

The HIV Awareness Unit of The Ministry of The People and Social Development partnered with Faith Based Organizations (FBO's) in planning a two day symposium. The theme of the event was **“Beyond Desire: The Role of FBO's”**. The main topic addressed was that of “Idealism versus Realism”, as it relates to HIV and AIDS and its impact on our diverse religious communities. The conference was held at the Signature Hall, # 63 Longdenville Road, Chaguanas on the Monday 25<sup>th</sup> and Tuesday 26<sup>th</sup> November, 2013.

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**My topic: How can faith communities be a voice and a presence in responding to issues such as HIV and AIDS, particularly in relation to eliminating stigma and discrimination, a human rights issue.**

Good afternoon brothers and sisters. All protocols observed. It gives me great pleasure to be here with you and to share with you my thoughts about how faith communities can be a voice and a presence in responding to issues such as HIV and AIDS – particularly in relation to the elimination of stigma and discrimination which is a fundamental human rights issue. Stigma and discrimination are major factors influencing the spread of HIV and AIDS. Fear of rejection and hostility lead some to isolate themselves; to make a decision not to be tested or to seek counselling or treatment; to suffer from depression. Stigma and discrimination can lead to persons losing their jobs, their friends, their home, their self-esteem.

In Plato's Republic, he says that the best city States are those that resemble the central nervous system in the body. If the finger is injured, the entire body feels it. In the same way, if one of our brothers and sisters is injured, the entire body of humanity should feel the pain and should reach out in love and compassion. Faith communities must become communities of care and compassion, and show unconditional love for our neighbour. We are on a shared journey and

According to UNAIDS, in 2012, an estimated:

35.3 million people globally were living with HIV

2.3 million people became newly infected with HIV

1.6 million people died from AIDS-related illnesses.

In her presentation to us, Izola Garcia, UNAIDS Country Coordinator for TT, highlighted the fact that their 2013 report is now available. She told us that in TT, since 1983, there are now about 22,780 persons living with HIV. 3,500 children. 5,565 persons are on treatment. “We need to do better,” she said. She is right. We must do more to make progress towards achieving universal access to HIV prevention, treatment, care and support targets. “Treatment is costly”, she said, “About \$30 m. annually in TT. We need to spend money teaching people how not to get infected – pay now or pay later.”

Despite progress, HIV still presents a serious global health crisis. Much work remains to be done if we are to achieve UNAIDS’ shared vision of zero new HIV infections, zero discrimination and zero AIDS-related deaths. I urge faith communities to continue to play their part in achieving this vision. Today, the social mission and message of people of faith in our region are more important than ever, and we must share these with credibility and integrity.

I recall that in the 1980s when I lived in London and was part of an Inter-Faith group in Westminster, there was some level of fear among individuals in the group about our response to persons living with HIV and AIDS. This was largely due to a lack of understanding about how the virus is transmitted.

There were some who believed that we should just pray and trust that God will take care of everything. As a Christian, I believe in what our Scriptures say. In James 2:17 we read: “Take the case...of someone who has never done a single good act but claims that he/she has faith. Will that faith save him/her?...if good works do not go with (Faith), it is quite dead.” We are not a sit-down-until-judgement-day-and-do-nothing-people-of-God. We are not armchair Christians. We are called to be Good Samaritans. Remember the parable of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:25-37). We should see God in the face of each person.

The words in one of our Vatican II documents: Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World (*Gaudium et spes*), are worth mentioning: “The joys and the hopes, the griefs and the anxieties of the men and women of this age, especially those who are poor or in any way afflicted, those too are the joys and hopes, the griefs and anxieties of the followers of Christ.” In other words, we have a duty to promote the human rights of each one of God’s children.

In the end, all members of the group agreed in London that as people of faith we could not remain in our comfort zones and do nothing - other than pray, while our brothers and sisters with HIV and AIDS and their families were in need of our support. We agreed that our response to those living with and affected by HIV and AIDS must be compassionate and non-judgmental.

T&T is blessed to have many faith communities in our country – all of whom reach out to those infected and affected by HIV and AIDS. And this is as it should be. But more can and must be done. We cannot afford to be complacent. Our former Archbishop Edward Gilbert constantly urged the faithful in our Catholic community, that we must not only have a vertical relationship with God, but also a horizontal relationship with our neighbour.

Genesis 1:27 tells us that every person is created in God's image and likeness and, without exception, possesses dignity and value. God has endowed each of us with an *inherent, inalienable, and inviolable* dignity which underpins our human rights. Belief in the inherent dignity of the human person is the foundation of all Catholic social teaching. All human life is sacred, and the dignity of the human person is the foundation of a moral vision for society. We believe that every person is precious, that people are more important than things, and that the measure of every institution is whether it threatens or enhances the life and dignity of the human person.

Solidarity is a key social justice principle. Solidarity means that “loving our neighbour” has global dimensions in our interdependent world. We are our brothers' and sisters' keepers, wherever they live and whatever their condition. We are one human family. At the core of the virtue of solidarity is the pursuit of justice and peace. Pope Paul VI taught that “if you want peace, work for justice.” If we stand in solidarity with those living with the virus, we must stop blaming them and discriminating against them and start loving them.

It is important to note that social justice involves: a) works of mercy/ Charity; and b) works of social action – seeking systemic change. These are often called “the two feet of Christian Justice” because to walk in justice we must walk with both feet. Although there is a relationship between charity and justice they are not the same.

Working for justice involves changing systems, structures, institutions and public policies that are at the root cause of injustices such as poverty and social exclusion.

It is important to understand the interplay and differences between the two approaches.

HIV and AIDS are not only issues for the individuals infected and affected by the virus, they are also a disease of social injustice - poverty, gender inequality, domestic violence, child abuse, stigma and discrimination and so on. Poverty and sexual violence increases women's vulnerability to HIV. As one young woman who contracted AIDS from her father told me: "When I was young I lived in a squat with my parents and 5 siblings. When my father came home drunk he would take whoever he would grab." As the calypsonian, the Mighty Shadow, sang, *poverty is hell*.

All of these are issues that faith communities must address if we wish to live by the tenets of our faith. These social ills are an affront to the dignity and worth of the human person; they prevent us from building communities.

### **What can we do?**

I shall give you one or two examples. I remember when I returned to TT to live and was appointed as Chair of CCSJ in 2003, our Vice-Chair, Clive Belgrave, took me to visit The **Cyril Ross Nursery** for HIV positive and AIDS infected children. The home is based in Tunapuna and is run by the Catholic Society of St Vincent de Paul and was opened in September 1994. It was heart-breaking to discover that for many years children at the home had to be schooled there by private tutors as no school would admit them – mainly because of stigma and discrimination.

Fast-track to September 2013 when a young man of about 28 years old turned up at Archbishop's House where I work and I was asked to see him – as I do with anyone seeking assistance. He walked into my office and took out a bag of Gramoxone, a weed-killer used by some to commit suicide. He had recently discovered that his wife had been unfaithful and had contracted AIDS which was then passed on to him by her. Their marriage broke up as a result of this discovery. None of his family were prepared to assist him. He lost his job because of the stigma which still impacts adversely on persons infected with the virus.

He had antiretroviral medication, but felt sick when he took it as one has to eat before taking the medication and he had no money to buy food. In desperation, he

thought he may as well end it all. So he bought the bottle of gramoxone. While he was weeping and walking, he saw Archbishop's House and decided to come and talk to someone. He was shocked when I hugged him as he thought once people found out about his condition, they would all react in a discriminatory manner.

We prayed together. Spiritual accompaniment is important. We discussed forgiveness. If persons who contract the virus from others do not learn to forgive, the healing process may take a long time. I also listened compassionately to his fears. We have a role to play in teaching persons infected and affected to cope with 'fear'. For those who belong to a faith community, we must encourage them to hold on to their faith and to develop a closer encounter with God; trust in Him to journey with them in their trials and tribulations.

I rang Clive Belgrave, my Vice-Chair, who is truly a make-it-happen man. Clive helped to get him accommodation and a job.

I have personally prayed with individuals who were nervous about getting tested and have accompanied them to get tested. Our neighbour is anyone who has need of us.

Living Water Community, another Catholic organisation, runs Mercy Home AIDS Hospice which is located in Woodbrook. It was founded in April 2006 and has housed 183 patients to date. They are able to house up to (9) adult persons at any one time. Like SVP, they are also involved in outreach work with families.

There are many faith communities and secular organisations that reach out in compassion to persons living with HIV and AIDS, and so it should be as Governments can't do it alone – although they should be doing a lot more! As Beverly King, Programme Co-ordinator of ComTALK Intl. said: "FBOs are a strong force of healing and hope...Archbishop Tutu said: 'We are agents of transformation, capable of turning the tide against the disease.'"

You have been given some very useful booklets which I urge you to read e.g.

- Faith-Based Organisations in the Caribbean and their contributions to the response to HIV and AIDS (2004) – produced by the Caribbean Conference of Churches (CCC). It provides information about e.g. The Rescue Mission Incorporated; South AIDS Support, CARITAS AIDS Ministry, Mercy

Home, Adventist Youth – Heart to Heart, Cyril Ross (SVP) Nursery, and The Samaritan Ministry – all in Trinidad (2007).

- CCC's Guidelines for Caribbean Faith-Based Organisations in Developing Policies and Action Plans to deal with HIV and AIDS (2004).
- The Care Ministry for Faith-Based Organisations: Guidelines for Training home-based caregivers (CCC).
- A list of HIV Testing sites
- CCC's leaflets e.g. A Faith-Based response to HIV & AIDS – Prevention Strategies for Faith-Based Organisations; The Role of Faith-Based Organisations in dealing with HIV & AIDS; Exploring Human Sexuality (some of Fr Clyde Harvey's ideas presented in question and answer form).

All **schools** should include in their curriculum a programme: awareness-raising of HIV and AIDS; affirming the dignity of each human person, including those living with HIV and AIDS; combating stigma and discrimination; urging students to avoid risky behaviour; developing a proper understanding about God's gift of our sexuality; promoting healthy relationships; marriage and family life.

Faith communities can do much to sensitize communities about the AIDS virus e.g. how it is transmitted, how we can assist in prevention, treatment and care. And remember, we ourselves must be exemplars/role models and practice what we preach. Many national conferences of Catholic bishops have issued statements concerning HIV/AIDS e.g. in 1990 the US Bishops produced an excellent Pastoral Letter entitled: *Called to Compassion and Responsibility: A Response to the HIV/AIDS Crisis* <http://old.usccb.org/sdwp/international/ctoresp.shtml>

The Ethiopian Catholic Bishops Statement (2006) is entitled: *Love as our Main Tool of Overcoming HIV and AIDS*. It begins: "We proclaim the good news that you are loved, and are not alone. We stand beside you and express our love, compassion and solidarity." The Catholic Bishops in South Africa, Botswana and Swaziland issued *A Message of Hope* (2001). It begins: "Do not despair – you are not abandoned by Christ nor by us."

Blessed John Paul II stated (Apostolic post-synodal exhortation *Ecclesia in Africa*, September 14, 1995, 116: AAS 88 (1996) 70) that, "the battle against AIDS ought to be everyone's battle."

Many parishes are involved in **ongoing** HIV and AIDS pastoral ministry. See [http://www.neac.org/files/documents/welcoming\\_parish\\_twenty\\_five\\_ideas.pdf](http://www.neac.org/files/documents/welcoming_parish_twenty_five_ideas.pdf) for ideas

The following ideas include some that have been adapted from this website – National Episcopal AIDS Coalition, Indianapolis, USA:

- If your parish/faith community does not have an HIV and AIDS ministry to address the needs of those living with or affected by HIV and AIDS, consider forming one. Any planning should involve persons living with HIV and AIDS. Consider issues such as opening a drop-in centre, self-help and support groups, home visits, meal preparation, transportation for persons with HIV and AIDS to attend Clinic, support for the bereaved and for care-givers (respite programmes).
- Prevention is critical. Therefore every opportunity must be taken to share information with the faithful about strategies for prevention.
- Engage in some activity that will communicate to those living with HIV and AIDS that they are welcome and that HIV and AIDS is an important point of ministry for your parish/faith community. Many Catholic Dioceses around the world have issued Pastoral Statements relating to this issue e.g. the title of the Ethiopian Catholic Bishops Pastoral Statement is: Love as our main tool of overcoming HIV and AIDS. "We proclaim the good news that you are loved, and are not alone. We stand beside you and express our love, compassion and solidarity."
- Parishes/faith communities could host a special World AIDS Day service/vigil/Seminar: including prayers for those who have died from AIDS.
- Include frequent mention of those living with and affected by HIV and AIDS in liturgical/faith settings, especially prayers of the Faithful e.g. at Mass.
- Talk with local HIV and AIDS service agencies about concrete ways to support individuals in your community living with or affected by HIV and AIDS.

- Promote HIV and AIDS awareness and responsible behaviour among members of our respective faith communities.
- If your parish/faith community holds a health fair, suggest that HIV testing be part of the total offering of screenings. Local HIV and AIDS agencies and government health offices may be willing to help set up the testing. Likewise, if your parish/faith community has a parish nurse, talk to him/her about how HIV and AIDS issues might be addressed.
- While planning adult and youth formation activities, such as confirmation classes, consider inviting someone living with HIV and AIDS to make a presentation focusing on his or her own story.
- In your personal prayers, pray for one specific person who lives with HIV and AIDS or who is affected by HIV and AIDS in your community.
- Find out what other communities of faith in your area are doing. If there is a local interfaith HIV and AIDS network, be sure your congregation is represented.

Members of faith communities must become advocates – standing alongside those in need; working **with** and empowering those infected and affected by HIV and AIDS. Faith communities must develop prayer, liturgies, anointing services, memorial services, rituals, and symbols that are meaningful.

In a book published by the Catholic Development agencies from Ireland, England, and Wales, the authors spelled out a simple “ABC” approach to avoid stigma and discrimination linked to HIV and AIDS:

•**A**dvocate for changes to legislation, culture, attitudes or practices that promote imbalances of power.

•**B**reak the silence that colludes with situations of denial, stigmatization, isolation or discrimination.

•**C**hallenge instances of discrimination and injustice occurring in communities.

(Ann Smith and End McDonagh, *The Reality of HIV/AIDS*, published by Trocaire, Veritas, and CAFOD, 2003.)

THE BISHOPS OF AFRICA & MADAGASCAR stated in their Action Plan for HIV & AIDS (2003)



- “Provide access to care and treatment, and advocate vigorously for access for those excluded through poverty and structural injustices
- Make sure that Church institutions and services respond appropriately to the needs of people living with HIV and AIDS
- Advocate for policies that support them adequately and assure a life of dignity
- Focus on the particular vulnerability of girls and the heavy burden borne by women
- Advocate for the implementation of governmental commitments.”

Our vision, mission, and core values must be clear so that everyone knows where we stand e.g. see CARITAS AIDS Ministry, Trinidad:

## **“VISION**

To provide a model of compassionate care and support services for the Persons with HIV/AIDS (PLWHA) and their families so as to open a door of hope, uplift the dignity of infected persons; educate and motive others to provide a helpful social environment for the affected population.

## **MISSION STATEMENT**

CARITAS AIDS Ministry believes in the dignity of the individual (sick or well client or worker) and is committed to providing a non-compromised, non-judgmental and personalized service to the person living with HIV/AIDS and his or her family.

## **CORE VALUES**

Services provided are underpinned by the following core values which are characteristics of CAM’s environment of care:

- Confidentiality
- Respect for the individual
- Independence, self-development and empowerment
- Skilful care which strive for excellence
- Informed decision making for clients/family
- Sense of belonging and committee
- Partnership, networking, collaboration and team spirit.

## CARITAS AIDS MINISTRY GOALS

- To provide affected communities with trained caregiver, professional and laypersons who are willing to provide comfort, compassion, support and “hands on” care to PLWHA and their families.
- To establish a facility to provide “drop in” service and respite care for persons infected and affected by HIV/AIDS in a supportive environment.
- To assist young people in the neighbour and others to understand the implications of early sexual activity and its effect on personal development and the attainment of planned life goals, thereby reducing the impact of HIV infection on this population.”

\*\*\*Over the years, faith communities have responded with vigilance to the spread of HIV and AIDS. We must continue reaching out to those infected and affected; help them to reconstruct their lives, where necessary; help them to develop hope.

Pope Benedict XVI said on World AIDS Day 2005 “Closely following Christ's example, the Church has always considered the cure of the sick as an integral part of her mission. Therefore I encourage the many initiatives promoted, especially by ecclesial communities, to eradicate this sickness, and I feel close to AIDS sufferers and their families, invoking upon them the help and comfort of the Lord.”

As is stated in Wikipedia, the Catholic Church is the largest private provider of care to HIV AIDS patients in the world. In relation to the sexual transmission of the disease, the Church holds that sexual-abstinence before marriage and monogamy inside marriage are the best means of limiting the spread of the epidemic.

As Cardinal Javier Lozano Barragan said to the UN General Assembly (2006), Caritas and other Catholic groups provide anti-retroviral treatment and drugs to stop the vertical transmission (mother to child), home-care, counselling, HIV testing, social and spiritual support. CARITAS INTERNATIONALIS is engaged in this important work in 102 countries. In the area of caring, the Cardinal said "we ...take care of orphans, widows and persons with AIDS who are in prison. We are helping with the social reintegration of HIV-positive people, and collaborate with governments and other institutions both on the civil and ecumenical levels that are dealing with the pandemic...Our work focuses on the training of health-care professionals as well as prevention, treatment, care and assistance. We accompany the sick and their respective families at every stage."

The Cardinal singled out a number of Catholic congregations heavily associated with HIV-AIDS related care: the Vincentians, Sant'Egidio, Camillians, Hospitaller Brothers of St John of God (Fatebenefratelli), Jesuits, Sisters of Mother Teresa, Bambino Gesù Hospital of the Holy See and Catholic pharmacists. (Wikipedia).

□ “**Catholic Relief Services** has been on the forefront of the epidemic since launching our first HIV project in Bangkok, Thailand, in **1986**. Today, CRS and our partners directly support more than 4.8 million people affected by the epidemic.

□ CRS HIV programming encompasses a wide range of interventions including **care and treatment, prevention, community mobilization and support for orphans and other children affected by HIV**. CRS also **helps infected mothers give birth to healthy babies free of HIV**. The agency is a key player in international efforts to eliminate mother-to-child transmission by 2015.

**CARITAS-EUROPA** has highlighted the fact that there have been a range of responses to this pandemic by the Catholic Church e.g.

- “Numerous Episcopal Conferences have issued pastoral letters and statements
- Training seminars for bishops, clergy, conferences of religious women and men and committed lay persons
- “Anti-AIDS” clubs established for youth and engage them in prevention education and service (*Education for Life* series in Uganda)
- National Catholic AIDS Network in USA and Catholic Charities USA - *Many Threads, One Weave*: parish-based training on HIV/AIDS ministry
  
- Church-based health care is responsible for some 50% of all health service delivery in developing countries - these extend to rural areas and have been among the first in treating patients living with HIV/AIDS.
- Blood safety programs have been established.
- Mobile home-based care programs have been developed.
- Orphan care programs have been initiated.
- Economic development programs have been promoted.
- Cardinal Javier Lozano Barragán advocates in the “corridors of power and policy-making, on behalf of the poor and marginalized, for access to life-saving medications” (at UN General Assembly)

UNAIDS and CARITAS signed a *Memorandum of Understanding* focusing on the following:

- Promotion of HIV/AIDS awareness and responsible behaviour, particularly among young people;
- Activities to mitigate the social and economic impact of the epidemic;
- Advocacy in line with the UNGASS Declaration of Commitment;
- Efforts to eliminate all forms of discrimination and stigmatisation of persons living with and affected by HIV and AIDS

If we are to change the world, we must start with ourselves. Therefore, let us reflect on the various ways in which we consciously or unconsciously discriminate against those infected and affected by HIV and AIDS and pray for a conversion of our hearts and of the hearts of those who act out their prejudices and discriminate against others in so many ways. Let us recognize God in our neighbours and stand in solidarity with those whose human rights are violated - in our families, our work places, our communities, our parishes and in our troubled world.

As Michel Sidibé, Executive Director of UNAIDS, said on 20 November, . “Every person counts. If we are going to keep our pledge of leaving no one behind—we have to make sure HIV services reach everyone in need.”

I end with the words of Blessed John Paul II who reminded participants in the 1989 Vatican Conference on AIDS:

“... I invite all the faithful to lift up their prayer to the Lord of life so that he will help humanity to bear fruit, even with regard to this new and menacing calamity. That God will enlighten believers ... so that they might be messengers of the hope that does not die ... if today, before the threat of AIDS, we want to find an effective remedy, we must entrust ourselves to God’s help, realizing that ultimately life will triumph over death, joy over hope.” (end quote)

We have the capacity to make a difference. Let us go forth from this hall and build a culture of solidarity with our brothers and sisters who have need of us. May our hearts be filled with true compassion and greater responsibility.

**SEE PRAYER BELOW**

## **World AIDS Day Franciscan Prayer**

[http://www.cafod.org.uk/Pray? tag\[\]=& tag\[\]=& tag\[\]=hiv+and+aids](http://www.cafod.org.uk/Pray? tag[]=& tag[]=& tag[]=hiv+and+aids)

### **Lord, make me an instrument of peace:**

What concrete steps can we take to promote peace and reconciliation in situations of conflict, violence and sexual exploitation to help reduce the incidence of HIV/AIDS and promote a culture of peace and reconciliation?

Where there is hatred, let me sow love:

How can Franciscans and religious leaders create welcoming communities of faith for persons living with HIV/AIDS and those affected by AIDS and eliminate all instances of discrimination and social stigma?

### **Where there is injury, pardon:**

Do we hold those who are living with HIV/AIDS as evil, immoral persons?

How can we set them free and allow them to discover the face of God in their current situations?

### **Where there is division, unity:**

Do our fears and prejudices lead us to commit acts of violence against our sisters and brothers living with HIV/AIDS?

**Where there is darkness (untruth), light (truth):**

Can we preach and speak about HIV/AIDS openly, exploring its origins, its impact, and the fears we have about it? Can we begin to speak the truth in the light, in our parish communities, our religious houses, and everywhere?

**Where there is doubt, true faith:**

Can we reach out to one another, particularly our brothers and sisters living with HIV/AIDS, in a way that restores faith in God? Can we draw upon the power of resurrection to remove all fears, fears of contagion that lead us to reject or withdraw our love and support from persons living with HIV/AIDS?

**Where there is despair, hope:**

How are we fostering communities of hospitality, receptivity, and healing where our brothers and sisters can find 'home', a place of welcoming and love.

**Where there is sadness, new joy:**

Do we recognize the power and grace in our brothers and sisters living with HIV/AIDS? Do we allow ourselves to be 'evangelized' and transformed by the witness of our sisters and brothers living with HIV/AIDS?

**END**