Pope stirs condom debate; UCC unit urges condom distribution in churches: HIV/AIDS prevention

News in the Apr 21, 2009 issue

During a weeklong visit to Africa in March, Pope Benedict XVI told journalists accompanying him on the papal plane to Cameroon that making condoms widely available “increased the problem” of AIDS. The remark, similar to the Vatican’s longstanding emphasis on sexual abstinence, revived controversy over how best to stem the global AIDS epidemic that has devastated sub-Saharan Africa.

The pontiff said March 17 that distributing condoms worsened the danger of the disease. The next day the Vatican sought to soften the comment in a version of it posted on the Holy See’s Web site that said condoms “risk” increasing the problem of AIDS.

On March 23, the day Benedict left Angola for Rome, demonstrators staged a protest outside St. Peter’s Square at the Vatican in a rally to commemorate AIDS victims.

In Cleveland, a unit of the United Church of Christ urged distribution of condoms in churches “as educational tools.” The recommendation was presented to the UCC Wider Church Ministries joint board meeting March 19 with the pope’s remarks as background.

“Making condoms available at houses of worship and faith-based educational settings provides opportunities to open conversations that can save lives,” said the statement by the United Church of Christ HIV and AIDS Network.

“There is no evidence that making condoms available promotes sexual activity,” the statement said. When they are given out along with educational materials, the group asserted, first-time sexual encounters tend to be delayed; also, among sexually active youth, HIV prevention programs have resulted in a reduced number of partners and increased condom use.