

Stigma Kills!

Sean Hawkey

Addressing christian communicators Kristine Greenaway says that some messages about people living with HIV “kill people, others are life giving”.



As a christian communicator she was recently rebuked by a UNAIDS official who told her that people living with HIV/AIDS are angry “about all the messages of stigmatisation and discrimination...communicated in the name of faith” Challenging WACC’s Central Committee to reflect on this, Kristine encouraged us to actively examine the hate messages being spread in the name of religions.

Religions often condemn people living with HIV/AIDS as sinners, and even drive them from their faith communities. This sort of stigma, says Kristine: “destroys individuals and breaks community apart”.



Because of the stigma people who suspect they may be HIV positive are afraid to seek help, counselling, testing, reluctant to take the necessary steps to avoid passing the virus on. Because of stigma many people who know they are living with HIV/AIDS withdraw from society, they don’t disclose their condition, they cut themselves off from medical, social and spiritual resources and put others, especially their sexual partners, at risk. Because of stigma most people caring for people with HIV/AIDS don’t admit it.

“We people of faith” says Kristine “especially those of us who are religious communicators, can contribute to the process of creating a culture of acceptance”. But, she says, “our voices are for the most part muted and modest. Religious communicators appear reluctant to use whatever resources we do have to create powerful, effective messages”.



Part of the problem is that, even where intentions are good, people do not know how to overcome the discriminatory attitudes in their congregations and communities.

Identifying communication initiatives and products at the community level which have as their objective to create loving/welcoming faith communities that are equipped to act, Kristine presented a case study of a Buddhist approach in Thailand where an AIDS hospice has been established in a temple, and visitors are encouraged. Thailand’s AIDS information programme is credited with a dramatic drop in HIV infections, helped in part by monks who sprinkle holy water on condoms before they are sent to villages.

More information: <http://www.pbs.org/wnet/religionandethics/week606>

Greenaway concluded her presentation quoting Stephen Lewis, UN Secretary General for HIV/AIDS:

“When the history of the AIDS pandemic is written, you want it said that every religious leader stood up to be counted; that when the tide turned, the religious leaders did the turning...It’s what all of us beg you to do. I submit to you that it’s what your God, of whatever name, would want you to do”

WACC Central Committee voted for a special programme on HIV/AIDS to be undertaken.

Resources for worship:

Ecumenical Advocacy Alliance: <http://www.e-alliance.ch>

Global Network of People Living with HIV/AIDS (GNP+) <http://www.gnpplus.net>

UNAIDS <http://www.unaids.org>

One World AIDS Channel <http://www.aidschannel.org>

Educational resources:

Stepping Stones: a training package on HIV/AIDS, gender issues, communication and relationship skills by Alice Welbourn: <http://www.stepsstonesfeedback.org>

How to talk to children/youth/adults about HIV/AIDS: <http://www.avert.org/children.htm>

Games

<http://www.unicef.org/programme/lifeskills/reference/teach.html>

Useful sites:

CORE Initiative, Communities Responding to the HIV/AIDS Epidemic,

<http://www.coreinitiative.org>

Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health Centre for Communication Programs

<http://www.jhuccp.org>

Catholic Aid for Overseas Development, CAFOD:

<http://www.cafod.org.uk/hivaids>

Strategies for Hope series of publications (Teaching Aids at Low Cost, TALC)

<http://www.stratshope.org>