

Church's Response to HIV AIDS

~ Patricia Mukhim

The Church in India's North East has a tremendous influence on peoples' thinking, their world view, attitudes and actions. It may not be too far off the mark to say that the church influences the consciousness of the community. In a world threatened by multiple issues and the scourge of HIV-AIDS, it becomes crucial for the church to develop effective responses to the issues and to get actively involved in social action in collaboration with government and non-government agencies to address the problem at hand.

- As an institution with a captive audience who come in Sunday after Sunday it is important for the Church to abandon its squeamishness to address issues related to sexual practices and sex education. Apart from preaching about healthy sexual practices the church needs to show how that can be achieved. The HOW part is often missing from church sermons. Issues are glossed over and the church is often ill-equipped to give out practical solutions after having dealt with an issue
- Man is made up of the spiritual, mental and physical realms. The church is too often engrossed in addressing the spiritual needs without feeding the mind of a person with creative thinking. A Christian must not just be spiritually wise but also mentally alert and agile to grapple with the myriads of issues facing him on a daily basis but in our context particularly with HIV-AIDS
- While church pastors and reverends may not be adequately equipped with the medical and technical side of HIV-AIDS they need to identify people within the church who could actually specialise in tackling the medical side of the problem. The church should send people to be trained in the art of correctly and effectively communicating even to the most ignorant person what HIV-AIDS is and its larger ramifications and how this scourge can be prevented before it hits real hard. Information, education, communication (IEC) is the modern mantra for development communication in every organization. This essentially means carrying the message to the people and doing it without ceasing. IEC has no time line. It continues till kingdom come. The church has to allocate funds and have a full-fledged IEC wing for disseminating information on HIV-AIDS.
- Peer support groups must be created within the church where afflicted, infected and affected people can come together, talk, sing and pray together and give each other the moral support needed. This needs to be actively and consciously promoted within the church
- Self help groups (SHGs) comprising people afflicted, infected and affected by HIV-AIDS also need to be created within the church. They can be assisted by other members who are already well-versed in the creation and setting up of SHGs. These SHGs should be able to ultimately build a corpus of funds for generating self employment among the members.
- The Church should have an organizational development wing which has

the expertise to tie up with the Bill Gates Foundation for HIV-AIDS. NEICORD has is today dealing also with HIV-AIDS. So is NEIDAC. There is need to tap these resources as also resources from the State Government's State AIDS Controls Society. The church must have a trained group of manpower to pool in all the resources, handle the finances coming in from different agencies and maintain transparency and accountability in its accounts. We cannot deny the reality that tackling HIV-AIDS costs money. We need money to get into the process of acquiring anti-retroviral drugs and to see that they go to the right people. Too often government agencies indulge in corruption even while identifying beneficiaries of the (ART) anti-retroviral therapy. Women are most often left out and men are given priority on the plea that they are the bread winners in the family. The church can do away with such gender biases while administering treatment.

- The church must encourage people to talk about HIV-AIDS. Discussion creates enlightenment and that is the first step towards prevention. When an issue is shrouded in secrecy and there is a social stigma attached to it, it usually spreads very insidiously and rapidly.
- The church also has to tackle the issues of drug abuse, intravenous drug use that actually spreads the HIV virus and also sexual promiscuity among drug users and which subsequently is carried over to their family members. It is not wrong to encourage needle exchange centres and to have a widespread campaign on the use of condoms among teenagers. The church in this century cannot afford to be prudish. It must speak and understand the language that the youth speak and converse in.