



FACE TO FACE

WYVA HASSELBLAD
CRWRC-Senegal B.P. 5323 Dakar-Fann
crwrc@sentoo.sn

November 2007

Dear Friends,

While in North America earlier this year, it was interesting that people seemed to be increasingly concerned about HIV/AIDS in the world. Awareness of the immensity of the epidemic and its impact is growing. People in North American churches are asking: what can we do? Many are already deeply involved: in ministry in their own communities, in treatment policy reform, fund-raising drives, writing books and articles, organizing campus activists, partnering with campaigns and activists in other countries, taking action on justice issues, and many other initiatives. This change of heart is a witness to the power of the Holy Spirit to work through the church.

One of the realities that is beginning to sink in, is that the church is as affected as (and in many cases more affected than) any other part of society. In Senegal, as in many countries across the globe, the church has been indifferent to the spread of AIDS. But this too is changing, as churches are admitting that HIV/AIDS is inside the church – just as any other human misery is found within the fellowship of believers. Nevertheless, while other parts of society have been organizing to care for those infected and affected, and have learned how to be effective, the church in Senegal is lagging way behind in the capacity to act.

This is where CRWRC can put a shoulder to the wheel as well, working with those churches in Senegal who, eyes wide open, have come to recognize the problem within as well as without. These churches – primarily Lutheran, Methodist, Reformed and Catholic – are learning that the root causes of HIV infection are present in our every day world of relationships and conflicts, attitudes and prejudices, power and subjection, privation and excess, resources and lack of resources. In this sense, we all have AIDS.

Recently, the coordinator for the CRWRC-sponsored Church Response to AIDS program in Senegal spoke about a situation in his own family. The discussion cantered on the way tourists come from wealthy northern countries to countries like Senegal looking for adventure-often meaning sexual adventures. Girls from village families are recruited by the hotels and restaurants in the tourist

beaches and resorts. They end up providing companionship to foreign tourists. This happened to the coordinator's sister. Instead of the financial benefits she expected from the situation, she was exploited and ultimately humiliated. The church typically would say, "It's her own fault – she is an adult." But what about her family and their pressure on her to support the family needs? What about the absence of jobs? What about the lack of hope for the future? What about trust and betrayal? We are grateful that this sister has not been infected with HIV, but countless women in her situation have been. I am not telling you this story as a parable of north-south relationships. This happens all the time within cultures, within societies, within countries. And the people in the story might be adults or children, might be rich or poor, might be women or men, might be Christian or Muslim, might be university-educated or not, might be red or green. In the story there might be love, or anger, exploitation, or desperation; there might be the desire to surmount a situation of hopelessness or dreams of a better life; there might be a one-way push into a no-return trap.

We have just completed a full-scale evaluation of all our programs in Senegal. The evaluation team members came from Romania, Canada, Senegal, and the USA via Mali. Some of the most encouraging changes are occurring in the lives of young Senegalese women through our adolescent health program. It is remarkable to hear parents, community leaders, and the participants themselves discuss the changes they have seen in their communities. One community leader, Edik Bah, expressed these changes in graphic language: "Before this [adolescent health] program a lot of very bad things were happening in this neighbourhood: very immoral and harmful things. Now people are living much more in the way they should. If people in a community build mutual understanding, they can accomplish anything! There used to be newborn babies [of unmarried mothers] abandoned in the garbage to die. This has stopped."

Fear and shame are a social control mechanism in Senegal, and usually results in people hiding their problems. For example, people who suspect they may be infected with HIV do not go for testing as they are fearful that their families may find out – they would rather face an early death



CRWRC

Living Justice, Loving Mercy

Canada: 3475 Mainway, PO Box 5070, Stn Lcd 1, Burlington, ON L7R 3Y8
USA: 2850 Kalamazoo Ave., SE, Grand Rapids, MI 49560-0600
visit us at www.crwrc.org

than live without their family's love and acceptance. The adolescent health programme encourages families and communities to break this code of silence, to talk openly about issues so that they can deal with them positively. As young women gain courage and confidence, they are able to be a force for change in their communities. This evaluation reminded me of how much I have to be grateful for: dedicated partner staff, communities learning to work together for change, enough positive results to keep me from sleepless nights, and enough challenges to keep me constantly aware of how much I have to learn. I am blessed with a dynamic CRWRC West Africa ministry team as well as the support and encouragement of family and friends.

And yet...and yet. Dakar has been full of violently angry protesters these past few days, demonstrating against what they feel is neglect and even oppression by the government. And would-be immigrants from Senegal and other poor countries

continue to lose their lives at sea (140 on a single day, October 22, this year) as they set out to clandestinely reach European ports, hoping to be able to tiptoe into a country where they will find work. We have to ask ourselves if we are making a difference in the lives of those who suffer disproportionately. What I do think is that we cannot do it alone: only as we are bound together in God's grace do we have a chance to accomplish what He asks us to do. Entering into the period of Advent gives us, once again, the opportunity to reflect on how God enters our lives to enable us to do our part.

Wishing you joy and hope I
in this season,

Wyva

