

Hope At Last

IMAGINE a room full of over 300 people black, white...rich, poor...men, women, children...some with smiles, others with tears streaming down their faces... holding hands and singing about "Peace flowing like a river..." with a feeling of hope, unity and love... Where could it be? The 1960's peace movement or a political rally or an independence celebration... Could it be in the Namibia where we read daily about violent attacks carried out against women and children, where human rights considerations can be left behind when convenient, where the poor must suffer in silence as resources for health and education dwindle away, where painful issues are often avoided in the name of national reconciliation leaving no space for real healing, and where once friends no longer speak because of political differences... YES it happened in Namibia!

Last week at the conference on Living Positively with HIV-AIDS sponsored by Catholic AIDS

Action, over 300 people, many of whom are infected with HIV or have lost loved ones due to AIDS, gathered from all over Namibia to try and find a path of hope to follow in the face of HIV-AIDS. Those of us who had the privilege of being present experienced the courage, strength and humanity of everyday Namibians as they shared their stories about living with HIV-AIDS.

Instead of discrimination or fear, compassion and encouragement flowed back to them from those people listening. The burden of carrying the knowledge of their HIV status alone was lifted as those sharing their stories received the hugs and caring of others. No medicines were handed out, but healing took place as brokenness and alienation were replaced by acceptance and hope. In the midst of painful revelations about HIV-AIDS, the shackles of secrecy fell away and a spirit of hope was liberated. The power of unity and hope prevailed at the closing service where

candles were lit, voices were raised in song and hands joined together were held high.

HIV-AIDS has and will continue to affect every sector of Namibian society. All Namibians have a responsibility to understand this illness, to face their own fears about HIV-AIDS, to discover how they will play a positive role in slowing the spread of HIV-AIDS, and to help create a society that shows love and compassion to those living with HIV-AIDS.

For those of you reading this letter who are infected with HIV-AIDS or who have friends or family who are infected, I would encourage you to seek out the various groups who are providing support/information about living positively with HIV-AIDS.

Here are a few helpful contacts: AIDS Care Trust Tel 061 259590/1; Catho-

lic AIDS Action Tel 061 249260; Positive Nation PO Box 8828 Windhoek. You have nothing to lose and everything to gain by realising that you do not have to face HIV-AIDS alone.

HIV-AIDS demands that each one of us begin the journey from fear to understanding. Here are some steps to begin the journey:

ACT now begin your own journey to understanding. Begin to look at gaps in your own knowledge, attitudes, and practice in relation to HIV-AIDS. Find ways to fill the gaps.

EXPECT people from all parts of your life to be able to help you fill the gaps with accurate information about HIV-AIDS and positive ways you can make a contribution in the face of HIV-AIDS. Workplaces, churches, schools, health care work-

ers, friends, family, media, social meeting places.

ENCOURAGE as a parent, learner, employee, church member, prisoner, family member the development of programmes which help people to fill the gaps in their understanding about HIV-AIDS.

LOOK honestly at your feelings and how you speak about people living with HIV-AIDS. Examine your own stereotypes, prejudices, fears and other barriers that might keep you from moving acceptance and compassion for those living with HIV-AIDS.

CHALLENGE ignorance, discrimination and insensitivity about people living with HIV-AIDS.

LEARN so you can share with children, col-

leagues, fellow Christians, family members accurate knowledge, compassionate attitudes, and helpful practices regarding HIV-AIDS.

BELIEVE that by working on your own knowledge, attitudes and practices about HIV-AIDS you will be helping to create a society that can face HIV-AIDS with understanding and compassion.

COMMIT your own resources...time, money, expertise, transport, homes to encourage interactive dialogues about HIV-AIDS in every corner of Namibia. **PERSEVERE** looking at HIV-AIDS deeply is not easy or simple and you will often feel overwhelmed, but through the difficulties we have the opportunity to move towards a more realistic understanding of the complexity surrounding HIV-AIDS.

There are no quick fixes! **BE PRACTICAL** ac-

tions speak louder than words...make a pot of soup for a family with someone who is ill with AIDS, put condoms where your employees can access them, speak with your children about sexual decision making.....

These suggestions are only a possible beginning for the journey from fear to understanding. As the conference On Living Positively with HIV-AIDS must be seen as only the beginning of light breaking into the darkness to bring hope that all of us can live positively in the face of HIV-AIDS. The struggle surrounding HIV-AIDS in Namibia has finally been given a soul... thanks to the courageous Namibians who have spoken openly about living with HIV. May we all find courage to live positively with HIV-AIDS.

Dr Cynthia Works
Windhoek

OSHAKATI TOWN COUNCIL

Tenders are hereby invited for the following

On Black And Brown