

HIV-positive Anglican priest in Kenya works to change AIDS response

by [Fredrick Nzwili](#) in the [January 4, 2017](#) issue

In a community where AIDS is still viewed as a death sentence, Rahab Wanjiru is working to build an HIV-aware church.

The 46-year-old Anglican priest in Kenya has the credibility to help dispel the silence that surrounds the virus and combines with stigma, discrimination, and denial in this remote region about 185 miles north of Nairobi.

That's because Wanjiru has the virus herself.

"Every time I preach in church or speak to the community, I make sure that I teach something about HIV/AIDS," she said. "Most people here are ignorant about the virus, but I tell the congregations that there is much hope, even when one has HIV."

About 1.6 million Kenyans are living with HIV in a population of about 42 million. About 900,000 are on antiretroviral drugs, according to the National AIDS Control Council. Despite major progress, HIV/AIDS remains one of Kenya's most significant public health challenges.

"She is an asset in the war against HIV," said Joseph Njakai, archdeacon of the Kieni Archdeaconry in Lamuria. "She is very vocal and dedicated. Every time we are in clergy meetings, she speaks openly about the virus. Her disclosure has also made it easy for the other clergy to approach her to learn more about HIV."

Wanjiru learned that she had the virus in 1997, after struggling with chest pains for four years.

"I was shocked and devastated by the result," she said. "I was bitter with God and wanted to ask him many questions."

In 2002, she applied to seminary. In what she describes as a miracle, her HIV-positive status was overlooked, and she was admitted to St. Andrews College of Theology and Development Kabare in central Kenya.

At the time, she was living without the lifesaving drugs that had just come on the market, believing, like many others, that a good diet and proper exercise might send the virus into remission. But after starting school, she realized her error and starting taking antiretroviral drugs.

She is now studying for her master's degree in HIV and community care at St. Paul's University, a Protestant school near Nairobi.

She has struggled against misconceptions. In 2010, shortly before she planned to marry, a bishop who knew of her condition advised her to cancel the engagement.

For a while, she gave up on marriage, but in 2013 she wed Mathew Muhoro, a primary school teacher, who also has HIV. After going through a program to prevent mother-child transmission, Wanjiru bore a daughter, Joywin Wangari, now two, who is virus-free.

"I thank God for this child," Wanjiru said. "God has done wonders in our lives."

Wanjiru worries that church members are not yet knowledgeable about HIV and AIDS. And many denominations have yet to fully accept people with HIV and treat them with dignity.

"Since going public about my status, I have to struggle to get space to speak about the virus in some meetings in my diocese," she said.

She also thinks Kenyan primary and secondary schools' HIV/AIDS curricula need to change.

"There is a lot of stigma in the texts," she said. "Something needs to be done about it."

She believes the epidemic can be defeated if the world adopts the SAVE approach, which stands for safer practices, access to treatment, voluntary counseling and testing, and empowerment. The campaign was recently developed by African clergy who felt the ABC approach (abstain, be faithful, and use condoms) wasn't working.

"If people who are positive can bring up [an HIV]-negative generation, that is a clear statement that we can defeat AIDS," Wanjiru said.

Many people in the parish and community look to her for support and knowledge.

“She is extremely committed in fighting HIV and AIDS,” said Jane Ng’ang’a, coordinator of the Kenyan chapter of INERELA+, the International Network of Religious Leaders Living with or Personally Affected by HIV and AIDS. “I think she can be of much help to HIV-positive clergy.” —Religion News Service

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