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Weekend conference focuses on Catholic approach to HIV and AIDS

Alice Popovici | Jul. 25, 2012 NCR Today

This past weekend, as more than 23,000 scientists, advocates and experts from nearly 200 countries gathered in Washington in anticipation of the International AIDS Conference [1] ? the event is being held in the U.S. this week for the first time in 22 years ? close to 100 representatives of Catholic organizations met at the Catholic University of America to talk about their work in countries such as India, Myanmar, Burundi and the United Kingdom.

This meeting gave attendees a chance to ?share expertise and some good practice models with one another, ?said Rev. Msgr. Robert J. Vitillo, special advisor on HIV and AIDS for Caritas Internationalis. Vitillo writes about the AIDS conference here [2] and here [3].

While some presentations highlighted challenges organizations face in securing funding for their ongoing work, others looked at pastoral and spiritual approaches to caring for people living with HIV and AIDS ? a group speaker Vincent Manning referred to as a ?fellowship of the weak.

Manning, of United Kingdom faith-based group Positive Catholics, said ?stigma and fear produce a silence that isolates and excludes people,? and the aim of the group is ?to listen with great care ? healing begins when a person feels seen and heard.?

Camillian Fr. Mathew Perumpil, of India, talked about expanding the education program of Sneha Care Home [4], a Bangalore residential facility for children living with HIV. Many of these children originally came to the home with their mothers, who were HIV-positive, became sick and died.

Perumpil said the program is unique in that it aims to prepare children for the future whereas most residential care programs for children living with HIV follow the ?orphanage model,? focusing on medical care rather than

?helping children grow into adulthood.??

Also discussed at the pre-conference were the findings of a report titled, ?The contribution of Catholic Church-related organizations to the Global Plan towards the Elimination of new HIV infections in children by 2015 and keeping their mothers alive.?

Findings of the report include:

- a lack of funding needed for programs and supplies.

- lack of access to health care and transportation to hospitals and clinics

- a need for ?community mobilization? and education to increase awareness of mother-to-child transmission of HIV

- a few Catholic Church-related organizations are working on programs designed to involve men in preventing the transmission of HIV from mother to child

- there is a need to address ?social and cultural barriers? to implementation of the Global Plan

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Links:
[1] http://www.aids2012.org/
[2] http://blog.caritas.org/2012/07/24/keeping-children-hiv-free-and-keeping-their-mothers-alive/
[3] http://blog.caritas.org/2012/07/23/hiv-survivor-catholic-centres-wont-turn-us-away/
[4] http://www.snehacarehome.org/