

Orthodox agency joins Ethiopian AIDS battle: Project includes abstinence-based education initiative

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The relief agency sponsored by the nine major Eastern Orthodox churches in the United States is joining a \$6 million program to fight AIDS in Ethiopia.

International Orthodox Christian Charities says the three-year project, supported by the U.S. Agency for International Development, hopes to bring education, health care, food and shelter to 9,000 children orphaned by the AIDS pandemic. The Baltimore-based IOCC will contribute \$1 million, along with the relief office of the Ethiopian church; USAID will pay \$5 million.

"This battle requires the cooperation of everyone within Ethiopia, and from outside, who has the resources and expertise to help," said the Ethiopian church's patriarch, Abune Paulos. "The church by itself cannot do it all."

The program also involves a massive abstinence-based education initiative among people ages 15-24. An estimated 2.2 million people in the country have the HIV virus that causes AIDS, and 90 percent of the cases involve people between the ages of 20 and 49. "Our job is really to save a generation," said Tedla Teshome, vice chairman of the church's relief office.

Officials said the church, which arrived in Ethiopia in the fourth century and claims about half of the nation's 67 million citizens as members, is a natural partner, with its 35,000 churches and thousands of clergy and lay workers.

The project aims to expand the number of "Hope Centers" for AIDS orphans from 13 to 220, and by 2006 create 250 hospice centers for people dying from AIDS. -

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