2006)

The (RED)<sup>™</sup> campaign wants us to feel good about giving: " Be embraced, take your own fine self to the power of (RED)<sup>™</sup>. What better way to become a good-looking Samaritan?", the website states. "Good-looking Samaritan"? Now, I'm no Bible scholar, but if I'm not mistaken, that entirely misses the point of the story - the ones who tried to look good are the ones who failed to help the poor!

Bono adds, elsewhere: "We're trying to make it really easy for people to help." But, again, as the story of the Good Samaritan (or the cross, for that matter) demonstrates, giving it's not always easy. Helping usually means being in relationship with the person you're helping. It's about partnership, at the very least. Sometimes it involves giving at a personal cost. It is rarely so easy if it is going to be effective and sustainable.

It's interesting to me that Stephen Lewis offers a more 'Christian' response than the consumer-driven response of a professed Christian like Bono when by suggesting that giving a days wage to an organization fighting AIDS would be a good strategy - and be more effective than buying a new iPod or a Gap shirt.

As we look deeper at (RED)<sup>™</sup> there are many questions to consider: Is (RED)<sup>™</sup> letting us off the hook to our Christian calling to be active and in relationship with those who are living in poverty or with HIV and AIDS (locally and globally)? Are we patting ourselves on the back without really committing ourselves to partnering with those who are suffering? And, with (RED)<sup>™</sup>, who really ends up feeling good and benefiting at the end of the day?

#### **CRUMBS FROM THE TABLE**

A colleague of mine tells a story of her young daughter seeing the (RED)<sup>™</sup> Gap ad and saying: "Mommy, you work to stop AIDS - can we go to the GAP so we can help your work and help people who are dying of AIDS?"

And though I'd like to have a child-like faith that I can change the world by shopping, and believe the hype-marketing, I'm not so sure that's the case.

Yet, I do believe that we do need popular, populist, creative, funky, culturally savvy ways of educating and engaging the public towards a justice-seeking orientation - and educating and mobilizing the 'sleeping Church' (as Bono calls it) around the fact that millions are dying unnecessarily and we're all implicated in our apathy. This must be our goal.

So, yeah, I'm left feeling a little blue about (RED)<sup>™</sup> - left with a lot more questions than answers - but quite certain that there are better ways for me to get involved in ending the HIV and AIDS pandemic than pulling out my credit card at the mall.

However, though I'm not quite a fan of the (RED)<sup>™</sup> brand, I'm still an admirer of its lead singer. So, I'll leave us with a few lines from a U2 song penned by Bono, which immortalizes not 'iconic' products - but "Sister Ann" a nun who works with children orphaned by AIDS in Uganda:

Where you live should not decide / Whether you live or whether you die  
Three to a bed / Sister Ann, she said / Dignity passes by.

I would believe if I was able / But I'm waiting on the crumbs from your table

May true dignity come not through our social consumerism, but by entering into partnership and dialogue with all those who are calling on us to journey alongside them as we all walk together towards a world where no-one is eating the crumbs from another's shopping expedition.