

ADDRESS TO THE SACBC AIDS MEETING

“How can I understand a figure or a statistic unless I have held the hand that it represents? The people we are talking about are the same as us. By the way we treat them, we know just how much like Jesus we have become”.

Those words were spoken by Dr. J P Muliylil, an epidemiologist in India. “How can I understand a figure or a statistic unless I have held the hand that it represents?” Figures, statistics, accountable partnerships, business plans, management of a demanding set of programmes, accurate reporting and data capturing, monitoring and evaluation, and so much elsethis is what we are about. In the quest for ever greater professionalism in every aspect of our task and responsibilities as management, a professionalism which is very important, we cannot however lose touch with the coalface; we are constantly called to the human encounter and experience which needs to be at the heart of a professional operation; we need to have held the hand and felt the human heart which all that professionalism presumes.

The dynamic is indeed two-fold, two sides of the one coin: an ever greater professionalism and degree of accountable management of programmes will enhance and ensure that what is actually offered to and experienced by the human being described as the “patient” is indeed the very best that is possible for that human being whom we believe is made in the image of God; on the other side, the holistic awareness of the complexity of social, emotional, economic, cultural, spiritual and other factors which make up the very personal and unique context of that individual human being, will and must shape the way our programmes and all the management structures function and are implemented on a daily basis.

As we enter into this very important process this morning, it is vital that we, each of us, reflects upon and analyses the very unique socio-economic-cultural context in which each of us works or ministers as we fulfill our role and responsibility as a member of the management team or structure where we are. Perhaps each of us this morning is aware, all too aware, of the demands, even stress under which we work on a daily basis as we face growing needs, complex problems, a paucity of human resources and ever greater financial challenges. Even coming away for two days to this workshop, vitally important as it is, means that all of us have left crucial work behind us which must be dealt with on our return as we try to catch up on two days away from our usual administrative tasks.

That is why one important objective or aim in this workshop must be to affirm, value, appreciate, and thank each one here for who we are as human beings and for the priceless gift of our work and ministry in terms of those whom we serve and care about from behind our desks, our computers, our piles of documents, and those phone calls which keep on coming to demand even more stats, documents, copies of invoices, and all the rest. We are also very human, and so vulnerable, as we try to respond to very high expectations. Let us touch into that humanness, that vulnerability, the fact that “there is no more than just me as I am”, that in the midst of my work and those never-ending needs I also have feelings, I can have a bad day, I have a sick child I am worried about, I – as a working mom – have to find some way of caring for my children during school holidays so that I can come to do my work as a data capturer or whatever, or as a sister in a community with other cares and responsibilities which require my presence and time, or even for myself as a bishop where I sometimes feel that even Jesus himself on a really good day would struggle with my workload!!.....Let us be aware that what I am feeling this morning everyone else in this room is feeling in some similar way, that we need to be a community of care and support for each other during this time together, so that when we leave here our hearts and spirits will be a bit lighter because of the way we have shared our common journey together in these two days.

So, on a personal level, I want to acknowledge and deeply appreciate each of you, and the gift you are to so many people because you really do walk the extra mile each day so that those people will be touched with hope and new beginnings, or enabled to move towards death with a power that helps them let go, and just be, and so be able to rest in peace.

We have seen our programme for these 2 days; we know what is coming: discussions between members of the team with the individual site delegation; Government accreditation of sites, and integration of OVC and ART programmes; Human Resources Management; Monitoring and Evaluation, and the times for plenary discussion of the problems experienced at the sites.

We can even sense as we look at those 2 pages of the programme what the aim of all this is: to enhance our effectiveness; to take us to another level in terms of narrative and financial reporting and accountability, and monitoring and evaluation of what we do; to ensure the sustainability of the programmes we offer; to optimise relationships and the mutual working together of the whole team back home.....all of this in view of deepening the quality of care for the person or the child we serve.

This is where we do indeed face major challenges. The demands being made upon us by funders and back donors in order to achieve accountable management and administration are indeed growing, and this especially in the midst of the economic downturn. The checking and double-checking, signing off on everything by three persons and so on, the need to be able to put our hand on a file or a copy of an invoice in 10 seconds when the auditor asks for it, the problems with delivery of drugs and laboratory feedback, and so on.....we all know about this only too well. This is simply the reality of the context in which we have to work in these days.

That is why it will be important and helpful for all of us to be clear about what is expected of us by our main partners who are here with us, so as to minimise the problems and to constantly streamline the work process to ensure that our team at home works ever more efficiently and effectively....so that indeed our accountability and professionalism cannot be questioned. The one thing we cannot countenance or even imagine as colleagues and friends gathered here is.....that the people we care for should suffer a diminishment in the quality of our service and sensitive care through inefficiency in the way we administer our programmes.

But that in itself calls for a rather special quality of dialogue between the partners to achieve a simple answer to a simple question: is what is being asked for by the funders and country management in terms of accountable administration really going to ensure a greater quality of care for the people for whom we are administering these programmes? To answer that question demands openness, honesty, and a real commitment to listening to each other. But that is not always easy to achieve when the back donors are operating in another environment many thousands of kilometres away from the shack settlement or village community in which we are trying to offer a service which really meets the holistic needs of people and children who are often very poor and deeply vulnerable, and who need time and lots of time to be listened to and understood *before* we can respond to their needs meaningfully and holistically.

The donors with their justifiable requirements for measureable outcomes which integrate seamlessly with financial outlay and accountability, don't always find it easy to fully understand the constraints under which we have to work in the socio-economic-cultural environment of our people. The task of our leadership in relation to our back donors is indeed very delicate and requires a wisdom and sensitivity that would stretch even Solomon on a really good day! We on the ground appreciate the challenge our leaders at SACBC and CRS face in this regard, and we would earnestly desire to enable

our dialogue with you to ease your significant challenges in the quest to ensure a sustainable partnership with the donors.

One very significant bond which unites SACBC, CRS and all of us on the ground is the spirit and indeed spirituality which underpins what we are about. In the midst of trying to cope with our demanding workload, it is so important that we are able to centre ourselves on that still-point within our spirit, and even for a few seconds at a time remember and reflect on the fact that ours is a calling, not just a job; that our God – that higher power in our lives – is the one who calls us personally not just once, but through every moment of each day as we experience the ups and downs of a “blou maandag” on Tuesday, or Wednesday, or Thursday, or Friday – or on all of those days in that particular week!

And to remind ourselves, especially when we talk together as team, that when we are working for and ministering to the most vulnerable members of our society – as we do – then every moment of that process makes our God present; every moment is an encounter with God in that person whom I, as a data capturer or financial administrator, are putting into my computer; every time we struggle to resolve a problem with a patient who for some reason is showing signs of being non-compliant, our God is part of our struggle to discover the reason and to bring them back to compliance. We are never alone, therefore. At the level of our spirit and spirituality, therefore, our relationship with our God, whatever we are doing in any given moment is not just something that would be nice to do. It will always be something which holds greater significance and power, because what we do enables our God to enter the life and human condition of the people we serve; what we do allows God to be present and active in that life with the healing power that can only come from God and which can touch the whole reality of that person’s life – through us, because we are there.

This does indeed call for those moments of encounter between us who are the managers and the people who are being cared for by the members of our team in the field. Whenever it is possible, let us open our hearts to be touched by the faces, the smiles, the worried look, the held back tears, the empty eyes, of the children and adults in our programmes – and let those encounters, however brief they are, enable us to recognise with real appreciation that the quality of our work can bring about the transformation of despair, or the beginning of hope, or the acceptance of what is, and so much else that can enable those we serve to taste peace and simple joy; that because we are there for them their life is indeed going to be different, and that their God is speaking a simple word in their hearts: “Do not be afraid, I will be with you”.

May this workshop and all we share enable us to appreciate ever more deeply, using the words of Doctor Muliyl, that we do indeed understand the figure or the statistic because we have held the hand that it represents, that we live in such solidarity with our people and with such quality of care, that yes! we realise just how much like Jesus we have become. Thank you.

Bishop Kevin Dowling C.Ss.R.
Monday, 20 July, 2009