

Blending Christian Faith and African Culture, Partners Work to Prevent HIV in Kenya



DePaul partners Leah Neubauer and Gary Harper demonstrate active listening during a session on interpersonal communication at a teacher training workshop in Murang'a in March.

Using a unique blend of African culture, Christian values, and proven social marketing techniques, Twinning Center partners at the Kenya Episcopal Conference-Catholic Secretariat (KEC-CS) and Chicago's DePaul University are working to stem the growing rate of HIV infections among Kenyan youth.

Partners developed a multi-pronged HIV prevention program targeting youth between the ages of 10-14 that has been implemented in 15 of Kenya's 26 Dioceses.

Called "Making Life's Responsible Choices: Love Life, Live and Talk!," the intervention includes both a multi-session school-based curriculum delivered by local teachers and a radio messaging campaign that airs on a

national Catholic radio station.

Building on the Kenyan Ministry of Education Science and Technology's National AIDS Education Syllabus, the school-based program incorporates group discussions, story telling, skits, role-plays, and interactive activities based on Bible verses and traditional African proverbs and stories. The program uses an "intermedia" process that combines mass and interpersonal communication to promote behavior change and public health awareness.

Christian and African values reinforce the program's HIV prevention messages because they parallel psychosocial factors—such as self esteem, self respect, the value of human life, and assertiveness in relationships—that can moderate behavior.

Collaboration across a wide range of disciplines and units within each institution contributes to the creation of sustainable, culturally-sensitive programs targeted to the unique needs and conditions of Kenyan youth.

Above all, the intervention seeks to give accurate HIV information, thereby encouraging young people to refrain from high-risk activities. On another level, it encourages them to break the cultural taboo and talk about HIV/AIDS among themselves and with others.



Partners are working to keep students at Catholic schools in Kenya—such as the group pictured above at Kianjiruini Primary School in Murang'a Diocese—healthy by providing them with the life skills they need to avoid behaviors that put them at risk for HIV and other diseases.

Adults who participate in the intervention's training workshops learn to clarify their own understanding of HIV/AIDS and start conversations in their own relationships and communities.

"There is so much silence around issues of HIV and AIDS, and we hope to play a role in breaking that silence about this pandemic," says Gary Harper, a Professor of Psychology and Director of the Masters in Public Health program at DePaul University. "We do not see ourselves as coming in and 'saving' these communities, but instead, helping to find their areas of strength and then working side-by-side to build their capacity to lower the rates of HIV infection."

As of April 2007, more than 16,000 pupils across 252 schools throughout Kenya are receiving the program and 1,000 teachers have been trained to implement the curriculum.

The partnership is currently working to add a parent component to the intervention and expand the program to all 26 of the country's Dioceses.