

UNIVERSAL CHURCH AND MISSION 2017

RELIGION AND DEVELOPMENT

Sr Alison Munro, SACBC AIDS Office, Pretoria, June 2017

The Southern African Catholic Bishops' Conference (SACBC) AIDS Office

A response to AIDS

The SACBC AIDS Office has provided a co-ordinating role since 2000 for the response of the Catholic Church to HIV and AIDS at the level of the Southern African Catholic Bishops' Conference. It replaced a previous poorly funded programme at the SACBC at a time when HIV and AIDS was escalating out of control in parts of Sub-Saharan Africa, and when anti-retroviral treatment was not available in the public (government) sector.

- ***Need for funding and advocacy***

More was needed than what the Church alone could provide, even with increased funding. Additional obstacles to giving people a second chance at life came from the South African Government and its Department of Health through their refusal to recognise that HIV causes AIDS, and their refusal to make anti-retroviral drugs available. Much advocacy, supported by the Church and the SACBC AIDS Office, and eventually also a court case, finally compelled the South African Government to provide drugs in the public sector.

- ***Pioneering role of the Church***

Today South Africa has the largest antiretroviral treatment programme in the world, in addition of course to the highest number of people infected with HIV. The Church played no small part in ensuring the initiation of many people on treatment, some of them in places where the Department of Health began its programme only later. Today those patients are part of the government's programme, and the SACBC AIDS Office focuses attention on orphaned and vulnerable children, a group still unevenly provided for by both the Departments of Health and of Social Development.

- ***Delivery of services to marginalised communities***

The Church, through dioceses and local parishes, and in collaboration with schools, engages with local communities where the children live, and with government organisations at sub-district and district levels, trying to ensure that children and their guardians receive health, education and social services. While these services are a right according to the constitution of the country, they are not always delivered by government agencies, especially in more rural areas.

Uneasy relationship between Church/church institutions of faith based organisations and government/governmental organisations

South Africa is a secular society, but one which includes many faith traditions. New churches, and faith based organisations, continue to spring up, not all of which subscribe to the values that underlie the Catholic Church's response to the poor and marginalised members of society.

- ***Numerous faith organisations and uneasy relationships***

Relationships between Church/church institutions of faith based organisations and government/governmental organisations in South Africa have over the years been uneasy. In the post-apartheid period there have been various overtures from the government to relate with church and

other faith leaders, an enormous challenge because of the impossibility of bringing people of all faiths into one body speaking for all of them. Various networks or loose organisations have existed or do exist, but none can be said to include even representatives of all the different faith groupings. There is no one faith response around development issues, notwithstanding that most faith communities do render services of various kinds to people in their constituencies and beyond.

The Church's engagement for development

Putting gospel values and Catholic Social Teaching into practice has always been at the heart of what members of our own faith communities and their collaborators do. Members of the Catholic Church rendering HIV and AIDS services are often asked whether they serve only Catholics. They don't of course, and because Catholic Church members number only approximately 7% of the total population of the country, it is true that the Catholic Church punches above its weight when one looks at the numbers and varieties of services offered, and the numbers of people reached in the various development programmes undertaken.

- **Faith based responses reach people through people**

It is known that Non-Governmental Organisation (NGOs), including Faith Based Organisations (FBOs), provide an enormous service to people, often drawing on the services of unpaid volunteers or people receiving only small stipends. Were these services to be withdrawn, the picture around service delivery would change drastically. Studies that have investigated the value of such volunteer services have demonstrated the costs saved by the government because people are providing the services it can't or won't provide. Faith organisations are often better placed to reach people far from government clinics, or people who do not readily access those services.

- **Government expectations of faith based organisations/communities**

Despite sometimes difficult relationships and very little financial support, the government and governmental organisations nonetheless do expect the faith communities to be able to provide services they themselves are unable to provide. Clearly this ambiguous situation has its particular challenges regarding implementation of projects, even when collaboration is presupposed. Engaging with the government in this regard is not always easy, whether nationally or locally.

The voice of the Catholic Church is one that is recognised, at least on some occasions, even if not always appreciated.

Potentials and limitations around engagement of Church/church agencies and Government/government agencies

- **Faith agencies doing the work of government agencies**

Funding demands have required that more people are reached, not so much with direct service delivery, as with what is now being called *technical assistance*. So rather than having the faith based organisation providing all the services, it is expected that these organisations do what is necessary to ensure that services are accessed where they are available, eg at clinics, from a variety of non-governmental organisations, and from the private sector. Bluntly, this can mean that the faith based organisations are landed with the work of government agencies, but not always the recognition of what they are doing.

- **Willingness and unwillingness to collaborate – from both sides**

Problems also come when individual members of government seek out the collaboration of particular faith leaders, to the exclusion of others, and yet give the impression that what they hear is the voice of faith leaders in general. Equally problematic is the unwillingness of some faith groups even to engage with government agencies, as well as the unwillingness of such agencies to work with faith based projects in their local areas. Some of our local AIDS projects foster good reciprocal co-operation with government and other agencies. Elsewhere there are challenges.

Models of cooperation or non-cooperation?

South Africa itself receives aid/funding for part of its HIV and AIDS programme from PEPFAR and the Global Fund, but has increasingly been expected to provide services, and show the effects of development/take responsibility for its own HIV and AIDS problems. As a country South Africa is now spending more on HIV and AIDS than it did previously, and funding from PEPFAR, the Global Fund and various donors has been greatly reduced. The Department of Health has to think differently and draw on the services of the churches/faith communities to assist it to be more effective in its provision of health care services to people on treatment and to vulnerable children.

Never may cooperation be taken for granted or guaranteed. Committed and serious work to make it happen and maintain relationships is needed.