

Kenyan faith leaders exchange roses as reminder of HIV/AIDS

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February 14, 2012

Nairobi, Kenya, 14 February (ENInews)--At a Roman Catholic church center near the Kenyan town of Thika, red roses were exchanged among faith leaders on Valentine's Day as reminder of their call to love and care for people infected and affected by HIV and AIDS.

The Christian and Muslim leaders had gathered under the Kenyan chapter of the International Network of Religious Leaders Living with or Affected by HIV/AIDS to discuss how to strengthen current approaches being used to fight the epidemic.

"A red rose is a sign of love, but many people infected by HIV/AIDS don't often get the expression of it. In most cases they face animosity, but as religious leaders, we can be different," the Rev. Joseph Njakai of the Anglican Church of Kenya told ENInews on 14 February.

"By exchanging the flowers, we are emphasizing that there is still love, even when people are infected ... This is the message we are passing to the communities."

The leaders are meeting amid increased calls for comprehensive prevention approaches, following new trends such as drug resistant tuberculosis and discordance (where one is infected) among couples. Nearly 344,000 couples in Kenya are HIV discordant, the Integrated Regional Information Networks reported on 14 February.

Africa's main approach has been the ABC (Abstain, Be faithful, use a Condom) since the 1980s, but this has many shortcomings, according to faith leaders. The clerics want to include a response known as SAVE (safer practices, access to treatment, voluntary counseling and testing and empowerment).

According to Christian Aid, the U.K. based charity, SAVE was developed to overcome the inaccurate connection of immorality to HIV, which has resulted in more stigma.

"(ABC) implies that people who are HIV positive have failed to abstain and being faithful. It suggests that people should abstain and that condoms are the last resort. SAVE provides a more holistic and non-judgmental approach," said Christian Aid, in a published guide.

In Kenya, which is huge exporter of roses, nearly 1.5 million people are living with HIV/AIDS. With many Africans dressing in red to mark Valentine's Day, faith leaders sent out messages to urge restraint on unprotected sex or other activities that might lead to further infections.

Those at the meeting highlighted that love was the greatest commandment of all religions, above red roses and chocolates.

"The message is simple, God loves all, whether they are infected or not. This is very crucial in the struggle against HIV," said the Rev. Ephraim Mbugua of the Presbyterian Church of East Africa.

"The power is immense, but communities have neglected this commandment. We have to go to the drawing board," said Sheikh Al Hajj Ramadan Hussein, a Muslim leader caring for persons affected by HIV/AIDS.