

Aids: We're not done yet

BY MANDLA ZIBI & BRONWEN DACHS

AN Aids-activist priest has criticised talk of ending the pandemic by 2030, noting that access to life-saving medication remains unequal.

"We speak about ending 'the pandemic', but what does it mean? About 6,3 million South Africans are infected, and many of them do not know their status," Fr Stefan Hippler, co-founder of HOPE Cape Town, told *The Southern Cross* after attending the 2016 International Aids Conference in Durban.

"When Durban first hosted the conference in 2000 we were in a situation of despair and hopelessness. 16 years later we can celebrate achievements like 3 million South Africans on treatment and a mother-to-child transmission rate under 4%," Fr Hippler said. However, the country still has a long way to go, he warned.

For Fr Hippler, one of the pressing issues now is equal access to treatment for various marginalised groups in society. Participants at the conference pointed out that

HIV-infection is spreading in what they call "key" populations, meaning groups of marginalised people—including sex workers, injecting drug users and gay men—who are often denied access to services and medication.

The priest also noted the effect of gender inequality as a major driver of new infections in South Africa: 300 new infections per day in the female 15-24 age group.

"Health minister Aaron Motsoaledi has announced that the threshold for treatment will fall away and everybody infected will be treated. That means in theory 3.2 million new antiretroviral therapy patients. How the fragile health system will cope with such an influx remains to be seen," Fr Hippler noted.

For NGOs like HOPE Cape Town, he said, this means a real challenge to assist government, and better communication between the role players.

Accompanying the Aids conference, Catholic roleplayers met for three days to assess the way forward in the battle against the scourge in Africa.



Jesuit Father Anthony Egan speaks at a panel discussion during a meeting coinciding with the International AIDS Conference in Durban. (Photo: Paul Jeffrey/CNS)

Munro OP, director of the Aids Office for the Southern African Catholic Bishops' Conference; Archbishop Peter Wells, papal nuncio to South Africa; Bishop Kevin Dowling of Rustenburg; Cardinal Wilfrid Napier of Durban; and Fr Anthony Egan SJ of the Jesuit Institute.

The gathering drew participants mostly from African countries.

The combination of antiretroviral drugs and their dosages are different for adults and children, Mgr Vitillo told the meeting. Diagnostic tests for children are more expensive than those for adults and often are unavailable, he added.

While the provision of treatment for children "is not a high-profit area for pharmaceutical companies, it is crucial to save lives", Mgr Vitillo said.

Church officials are in talks with major pharmaceutical and diagnostic companies to try to persuade them to develop and make available the necessary tests and life-saving drugs, he confirmed.

Discrimination and stigma attached to Aids "are still very significant problems" in South Africa,

said Bishop Dowling.

Because of fear of rejection by their families and communities, many people refuse testing "until it is too late and they can't be saved", he said, adding that it is mostly men who seek diagnosis when it is too late for life-saving treatment.

"Terrible suffering" is also caused through some "pastors saying that Aids is God's punishment" for immoral behaviour, Bishop Dowling lamented.

Fr Egan, a theologian and lecturer in medical ethics at the faculty of Health Science of the University of Witwatersrand in Johannesburg, felt that we need to reflect on what it means to be involved in Aids ministry instead of simply responding to people's immediate needs.

"We need to move away from seeing ourselves as people working in the field of Aids who happen to be Catholic" to a more sophisticated theology of conscience that enables a "deeper understanding of social ethics, including why the Church needs to respond" to the pandemic, Fr Egan said.

Women's group presents 67+3 blankets for Mandela Day

BY MANDLA ZIBI



Parishioners of Strandfontein in Cape Town with some of the blankets they made for the "67 Blankets for Mandela" project.

TEN women handed over 70 blankets to the "67 Blankets for Nelson Mandela Day" initiative held every 18 July to celebrate Mandela Day.

The donation by the parishioners of St Philip's church in Strandfontein, Cape Town, was part of a number of projects with which the Kolping Family group is involved.

"The Kolping Family movement seeks to empower and up-skill communities in order to help create jobs," said group coordinator Avril Baatjes. "We have been meeting once a week for the past seven years to knit for various causes. Each year we choose a new beneficiary and this year the blankets were donated to the '67 Blankets

for Mandela' initiative," she said. Founded by actress Carolyn Steyn, "67 Blankets for Mandela Day" is a non-profit organisation which has collected thousands of hand-made blankets for beneficiaries around the country.

On April 22 this year, the group set a world record for the world's largest blanket. Thousands of blankets from as far afield as Asia, the United States and Australia, as well as blankets hand-made by South African prisoners—a total of over 20 tonnes—were stitched and combined at the Drakenstein Correctional Centre in Paarl, Western Cape.

According to Ms Baatjes, in previous years the Strandfontein women have supported St Luke's Hospice, Groote Schuur Hospital,

Old Age homes, Nine Miles Surfing Club and others.

"At St Luke's we donated 60 blankets. At Groote Schuur we donated knitted caps and booties for premature babies. With the 9 Mile Surfing Project we teach underprivileged kids how to surf. We knitted beanies, gloves and scarves for them," said Ms Baatjes.

The group also organises the "Christmas in July" event at Nazareth House, a local orphanage and old age home.

"We provide entertainment and gifts for our senior citizens and try to ease their discomfort in their advanced years. We just want to inspire people to give, and there is nothing more joyous than to see the difference you can make in someone's life," said Ms Baatjes.

New PE centre a one-stop library and repository

STAFF REPORTER

A NEW Catholic Resource Centre was launched in Port Elizabeth—and one of its first actions was to announce a cooperation with *The Southern Cross*.

The centre known by its acronym CRC, combines the roles of archives, library and repository, adding technology to enable Christian communities to acquire knowledge and ongoing faith formation.

Port Elizabeth Catholics have access to the centre to use its library, research the archives, browse the Internet or buy Catholic merchandise from books to crucifixes to coals and candles—and, of course, *The Southern Cross*.

The library and repository will be looked after by Denise Steenkamp.

The CRC takes over the function of the old Cathedral Bookshop, on whose premises it is located.

The centre will also serve as a depot for parish's parcels of *The Southern Cross*. Due to inefficient postal services the delivery of the newspaper was unpredictable. The allocations for parishes in the area will now be couriered to the CRC for dispersment.

The launch was preceded by an Open Day during which PE Catholics could find out more about the centre.

At the launch, Bishop Vincent Zungu and diocesan financial administrator Alberto Trobec welcomed dignitaries including Prof Garth Abraham, president of St Augustine College; Fr Russell Pollitt SJ, director of the Jesuit Institute; and Fr John Baldwin SJ from Boston College in the US who is lecturing the Winter Theology in South Africa this year.

The launch brought to fruition an idea 30-years



Bishop Vincent Zungu cuts the ribbon of the St Michael's library which forms part of PE's new Catholic Resource Centre

in the making, starting with the late Bishop Michael Coleman.

Over the past few months the project was driven by Mike Lenaghan who did the planning and monitoring, bringing his vast experience and numerous contacts to bear.

Bishop Zungu described the CRC, as the "heart" of his diocese. The centre is structured on the foundations of the diocese's extensive library of religious books, which will now be made more accessible to the wider public through dissemination of information through the Internet.

The inclusion of the diocesan archive is intended to make local historical information more accessible to the people whom it was designed to serve.

The CRC website will be launching in August. ■ For information phone Denise Steenkamp on 041373-1686



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