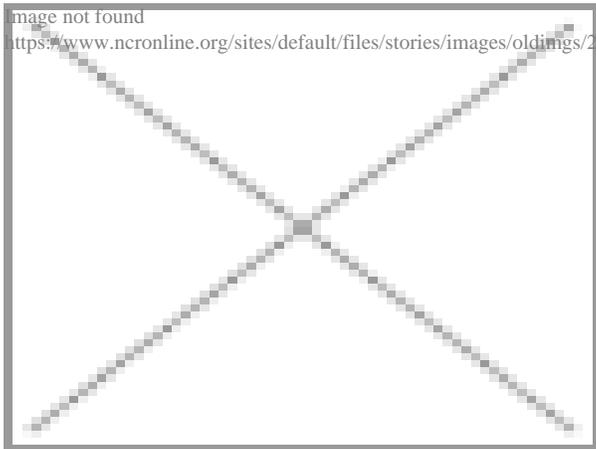


## Doctor-priest taps partners to tackle HIV/AIDS

N.J. Viehland | May. 10, 2012 NCR Today



Manila, Philippines ? Rising cases of infection with the [human immunodeficiency virus](#) [1] in the country has prompted Church officials to partner with United Nations and government agencies while standing their ground against promoting condom use and other strategies not in line with Catholic teaching.

"We are open to the help and assistance of the United Nations," Missionaries of the Infirm (Camillian) Fr. Dan Cancino, coordinator of Episcopal Commission on Health Care programs, told *NCR*.

Cancino said the [United Nations Children's Fund](#) [2] provided technical assistance and about 1.8 million pesos (US\$42,300) for the cost of a three-day HIV/AIDS training seminar last year for teachers and officials of 50 schools around the country, including regions where high numbers of cases have been recorded.

Another round of training for 100 school teachers is being organized in collaboration with the [United Nations Educational Scientific and Cultural Organization](#) [3], [UN AIDS](#) [4] and [Catholic Educational Association of the Philippines](#) [5].

"Even if we (Church) have different perspectives from UN and other groups, we still can work together," Cancino said.

In the past, some Church leaders were more guarded about who they partner with.

He said the question of whether the Church should collaborate with groups holding a different position on HIV/AIDS was tackled by the [First Workshop of Asia-Pacific Catholic HIV/AIDS Network](#) [6] in 2010 with Auxiliary Bishop Broderick Pabillo of Manila, Chairman of Episcopal Commission on Social Action, Justice and Peace.

"The bishop acknowledged we cannot work alone. We need help, data and evidence-based reports. But we sit down with prospective partners, and we give our terms of reference. We cannot be pushed to promote condoms,

and they do not push. They respect the Church's position," said Cancino, a medical doctor specializing in public health and infectious diseases.

The partnership could also help achieve one of the [UN Development Program's Millennium Development Goals](#) [7] to reverse the spread of HIV/AIDS infection.

### **Rising cases**

From January to February, 486 people in the country tested positive for HIV, bringing the number of cases of infection to 8,850 since the country's [HIV/AIDS registry](#) [8] began in 1984, the Philippines Department of Health reported.

Percentage-wise, the figure seems small for a country with an estimated population of more than 101 million people, according to the latest census. However, the great increase in cases is causing concern. Cancino noted February's enlistments were the highest in all months in the registry.

Twelve of the new cases this year – all male – were reported as AIDS cases. Since enlisting started, 345 of the 985 AIDS cases have died, the Department of Health reported. Newspapers earlier this week also reported five AIDS deaths in the south this year.

Most new cases this year were male from around Manila. Some 91 percent were infected through sexual contact, mostly homosexual. Needle sharing among injecting drug users was also a common cause of infection.

Cancino said these conditions demand that people helping HIV-infected people revise their interventions.

"It is more difficult because interventions have to address two, sometimes three situations," the priest said, citing homosexual contact, injecting drug users and sometimes the infected person is a sex worker.

Laws will have to be amended. HIV/AIDS prevention law demands confidentiality, while anti-drug abuse law requires reporting of detected illegal drug use.

### **Church intervention**

Cancino said his and other Church-based groups in the predominantly Catholic Philippines approach the problem of HIV from the perspective of preventing people from contracting the virus.

"Protecting people from infection needs education and values formation," he said.

Echoing [Pope Benedict XVI](#) [9], Cancino said condoms may be used as an initial step to preventing infected people from spreading the virus.

Cancino's Episcopal Commission on Health Care, with the Catholic Educational Association of the Philippines, is also developing a "Life Skills" module that will be taught as a separate subject or integrated in science, Christian living, civics, even English classes from grade 5 to college in 1,345 Catholic schools in coming years.

"Behavior change and values formation, I think, these are the two important ways how to solve HIV and AIDS," he said.

Meanwhile, there are needs of people infected already. On May 5, 38 people with HIV/AIDS, mostly from the March registry, joined a retreat Cancino directs for HIV/AIDS patients every two months at the Camillian Center in Quezon City.

Recently diagnosed participants 16 to 27 years old joined others in the groups, including Christians, Muslims and Buddhists. Most were professionals, some overseas workers predominantly from the Middle East and seafarers who were deported after being diagnosed with HIV. Others were professionals working in hospitals, call centers, business centers of Makati and Ortigas.

The retreat aimed to "shed light in the assurance that, that there's still hope even when you are diagnosed with HIV," Cancino said, and to assess at what stage the patient is in.

Most coming to the retreat are still in denial stage, and some have not disclosed to their family their situation. Almost 50 percent of them -- especially among newly diagnosed -- have attempted suicide.

?Kurt,? not his real name, at the end of the day told his parents in a private session he was HIV infected. At the Camillian Center, Cancino sat in the family meeting and facilitated the 19-year-old's revelation to his parents about the infection he contracted from homosexual activity.

They cried together, as mother and father immediately accepted their homosexual son. There was none of the usual blaming, only question after question: "How much longer does our son have to live? What can we do for him and for the family? How can we support our son??"

"What impressed me then was how the Holy Spirit moves in these situations," Cancino said.

"When we talked in the level of faith, we talked about belief in God and how the Holy Spirit moves at this time. They said they were coming from a very conservative perspective. They considered HIV as sin, they considered patient as sin and now it happens to their son."

Kurt's family is Christian.

"I thought to myself, I would not have the capacity to undergo Kurt's problem. I remembered [what Christ told Camillus](#) [10], "This is not your work but mine," Cancino said.

Cancino acknowledged the statistics make it seem like HIV/AIDS prevention is a losing battle.

"We are tempted to say our efforts have no effect, but here in the concrete experience with patients is when I see how big and important is the work for some people," the doctor-priest said.

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- [2] <http://www.unicef.org/>
- [3] <http://www.unesco.org/new/en/>
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