

Wajibu

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HIV/AIDS - CARE AND PREVENTION RELIGIOUS, CULTURAL AND SOCIAL ASPECTS

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STATEMENT OF PURPOSE

Wajibu seeks to enlighten people on social, economic, political and religious issues that are topical, relevant and of common concern. It wishes to promote dialogue among the various communities in Kenya and seeks to promote values that lead to the building of a just, free and peaceful society. It aims to provide young people with a forum where they can express their hopes, fears and vision for the future.

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The following articles have appeared earlier in *Ray of hope*: a Newsletter of the Hope for African Children's Initiative: "Choosing life" in the issue of October 2005-April 2006; "Taking HIV/AIDS messages to the hearing-impaired" and "Precious memories" in the issue of April-September 2005. They are used with permission.

The article by Edith Shikumo is an IRIS (Interlink Rural Information Service) feature.

Picture and graph credits: The illustrations on pages 4-7 are from the issues of *Ray of hope* cited above, the illustration on p. 17 is the cover photograph (by Giacomom Pirozzi) of *Study of the response of faith-based organizations to orphans and vulnerable children*, cited in "Further reading on p. 17." The graph on p. 15 and its accompanying text is from *Mainstreaming gender into the Kenya national HIV/AIDS strategic plan, 2000-2005* (cited in "Further reading").

EDITORIAL

WAJIBU has published two previous issues on the AIDS pandemic.¹ There is no need to justify another issue on this topic. Although there is certainly more awareness on the various causes of the pandemic than there was in the 1990s, we can by no means afford to be complacent on this subject. New cases continue to be reported regularly and there are still people living with the virus who are stigmatized or are discriminated against.

In this issue, in addition to highlighting the good work of community groups and some NGOs, we are giving special attention to the role played by faith communities in the struggle against the pandemic. Although it had generally been assumed that most of the responses in the struggle against the pandemic were coming from the Government and from NGOs, it has become obvious that many faith communities have been doing much work among the HIV/AIDS infected and affected population without seeking publicity for this. Evidence of this work came first to light in a report of a study undertaken in the last quarter of 2002 in sixteen districts in Kenya. The study, the first of its kind in the country, came up with interesting revelations into the structure, operations and competencies of congregational

responses to the twin challenges of HIV/AIDS and orphans and vulnerable children (OVCs).

The study found that many congregational responses had strong capacities in terms of governance, human resource, financial systems and community participation, factors that were hitherto thought lacking. The report, entitled *Haven for children: a study of FBO responses to orphans and vulnerable children*² (OVCs) found that many of the congregational responses were started out of acute need, with a majority being started by religious leaders. One factor that ensured success and sustainability of the activities by the congregations was that they usually used volunteers, most of them women, in their work. These volunteers were highly committed to their work.

However, in spite of the good work done by many faith communities in alleviating the plight of people living with or in other ways affected by the pandemic, there are problems that must be overcome if these communities are to play their part fully. For one thing, not all religious leaders have overcome their prejudices against people infected by the virus. In the last issue of WAJIBU for 2004, we carried a story of a woman trying to live

positively with HIV who was shunned in two different churches! Therefore, much work remains to be done to overcome stigma and discrimination among certain religious leaders.

If we wish to improve the capacity of the faith communities to realize their potential in reducing the effects of the pandemic, there is another area on which we must focus attention. This is the need for greater cooperation in this work within the religious sector. Competition for available funding should not find a place among people of faith and—if our main concern is with the people who are suffering—we must try to eliminate it at all costs.

The Inter-Religious Council of Kenya (IRCK) has done much to foster cooperation among faith communities in the area of HIV/AIDS. We have been reporting on their work in previous issues of the journal and are featuring their accomplishments in some detail also in this issue dealing specifically with the pandemic.

We cannot afford to be complacent when it comes to the lot of so many among our compatriots who are struggling to come to terms with the serious problems they encounter as a result of this deadly virus. In our churches, mosques and temples there is still too much silence when it comes to acknowledging the presence of HIV/AIDS among us openly, an attitude which does nothing to counter the pandemic. What is **your** church, mosque, temple doing to help your friends and relatives who are infected or affected by HIV/AIDS? If they are doing anything do you know about it or are you involved in it? We are asked to stand next to our brothers and sisters in this struggle. Let us not fail them! **W**

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Notes

- 1 Volume 6, no. 2 (AIDS in Kenya) and Vol. 13, no. 4 (The challenge of HIV/AIDS in Kenya)
- 2 *Study of the response by faith-based organizations to orphans and vulnerable children*. New York: World Conference on Religions for Peace; Nairobi: UNICEF, 2004