

Women take the initiative in AIDS ministries

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"As women in the church, we have to intervene and give hope to those who can no longer find meaning in life".

What is the church doing about the AIDS crisis? We put that question to a broad cross-section of church people around the country. It seems that while there is still much more that could be done, many new and imaginative ministries are being developed. That many women were involved in a caring ministry like this did not surprise us, but that almost everywhere the initiative was being taken, and the work done, by women alone, was an eye-opener. Very few men have been involved.

Sister Alison Munro co-ordinates the various AIDS ministry initiatives in the Catholic Church nationwide. It is women, she says, who are setting up AIDS desks in one diocese after another. It is women who do the counselling and the nursing in the AIDS centres that are mushrooming in the Catholic Church. The women involved are often religious sisters, but not always. The Basaidi Ba Anna or Women of St Anne have developed a ministry that takes the form of an HIV/AIDS awareness campaign especially among the youth in the townships.

The Catholic Women's League is specialising in the building and furnishing of homes called Villages of Hope, where the AIDS sufferer is able to end his or her days with some members of their family. Alosha Mtsane, who is among other things the co-ordinator of a group called Care Ministry in Port Elizabeth, was the guest speaker at the National Conference of the Catholic Women's League in 1999. She introduced a woman who was diagnosed HIV-positive seven years earlier. "Her story was heartbreaking yet inspiring," said the CWL President, Mrs Anna-May Swamers.

In Cape Town, Maria Nulty's Caring Network uses the parish network to reach the sick and dying in their homes. Moira Archibald does the same thing in Port Elizabeth. Sister Dietharde Steffan, a chaplain at the General Hospital in Johannesburg, is also an AIDS counsellor at the Virology and the Ante-Natal Clinics in the hospital. She speaks of the good that can come out of the trauma of this affliction. "Not only does it challenge those of us who are involved in the AIDS ministry to be more deeply compassionate, but it also challenges the patient to develop a more holistic approach to life, a balance between the sexual and the spiritual."

At the Catholic Cathedral in Johannesburg, Sister Shelagh Mary Waspe is involved in a project that supports youth who are educating their peers about AIDS. MAP International (Medical Assistance Programme), a Christian health aid agency, organised a conference in Nairobi about how to include AIDS in

the theological curriculum of the seminaries and theological colleges. The representative from St John Vianney Seminary in Pretoria was Sister Immaculata Ngubane. She is the Associate Director of Pastoral Training at the Seminary and is responsible for the pastoral work of the students which includes AIDS ministries. There is even a programme of training for teachers in Catholic schools run by the AIDS Unit of the Catholic Institute for Education. The person responsible is Anne French.

The Saint Mary the Virgin Cathedral HIV/AIDS Outreach Group is an inner-city initiative by the Anglican Church to create awareness about HIV/AIDS, both in the inner city and in various parts of Soweto. Co-ordinator of the group, Dikeledi Malema, said creating awareness and dealing compassionately with people living with HIV/AIDS was a special ministry that must be inculcated in all our people. It was gratifying that the project was enjoying the support of the community and being recognised as a useful resource. Home-based care units were to be established, and Malema was hoping that volunteers drawn from the Mothers' Union, youth groups and other groupings, including domestic workers, would take charge of these centres and "in a loving and caring way tend to those who are terminally ill".

Queen Msimang, a Mothers' Union member attached to St Andrew's Anglican Church in Soweto, said women in her area have started an ecumenical bereavement support group to minister to people who have to deal with their loved ones who died as a result of AIDS. "It is often said that they are traumatised by these deaths and are filled with a sense of guilt that they have failed to lead an exemplary life themselves." The establishment of a partnership with government so that the churches can set up hospices is being discussed, "and in time we will approach the Johannesburg Metro Council for the purpose of engaging it on this issue".

Floro Moloto, who is attached to the Gauteng Council of Churches Women and Children's Desk, said many young people still do not believe that HIV/AIDS exists. They think it is a "made-up story" aimed at maintaining control over young peoples' sex lives. "It is such a great pity that there are so many doubting Thomases, but our task is to create awareness among our own constituencies that HIV/AIDS is a reality. We took a group of such doubting Thomases to a home of terminally ill patients, and only then did they believe that HIV/AIDS is for real."

Moloto said it was important that all church women make it their task to bring about awareness about the pandemic. "We need to promote AIDS awareness in all our church structures, particularly as women who have to face the task of caring for and nursing our children at the terminal stages of the disease. We do not shun this responsibility. But, as part of the Council, we need to engage the government on issues such as poverty eradication, job creation, and the high rate of unemployment. There is no doubt that the high incidence of AIDS must also be linked to poverty and unemployment. If you are poor and unemployed, you become more vulnerable because of your

inability to access medication and other forms of assistance. These facts are all the more reason why we should engage government."

Moloto said HIV/AIDS was everybody's problem, so that parents, youth groups, health professionals and church organisations must work together to find a solution to the problem. "Kopano ke matla (unity is strength), so let us all apply our energies as we seek a cure to this disease." She also talked about family ministries which must seek to minister to families and couples about what they can do collectively to find a solution the pandemic.

Caroline Mabunda of the Coptic Orthodox Church, based in Thembisa on the East Rand, said that she led a group of women in her church who were concerned about the plight of women who came from disadvantaged communities. "We find ourselves having to minister to a group of women who use their bodies in order to earn a living. The so-called sex workers come from this group. Whether we like it or not, the fact of the matter is that most women reach a point where they say 'I will do anything to feed my kids.' Sad to say, some women end up being HIV-positive because of their economic situation. As women in the church we have to intervene and give hope to those who can no longer find meaning in life." As women, Mabunda believes that sex workers can be turned around, by changing their attitudes towards life. "We have to develop centres where they could be given skills, instead of giving them fish to survive for just a day, I believe we need to teach them how to fish so that they can have fish on the table every day."

Sylvia Mogatusi of the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Southern Africa Women's Desk said the first priority for the church women is to inculcate among the youth the need for abstinence and faithfulness. However, the church has first to create in its teaching and practice an environment that will make the youth view abstinence as God's plan for humanity. Mogatusi also said that parents have to be seen as role models in terms of faithfulness, as it did not make sense to preach abstinence when "role models are seen to be messing around". To strengthen and encourage women who are trying to do something about AIDS, ELCA's Women's Desk holds prayer meetings in Soweto. "AIDS cuts across denominations, so our prayer meetings will be ecumenical," said Mogatusi.

The General Secretary of African Spiritual Churches Association (ASCA), Reverend Kenosi Mofokeng, said women within her organisation are very concerned about the scourge of HIV/AIDS. "How can we not immerse ourselves in giving support and material assistance to our brothers and sisters who are living with HIV/AIDS?" Mofokeng said it has been her experience that people living with AIDS will have their condition worsen if they are not shown love and are not adequately fed. "And so in addition to the moral support we give them, the self-help groups within our organisation provide them with food parcels as a way of helping to boost their immune systems. We also visit them regularly to ensure they are not lonely."

Patrica Mokoena-Harvey of St Andrew's Catholic Church said that in her "own quiet way" she was supporting the Sacred Heart House, a home for people with AIDS in Kensington, Johannesburg (Tel: 011 615 2639) to support those who are afflicted by AIDS. "It is the spirit of compassion inculcated in me by the late Father Trevor Huddleston of the Community of Resurrection, that makes it my duty to want to help. I have made it my rule of life to donate a portion of my pension to assist in whatever way for the alleviation of suffering and pain, particularly to those who live with AIDS," said Mokoena-Harvey.

Puleng Lenka-Bula, an African woman theologian, said she was concerned that some men in high places, including certain parliamentarians, not only hide their HIV/AIDS status, but continue to engage in a promiscuous sexual lifestyle and so expose women to the risk of being infected with HIV/AIDS. "This attests to the entrenched patriarchal behaviour and control that women still face in Southern Africa. It is also a violation of women's right to choose and give fully informed consent in their sexual relationships." Lenka-Bula said it was important that women theologians begin to engage in advocacy work and solidarity with women and people living with HIV/AIDS. "We should call on the government to reprioritise its spending. In the 1999 national budget, the allocation for Defence exceeded spending on Health and Welfare. This should change, and women should lobby hard for a good health care system."