

Faith can be a Risk Factor for HIV in Africa

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Why Church Messages can be Bad for Your Health

Uganda's success in significantly reducing HIV/Aids prevalence and new infection rates in the last ten years is a sign of hope in turning the tide of Aids in Africa. Uganda is often seen as an example for other African countries. Christian communicators from around Africa gathered in Kampala in March 2004 to take part in a meeting sponsored by the Africa Region of WACC on "Aids in Africa: Communicating for Behaviour Change." The two-day seminar was hosted by the Uganda Media Women's Association who are a WACC member organisation based in Kampala.



Flavia Kyomukama, a teacher, mother of three and abandoned wife, is a member of the management committee of NACHWOLA, the National Community of Women Living with HIV/Aids, and is the Director of Uganda's Support on Aids and Life through Telephone Helpline (SALT). She shocked some at the gathering with her statement that "faith is a risk factor for HIV/Aids for many people."

She went on to explain that she did not mean only religious faith, but faith in general. Many women have been with only one man and have faith in and are faithful to their husband, and yet they contract HIV. Many women and men have faith in their pastor who tells them they are healed in the name of God. Confident in the words of their pastor, they then marry without seeking voluntary testing and counselling, and soon an infected child is born. Many other women are led by faith-based attitudes towards divorce and submission promoted by church groups to remain in marriages that endanger their health and lives. "Church women imagine they are happily married and safe. The church encourages them to be submissive to their husbands and not to question them." What does this mean to a woman whose husband has suddenly re-appeared after a long absence? She is also concerned about churches that say that God can do everything you ask and all is possible. When it comes to HIV/Aids, this can be dangerously misleading, according to Kyomukama.

As a member of the choir, she is at her church in Kampala five times a week for choir practice, weekly Bible study and Sunday services. She doesn't hear HIV/Aids spoken about in her church. On International Women's Day this year, the official theme in Uganda was about revealing the female face of HIV/Aids. She went to her church that day and found only silence on that subject. She would like to see her church make announcements every Sunday about HIV/Aids services available. She has given her church information about the Aids helpline, but nothing has ever been said to the congregation about it.

Churches, she says, are still in denial. "The churches are doing 30% of what they ought to do." The churches are very powerful in Uganda. They need to do more for their congregations

before the people turn up sick at the church hospital when it is too late for them, she explained.

Kyomukama points to other problems with the “be faithful to your partner” message. First, it assumes that those to whom it is addressed do not know their HIV status or the HIV status of their partner. She believes it is not helpful to rely on ignorance. Couples should be advised to know their HIV status and take measures accordingly. She refers to those who do not know their HIV status as “anonymous”. To rely on faith rather than facts encourages that “anonymity”. This type of anonymity is killing people. Second, it contributes to silence about non-sexual means of HIV transmission and maintains ignorance about infection through health care practices, or the local barber shop, for example. Her conclusion: “be faithful to your partner to avoid Aids” is an inadequate message.

Rev Canon Gideon Byamugishi of Uganda’s Anglican Church who also spoke at the African Christian communicators gathering in Kampala gave another reason to be cautious about using this message. He maintains that it stigmatises those who are infected by supporting the view that HIV/Aids is a consequence of promiscuity. The implication is that if they had been faithful, they wouldn’t be infected. Therefore those who have HIV must be morally deficient. He is convinced that stigmatisation of those infected with HIV is a major factor contributing to its spread and to the Aids death toll. He points to Botswana, a country with one of the highest rates of HIV/Aids and where anti-retroviral drugs are widely available. Too many Botswanans don’t seek treatment, he says, due to the stigma and discrimination directed towards those who admit to being infected.

Kyomukama says many faith-based organisations are doing very good work on HIV/Aids and have made a big difference. But it is not enough. She challenges the churches to come to terms with denial and to do much more, especially towards women who are vulnerable and at risk.

The Christian communicators from nine African countries at the gathering issued a communiqué recognising that most campaign messages currently in vogue in most of their countries tend to stigmatise persons living with HIV/Aids. They pointed to the need to evolve campaign messages that give hope and that address not only the prevention, but also the management of Aids. They urged faith-based organisations to give more time to teaching on HIV/Aids, particularly from the pulpit, and stated that persons within the church living with HIV/Aids should be recognised and supported to prevent stigmatisation.

For more information on WACC’s Africa Region or on the meeting: “Aids in Africa: Communicating for Behaviour Change.” please contact Julienne Munyaneza , Regional Coordinator for Africa.