Martin SSempa: You must learn how to say no! Say I do not want to have sex! I have chosen not to have sex! And if they are not responding, this is what you must do - (Yelling and slapping mouth).

Pastor Martin Ssempa is the new face of Uganda’s fight against HIV / AIDS. He’s also famous for burning a batch of condoms on the university campus in Kampala.

Ssempa: Our major goal as a country is not to promote promiscuity. It’s to promote abstinence. It’s abstinence, it’s being faithful, and it’s appealing to the faith value of the people.

For this east African nation, Ssempa’s abstinence campaign has played a controversial role in the fight against HIV / AIDS. Ten years ago, 15% of Uganda’s adults were infected with HIV. By 2003, the number had dropped to less than 6%. It’s one of the most dramatic success stories in the history of AIDS, due at least in part to condom use. But activists say that is all being undermined by a new campaign against condoms.

Lydia Mungherera: My first amazement was, well I heard that the first lady had opened up a big office and they were promoting abstinence, but not only promoting abstinence but saying abstinence works and condom use doesn’t.

In the early 90s when other African leaders were silent about AIDS, president Yoweri Museveni spoke openly about safe sex, promoting a strategy known as ABC - Abstain, Be faithful, or use a Condom.

Gabriel Amori: The target for the younger generation without hiding anything was to say, look young men, if you must have sex, use condoms. And it worked.

But at an AIDS conference in 2004, Museveni shocked activists by denouncing condoms. “Because we don’t think that we can have permanently a condom society, a condom world.”

It was a complete reversal of policy. Signs promoting condom use disappeared from the streets of Kampala, replaced by billboards celebrating virginity. Many suspect that the born-again first lady was responsible for the change. Janet Museveni recently staged a virginity march in the capital of Kampala, and has called for a national census of virgins. But others claim that money, not religion, is behind the push for abstinence.

President George W. Bush: To meet a severe and urgent crisis abroad tonight, I
propose the emergency plan for AIDS relief, a work of mercy beyond all current international efforts to help the people of Africa.

The same night he made the case for war in Iraq, President Bush committed 15 billion dollars to fight AIDS, more than any nation in history. It was called the President’s emergency plan for AIDS relief, or PEPFAR. Under the plan, a third of funding for HIV prevention would go to programs that promote only abstinence.

Canon Gideon Byamugisha: If the new rules are saying, you must, in order to access our money, you must promote abstinence, people will do it.

Some say that local AIDS groups have stopped promoting condoms to qualify for the new money. But Martin Ssempa is not complaining. He’s one of a handful of evangelicals who lobbied Washington for the new focus on abstinence.

Ssempa: I find that the western perspective to AIDS prevention is largely a result of the 60s. Faith is a very low value. But the population we are talking about Africa, 80% of the people are Pisms. They are largely traditional. They are largely religious. And the model that supports them to fight HIV / AIDS is largely different. But this thing, one size fits all, that is being put and asked, more condoms, more condoms, more condoms, more condoms.

Each year, the United States ships millions of condoms to Uganda. But under PEPFAR, condoms can only be promoted to so-called high risk groups like sex workers. For everyone else, there is abstinence.

(Singing in church).

Canon Gideon Byamugisha: Keeping yourself pure or a virgin until your marriage is a good, spiritual, and physical health practice. But in terms of HIV infection, you must do more than that. It is as if, once you are married, forget about AIDS, which is not true.

Fifteen years ago, Rev. Canon Gideon Byamugisha was the first African clergyman to announce that he was HIV positive. After his first wife died of AIDS in 1991, he discovered he may have been infected from a blood transfusion. For over a decade, Byamugisha has been fighting the stigma surrounding condom use.

Byamugisha: I am not the only religious leader who supports condom use. We are many, because we don’t just support condom use. We support every strategy that can prevent new infections.

But the first lady's office has a different view on condoms.
Beat Bisangwa: We feel pressured to support the condom culture. We feel we are stigmatized. We feel that we are marginalized. We feel that we are not being given freedom and facilitation enough to be able to put more toward what we believe in.

With funding from US Christian groups, like Focus on the Family, the first lady’s office holds workshops at a local high school where students pledge virginity until marriage.

Teacher Helen Ilebot: Now this is a card. We are not forcing anyone to sign. They are two in one, so you are going to sign both of them. It's a reminder that you just wait for that person, very special for you. It’s a commitment to abstain. It’s a tangible commitment, evidence to everyone. Every time someone tries to push you to have sex, you remember that this is something I did.

A youth counselor had a different take on the cards.

Florence Nabulenyi: Most young people sign these cards for fun. I had some friends who signed the cards but they were not virgins... And they weren’t abstaining because I know their boyfriends.

Being a virgin is good and it should be promoted, but it should not be promoted against prevention because prevention is not virginity.

You must know what you will do the first day you engage in sex, whether it is your 21st year or the 41st year or in the 100th year. You must know that once I graduate from being abstinent, this is what I do.

In the first two years, since the US funded Focus on Abstinence, new HIV cases in Uganda have doubled, putting more people at risk.

Then you discover it may be the money that’s coming is not doing enough. It’s doing something, but it’s not doing enough because the levels of infection should be falling, not rising. The HIV rate should be going down, not going up.