

Equipping Communicators to Face HIV and Aids Challenges for Behavioural Change

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The World Association For Christian Communication - Africa Region in collaboration with the Presbyterian Church in Cameroon (PCC) held a two day seminar from the 24th to 25th of April in Limbe. Various participants from within Cameroon and other delegates from the WACC-AR Executive Committee attended the seminar, which was under the theme "HIV and AIDS in AFRICA Communication for Behavioral Change".

The seminar was seen as timely for a number of reasons and it was filled with so much energy as participants gave their contributions in response to the challenges posed by HIV and AIDS. Rev Dr Festus Asana, the PCC synod Clerk, in his opening remarks highlighted that, "HIV/AIDS has become a household name but we are yet to know how well people understand the destructive effect of what this name represents. One way of knowing is to study people's behavioural change and media personnel are in a good position to make evaluations whose conclusions can be very revealing and liberating. Such role of communication can not be underrated." Achowah Umenei, the WACC-AR President also pointed that the meeting by virtue of taking place in Cameroon was a good omen for the Cameroonians for it gave them the opportunity to hear good stories and good practices from the other countries, such as Ghana, Kenya, Uganda, Zimbabwe and Rwanda/United Kingdom which were present.

The power of communication to foster behavioural change was at the core of most presentations given during the two-day seminar. The media were challenged to be more inclusive in their reporting and shun from "stigmatization language," of them and us and to give facts as they come. In this regard communicators were challenged to bring in messages of hope that will effect changes in behaviour and attitudes towards the fight against HIV and AIDS. As Julienne Munyaneza, the WACC Regional Coordinator, pointed out stigmas expressed in language was still one of the greatest obstacles in the fight against HIV and AIDS.

In the campaign against HIV and AIDS through communication, the World Association for Christian Communication and PCC chose the theme "Communicating HIV and AIDS for behaviour change" having realised the power of the media in shaping and changing perspectives in the fight against HIV and AIDS in Africa. The seminar, whose focus was to train journalists to be the focal point in the fight against HIV/AIDS through audio-visual dissemination of information, highlighted the role that the media and Church leaders can play in breaking new ground in influencing behavior change.

Journalists and Church leaders have been urged to follow the example of Ezekiel 33 and be the watchmen and watchwomen for the society greatly affected by HIV and AIDS.

In his presentation Wanki Neba examined the role the youth can play in fighting HIV and AIDS. "The youths are the most vulnerable group to HIV and AIDS due to ignorance or lack of adequate information and knowledge about the disease ", said Neba. He also added, that the youths can be agents of change only if they are given a moral education that is taught without shame. Wanki Nebo also highlighted that it is the duty of the governments, church and the media to equip them with accurate information and skills to protect themselves from HIV and AIDS. He then alluded that it is the responsibility of the whole society to understand the changes that occur in children as they grow and give them enough information on the disease.

In a similar fashion Oghai Abungwo, highlighted the challenges and difficulties that are faced by the media in influencing behaviour change and of great importance he mentioned language as the most crucial aspect. According to him the HIV and AIDS poses profound challenges to journalistic ethics and professionalism as some are not well versed with HIV neutral language in reporting. Therefore it came as a challenge to the media personnel to restructure their focus and

attention when dealing or reporting on issues of HIV and AIDS.

Various topics were also discussed under group work as the participants explored and reflected on the challenging questions with regards to communicating HIV and AIDS in the media and the church. It was overly agreed at the plenary session which rounded up the seminar on April 25, 2006, that journalists should have a clear cut communication strategy when telling HIV and AIDS stories. It was also agreed that the media should play a leading role in mitigating HIV and AIDS` and bring in messages of hope.

Asked why the seminar was so fruitful, Gertrude Maasodong from Ghana commented on the active participation of the youth during the deliberations and said, "Once you capture the youth, you are half way of winning the battle against HIV and AIDS?".