U.S. Agency for International Development

Bureau for Global Health

SUCCESS STORIES

HIV/AIDS

One Nigerian Church Takes HIV Prevention on Faith

THE REDEEMED CHRISTIAN CHURCH OF GOD is one of the fastest growing Pentecostal churches in Nigeria, with more than two million members and branches in every state. In a country where close to 6 percent of the adult population lives with HIV/AIDS, many of Pastor Laide Adenuga's congregants have been affected by the epidemic, and they have come to depend on their church for assistance. What may be surprising is how the church has responded: not just with compassion, but also with a comprehensive plan to discuss HIV/AIDS openly and to educate the faithful to prevent infection.

Five years ago, with funding from the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) through Family Health International's IMPACT Project, the church developed a dynamic HIV/AIDS prevention program that focused on changing risky behavior and advocating for those affected by the disease. The project empowers individuals and families to prevent HIV by using peer education, interpersonal communication and counseling, spiritual counseling, drama, and HIV/AIDS education modules in the church's Bible college curriculum.

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For individuals, the church offers peer education and counseling to promote risk reduction behaviors. For families, the church emphasizes parent-child communication and conducts seminars to empower parents to discuss frank sexuality issues in the context of their faith and the growing epidemic. Counselors have been trained to incorporate HIV/AIDS into church-based counseling, and more than 300 peer educators facilitate education sessions in church parishes in Lagos. Musical concerts, dramas, and sensitization seminars frequently achieve wider reach.

A mix of messages has been tailored to reach the church's diverse congregations. For young people, the dominant message is abstinence. One poster reads, "Care for a Healthy Future? Say No to Premarital Sex." The importance of abstinence and abstinence negotiation skills is demonstrated through role-plays, case studies, and illustrations at peer education training sessions. To encourage dialogue on sexuality between parents and youth, the church produced a bookmark that declares, "Sex: If you do not educate your children, somebody else will."

Photo courtesy of Family Health International

Pastor Laide Adenuga, Coordinator of the Redeemed AIDS Program

For couples in the church, the message is mutual fidelity. And to debunk the notion that AIDS is a sinners' disease, the church developed a message that says, "Everybody is at risk for HIV infection." To reach those who stigmatize people with HIV, the church came up with, "Jesus cares for all. Care for people living with HIV and AIDS." Finally, church publications and drama productions reinforce HIV/AIDS advocacy messages targeted at decision-makers.

Pastor Adenuga, who coordinates the church's HIV/AIDS activities, explained that the backing of church leaders made all the difference in getting the program off the ground. "Regular reference to HIV and AIDS in sermons delivered by the General Overseer of the Church created an enabling environment for programming."

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The church also takes an active role in receiving and making HIV/AIDS referrals. Family Health International/IMPACT refers persons living with HIV/AIDS, transport workers, and youth to faith-based projects for spiritual counseling. In turn, the church refers its members to HIV/AIDS care and support groups and other services provided through Family Health International/IMPACT programs.

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