

*The Contribution of Christian Congregations
to the Battle with HIV/AIDS
at the Community Level*

Executive Summary

This report examines what local Christian¹ congregations are already doing to meet HIV/AIDS needs in their communities and how their contribution could be increased. We are writing primarily for those who are not HIV/AIDS specialists, particularly leaders of churches and other faith-based organizations; however, our findings also have some relevance for specialists in Christian and secular groups, including governments. We believe their interaction with Christian congregations is an important growth area in the ongoing HIV/AIDS battle.

Through quantitative and qualitative research of small sample groups, we provide an early 2005 view of the activities, prospects and mood of Christian HIV/AIDS workers (mostly part-time volunteers) in seven countries. The aim of the report is not to prescribe next steps in detail but to provide an overview that will stimulate strategic discussion during the OCMS Mission Briefing in June 2005.

The workers and congregations studied are clearly making a number of substantial contributions in all three aspects of the battle against HIV/AIDS—prevention, care/treatment, and mitigation. Much of this care occurs as part of existing church programs, such as youth ministry and women's groups, yet much of it is also extended to people who are not members or attenders. The majority of the work is done by volunteers, not paid staff.

Though congregational and secular agendas overlap to a considerable degree, congregations are contributing several key things which secular groups either cannot do or choose not to do. Five of these are the sheer number of volunteers, the communication networks such as denominations, the provision of a face-to-face community of peer support and positive peer pressure, a high touch style of ministry marked by resilience and joy, and prayer with and for the infected and affected. Besides this, the churches have a message of hope beyond death and a way of filling each remaining day of life with meaning.

If the congregational contribution to the battle is to increase, congregations will need to overcome the internal challenge of turning their superficial members into deep, genuine followers of the Messiah, Jesus. They must recognize that involvement in HIV/AIDS ministry is a natural outgrowth of the central purpose of congregations, representing the Messiah in the community.

¹ The survey is primarily but not exclusively about evangelical Christians, broadly defined.

They also need to overcome the external challenge of developing closer working relationships with FBOs and secular groups including governments. There is openness on all sides to improving these relationships, though there are still tensions such as the debate about condoms. The congregations can benefit from the expertise of the secular groups and also be more widely used as delivery networks for some of the resources of the secular groups if appropriate structures and connections could be used as middlemen.

We conclude, *“Christian congregations must more effectively provide what they are specially or even uniquely positioned to contribute, and they must also cultivate better connections with groups Christian and secular that work at national or international levels.”* Ten recommendations for discussion and many more for further research are included in the closing chapter. Appendix 3 contains a separate report from each country, written as a reflection and a focus for prayer. Appendix 4 describes two models of “middlemen” type organizations in Kenya and Zambia that encourage and equip congregations for HIV/AIDS ministries.

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