

Compassionate conspiracy: AIDS action in Namibia: The church has the infrastructure

by [Lucy Y. Steinitz](#) in the [May 17, 2000](#) issue

When Sister Raphaela Händler arrived in Namibia in 1996 to coordinate the country's Roman Catholic hospitals and health-care clinics, she realized that AIDS was a "time bomb" about to burst. She had worked previously in Tanzania, and had seen the AIDS pandemic spread there. Although Namibia was years behind Tanzania in the spread of this disease, the pattern was similar. Namibia was heading for disaster.

By late 1998, Namibia was the third most HIV-infected country in the world, with more than one in five adults estimated to be HIV-positive. Even more disturbing, according to Sister Raphaela, was that the churches were "conspirators in the silence," doing nothing to address the crisis. She initiated a mass advocacy effort that resulted in Catholic AIDS Action, a program approved in 1998 by the Namibian Catholic Bishops Conference. It was the first national church-based program of HIV/AIDS prevention and care in Namibia.

The Namibian bishops laid down two ground rules: first, the program must build on Christian values, and second, it shouldn't cost the bishops conference any money (it had none). And so, with prayers that "God will provide," Sister Raphaela started looking for people with whom she could share her vision—those within Namibia who could do the work, and those outside the country who could provide the funding.

At the time I met Sister Raphaela I was completing a study of the country's orphans and was developing a guide to the policies and programs for children in need. I was excited by her vision, so I said, "Sure, I'll help."

We began with a structure already in place: the country's 91 Roman Catholic parishes, 300 small Christian communities or outstations, and its Catholic hospitals and clinics, schools and hostels. We began putting up posters throughout the

country, proclaiming our theme: “Courage to Fight and Strength to Care.” Archbishop Bonifatius Haushiku declared at the official opening of Catholic AIDS Action, “AIDS is a disease, not a sin.”

Since one out of four Namibians is Catholic, we could reach many of the country’s residents by reaching Catholics. And since we were able to build on existing church structures and overseas church contacts, we moved right into implementation. As a result, our impact was almost immediate. Donations began flowing in from individuals and small German church organizations that knew and trusted Sister Raphaela’s work. Soon UNICEF, UNAIDS and Germany’s Misereor sent money for staff training.

We developed a mission statement rooted in biblical text and the life of Jesus: “Acting in the spirit of Christ, Catholic AIDS Action challenges the AIDS pandemic in Namibia with the courage to fight and the strength to care. It builds on Roman Catholic affiliated groups and institutions to inspire and support programs of HIV/AIDS prevention, home-based care, spirituality and support of orphans.”

Home-based care and issues of social welfare were readily supported by the church. They reach to the core of what it means to be a Catholic and a Christian: to reach out and serve the whole person spiritually and physically, as both Jesus and the early missionaries did.

It was tougher to find common ground on the issue of AIDS prevention. We wanted to distinguish ourselves from the government and most nongovernmental organizations, which were focused on promoting the use of condoms. We felt that this was an insufficient strategy, given the continued escalation of HIV infections. But we knew that we had to address issues of sexuality and sexual expression openly and honestly. To ignore or condemn condoms would be to invite rejection.

We also knew that “Thou shalt not murder” applied to situations where one partner was infected with HIV and the other was not yet infected. Even for the most religious and loyal Catholics, serious moral dilemmas emerged. After much debate, we attempted to reconcile all perspectives by modifying a set of slogans we had originally heard from Patricio Rojas, Namibia’s representative to the World Health Organization:

- A is for Abstinence before marriage.

- B stands for Be faithful in marriage. This is the Christian way, and it guarantees life. But if you find that you cannot follow this teaching, then choose
- C for Condom, because the alternative is
- D for Death.

Much as we might wish that everyone could fulfill a higher moral standard, we decided that our first priority is to keep people alive.

Despite its humble beginnings, AIDS Action has grown quickly. Thirty trained volunteer groups now provide nationwide home-based family care to people infected with HIV and AIDS. Another 35 groups work on income-producing projects, living programs for people who are already infected, peer support, and outreach. Our prevention program has graduated over 4,000 youngsters in a ten-week UNICEF-sponsored course called "My Future Is My Choice." Last year we opened Namibia's first AIDS drop-in center. We also sponsored the country's first national conference on "Living Positively with HIV/AIDS," where President Sam Nujoma spoke to a crowd of 500. We have now established national standards for training and supervising home-based care, as well as care of needy orphans.

Our staff consists of nine Namibians (including six religious sisters) plus four long-term foreign volunteers. As one measure of our diversity, the prayers which we say at the beginning and end of our meetings are offered in nine different languages!

Most of our more than 240 volunteers are religiously motivated, and the vast majority are women. Many are HIV-positive. We often hear volunteers refer to their "desire to help others as long as possible, knowing that I might need help one day too." One volunteer explained that she has chosen to help others in order to serve as a good role model for her daughter. "I can't control what my husband did to me," she said, referring to the way she contracted HIV. "But I can show my family that I'm not completely helpless, and I can still do something good with my life."