

OVC, Learning and Sharing, June 2006
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“The battle against AIDS ought to be everyone's battle. Echoing the voice of the Synod Fathers, I too ask pastoral workers to bring to their brothers and sisters affected by AIDS all possible material, moral and spiritual comfort. I urgently ask the world's scientists and political leaders, moved by the love and respect due to every human person, to use every means available in order to put an end to this scourge.” (John Paul II, Ecclesia in Africa)

Our Catholic Church Structure

- The Southern African Catholic Bishops' Conference has its headquarters in Pretoria.
- The territory of the SACBC is in three countries, South Africa, Swaziland and Botswana, covering 29 dioceses.
- Each diocese needs its own structures responding to AIDS in collaboration with diocesan co-ordinators, diocesan /parish AIDS committees/ parish pastoral councils.
- The Catholic Church is us, the ordinary people of God, not just the pope and the bishops.
- Is doing an enormous amount to respond to AIDS, and is called to more.
- Has been involved in the education and care of people from its very beginnings.
- The challenge: to work increasingly with other people of good will, NGOs, other churches, government departments.

What Scripture says

- “Let the little children come to me, and do not hinder them, for the kingdom of heaven belongs to such as these.” (Mt 19: 14)
- “Whoever welcomes a little child like this in my name welcomes me. But if anyone causes one of these little ones who believe in me to sin, it would be better for him to have a large millstone hung round his neck and to be drowned in the depths of the sea.” (Mt 18; 5-6)
- “Do not take advantage of a widow or an orphan. If you do and they cry out to me, I will certainly hear their cry.” (Ex 22:22,23)

The Social Teaching of the Church inspires us

- “The Church shows her concern for human life in society.
- “Everyone has the right to enjoy the conditions of social life that are brought about by the quest for the common good.”
- “The Church sees in every person the living image of God himself”.
- “We need to respect the dignity of children.”
- “All social values are inherent in the dignity of the human person”.

- “The Church’s love for the poor is inspired by the Gospel of the Beatitudes, by the poverty of Jesus and by his attention to the poor”
- The challenge: “We are called to love our neighbour as ourselves and to persevere in this conduct because we are all really responsible for everyone.”

The Church’s Concern for Children

- The family has a completely original and irreplaceable role in raising children.
- Parents are the first educators of their children.
- In the education of children, the role of the father and that of the mother are equally necessary.
- Parents have a particular responsibility in the area of sexual education
- The rights of children must be legally protected within juridical systems.
- The situation of a vast number of the world’s children is far from being satisfactory.
- The challenge: how to create family environments for children orphaned and made vulnerable by AIDS.

Our Church Response to OVC

- Commitment to orphans, widows, aliens/foreigners as a biblical injunction is clearly a call to the Church in every age, not least to our own.
- Home based care begun by parishes/dioceses and religious congregations is often the first place in which OVC are identified. Schools identifying increasing numbers of OVC.
- Our work is for the sake of others, not simply for what we can get out of it.
- Challenge: needing to focus far more on prevention, ultimately the key to turning the epidemic round
- The challenge: the spiritual and pastoral care of people.

OVC Programmes

- Long term commitment to OVC is not easy; it’s easier to run a five day workshop on prevention than to be committed for the long haul.
- Programmes in the Church often begin as feeding schemes, but must evolve into comprehensive responses if children are to be assisted beyond the basics, and if programmes themselves are to be sustainable in the long term.
- It’s not easy to move beyond the basic security needs type of intervention to eg more psycho-social and pastoral support types of intervention if skills, resources and commitment to other people’s children are not present.
- People in society often open their hearts to individual children in one kind of need or another. Greater numbers of vulnerable children are more difficult to deal with.
- Some parishes providing a comprehensive response to families within their own borders, or to families in neighbouring parishes.
- A real challenge is that of making the good services that are available on a small scale to the greatest number of beneficiaries, i.e. scaling up the numbers of children being reached.

Treatment of children

- Children on treatment are going back to school, not dying; homes formerly taking care of dying children having to rethink their response.
- But treatment is not by far reaching everyone who needs it, and many children are not being brought for treatment. Approximately 8% of the people on treatment in our programme are children. Most are not of school going age.
- The challenge: how to get more children on treatment, and in time.

Psychosocial and Educational Support

- Work re life-skills in primary schools addresses all children, not only OVC, throughout the Catholic schools network
- Educational access programmes are supported by both donor funding and donations from private individuals.
- Schools also identify orphans, who are supported in various programmes, which include psychosocial support, continued educational access, food security, housing.
- Psychosocial support being scaled up, including memory boxes, play/art therapy
- The challenge: to continue providing age appropriate services

Fostering, Adoption, Social Security

- Obtaining official documentation (birth certificates/ identity documents/parents' death certificates) to access social grants for OVC in South Africa is undertaken by Church projects; the increased uptake points to both increased numbers of OVC and an improvement by the Department of Social Development in delivery of services.
- The process of fostering and adopting of children can be long and drawn out because of the legal processes involved. Projects which have their own dedicated social workers score around the statutory work involved.
- Children fall through the cracks a second time when eg foster parents use grants for cell phone airtime or for liquor or for the needs of their own families.
- The challenge: ensuring that those in need receive resources for which they qualify.

What child care workers in SACBC OVC Projects believe

- "Our objective is to bring life to these children so that they can live like other children;
- We aim to give children hope, love, a chance to play, and to interact without discrimination;
- The objective is to make the lives of orphans and vulnerable children a fulfilling and enjoyable experience;
- We want to alleviate hunger and address the need for care;
- Our objective is to look after the well being of the whole child – spiritually, emotionally and psycho-socially;

- We want to restore children's dignity, humanity and trust and (help them) continue with their education;
- We care for HIV positive people and their families;
- We work with people living with AIDS (PLWAs) and orphans and vulnerable children (OVCs) to bring quality of life, to remove the focus on death and (to help them) turn to life;
- Our objective is to provide professional and holistic care for the homeless and destitute in the Johannesburg inner city."

Project Representatives in Tessa Marcus: To Live a Decent Life

Some of the lessons learned thus far

- Children's needs not sufficiently being met across the board; many children fall through the cracks even within supposedly safe environments of eg foster care.
- Refugee children bear an additional burden; they do not eg qualify for social grants.
- Not enough being done collectively to address the problems comprehensively; there is still too much fragmentation in everyone's response, whether Church or government or NGO.
- Training for caregivers needs constantly to be done to include new caregivers and to address volunteer attrition. Caregivers need carefully to be screened.
- Specialised care is needed for caregivers who suffer burnout and whose level of commitment can be under stress.
- There is an expectation that the Church be a provider of care, but we don't always have sufficient care built in for those who provide the service.
- Institutional care within Church institutions is often excellent, but not reaching the numbers of children that need to be served. The level and quality of care in institutions needs somehow to be replicated in non-institutional care.
- Child-headed households are an option, and can work if they are supported by caregivers on a daily basis.
- Grants and birth certificates reaching communities, though not without problems as cases of fraud attest.
- The Church cannot work alone since it doesn't have all the resources, skills, answers. We need to work collectively, collaboratively with whoever is there, even unlikely partners.
- Caregivers and child care workers need skills training
- The challenge: in all of this, it isn't business as usual.

Our Southern African situation

- We experience a drop in life expectancy, with many adults not able to raise their own children.
- South Africa's children are vulnerable to rape and abuse in a very violent society.
- Sometimes the traditional cultural net of extended family and/or local community is in place, sometimes not.

- The backbone of the Church's response to AIDS is home based care from which has arisen both the care of orphans and vulnerable children, and ARV treatment of both adults and children.
- The challenge: meeting the needs of the rising in numbers of children orphaned and made vulnerable by AIDS across the region.