



...isn't that what mission is all about?

Papua New Guinea is a country where over thirty thousand people have tested positive for HIV, but the number infected could be far greater because the majority of those infected do not know it. Besides the *infected*, there are hundreds of thousands of people *affected*, searching for the resources to care for family members who are ill, or trying to cope without a husband, a wife, a mother, or a father.

In the last few years, my principal mission as a Divine Word Missionary has been to research social and cultural factors that are contributing to the HIV epidemic and to look for strategies that can help to alleviate it. The experience has taught me a lot about mission because I have come to realize that I am the one who needs to be converted—in my attitudes, in my openness to different cultural values, and in my understand of what it means to be truly human amid the perplexity, the suffering, and the mystery of life and death associated with HIV and AIDS.

The Churches in Papua New Guinea play a major role in caring for the infected and affected. The Catholic Church has initiated and administers many voluntary testing and counseling centers and many care centers. People are invited to take a blood test to find out whether they are infected. The news that one is not infected brings great relief. Some smile. Others cry. Learning that one's test is positive and that one is infected is devastating news. At such moments,





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people ask questions such as: Did God send this epidemic? Am I being punished? Does God care for people living with AIDS and their families? Does God hear our cries for healing?

Thirty Divine Word Missionaries in Papua New Guinea discussed such issues in a week-long workshop on how to respond as pastors to the situation. We see it as an opportunity for prophetic dialogue, one of our principal approaches to mission today. Prophetic dialogue involves speaking out in word and deed, not on our own authority, but on God's authority. In this context, we try to be open and to understand the epidemic in the light of people's experience and the Christian mystery. Our response affects the way we think about the epidemic and those affected by it. We must see the person rather than the disease. Because of Jesus' compassion for and solidarity with the sick, his mission and ministry provide the model for healing. If we are to talk about God, then it must be about how God accepts us as we are. Can God be found, not outside, but in the midst of the HIV epidemic?

If God is to be seen in the face of a person living with HIV, then the Christian community has a responsibility to respond with the love and compassion that have their origin in God. Antiretroviral therapies available today can prolong life. But it is even more important to promote a new quality of life and meaning in life so that people no longer think and talk about "dying from HIV" but rather "living with HIV."

Some Christians find the HIV and AIDS issue embarrassing because they link it to behaviors that the Church disapproves of. Yet when one looks at the reality in Papua New Guinea today, the persons most at risk of contracting the virus are not so-called high risk groups, such as truck drivers, but church-going, married women. How does one talk of the goodness of God in a situation where a faith-





ful wife tests positive, having been infected by her husband?

Religious sisters at Church hospitals have taken the lead in promoting medication for preventing mother-to-child transmission of the HIV virus. Churches are instrumental in helping to promote a sense of unity and social cohesion among the members. The support and health of a community are important factors in slowing the transmission rate of HIV infection. Churches are also promoting the ideal of healthy families and opposing domestic violence in all its forms.

The social stigma of HIV infection affects people when community members brand a person they know or suspect of being infected with HIV as a danger or liability to the community. This causes that person to be excluded or marginalized. Infected people experience internal stigma when they themselves, through fear or shame, isolate themselves and feel that they are being punished for something they have done.

In some dioceses, World AIDS Day on December 1 is an important occasion to speak out and witness against stigma and discrimination. In the Mendi Diocese, I took part in a week-long gathering of health workers and people infected with HIV. Bishop Stephen Reichert O.F.M. Cap. joined us in a march through the streets of the town and spoke out against a commonly held belief that AIDS is a punishment from God.

Through the experience of working with people infected and affected, I have come to realize that AIDS is not just a disease. It is a symptom of a cultural crisis, of dysfunctional political and socio-economic structures, of lack of knowledge, of things that have gone wrong in the way we relate to one another and, most importantly, in the way we love one another. □

How does one talk of the goodness of God in a situation where a faithful wife tests positive, having been infected by her husband?

Fr. Gibbs has produced two films about HIV and AIDS in Papua New Guinea.

You can view them on the Internet at:

www.vimeo.com/13991163 (*Mist in the Mountains*) and

www.vimeo.com/13993903 (*World AIDS Day, Mendi*)



WATCH
Online an interview with Fr. Gibbs at:
svdmissions.org