

# WE HAVE AIDS



CIDA PHOTO: STEPHANIE COLVEY

## AIDS AND THE MARKETPLACE

ALICIA ZENTS, CRWRC KENYA

It was 1997 when Joseph came to Simon's office to tell his boss he was HIV-positive. Today, Simon sheepishly tells me how fear and unease drove him to instinctively send Joseph out of the room. Simon needed time to absorb the news.

Simon Ngigi lives and works in Nairobi, Kenya, where he and his wife, Lillian, own and manage a workshop that manufactures seals for industrial purposes. They have two young children and dream of growing their business over the next three years to double their capacity. Simon is also a member of a Christian business and loan association that has been developed with support from the Christian Reformed World Relief Committee (CRWRC) and Partners for Christian Development.

When Simon started his business several years ago, he never dreamt that HIV/AIDS would threaten its viability or that he would become so closely acquainted with the disease's destructive force. Of course he knew about the deadly virus long before his encounter with Joseph. In fact, Simon used to work for a company that would require a medical check-up for interested applicants. Those found to be HIV-positive were not offered employment. Simon just didn't think it would impact him.

When Joseph began feeling sick more frequently, Simon thought it was malaria or maybe a problem with alcohol. Then Joseph's wife fell sick and was admitted to the hospital. She died shortly after. Later, Joseph contracted tuberculosis, which led to AIDS. Eventually, he went home for good. After two months he passed away, leaving behind two children.

For Simon, quantifying the loss, particularly in financial terms, is difficult. When Joseph was sick, he was absent for many days and his productivity went down. Culturally speaking, it would have been unacceptable to hire someone else while Joseph was still alive. It would also have been difficult to dismiss Joseph while he was sick. Moreover, Joseph had been well-trained in Simon's company and Simon would have had to train a new laborer. In addition to these costs, Simon took responsibility for paying for Joseph's medical expenses as well as the funeral costs for Joseph and his wife. Simon's attitude has changed considerably from that day when he told his HIV-positive employee to leave the room. Now he talks to his

### EFFECTS ON THE WORKFORCE

*"Most of the 40 million people infected with HIV are in the prime of their working lives. The effects are momentous—not just on workers and their families, but on enterprises and entire national and regional economies. AIDS has become a crucial workplace issue and a massive development challenge."*

Frankly, the numbers are staggering. The International Labour Organization (ILO) says that of the 40 million people affected by HIV today, at least 25 million of them are at the prime working age—15 to 49. In 20 years, this could mean that the size of the workforce in some highly affected countries will be up to 30% smaller. Imagine your own workplace. How would you cope with losing a third of your co-workers or employees? Half of all teachers in Uganda are thought to be infected. How would losing half of the teachers in your school affect you and the students? Agricultural output has declined significantly, possibly as high as 50% in some countries as a result of AIDS. In countries already

*continued...* **WORKFORCE**



CIDA PHOTO

*Sadly, coffin-making is a thriving business in Africa.*

# Rising Costs of AIDS in Business

*Continued...*

employees about the dangers of HIV/AIDS. He shares about the importance of making good decisions about how you live. He's also planning to begin weekly devotions with his employees, to share about his faith and spirituality.

Simon is not alone in facing the challenge of AIDS in his business. In one study conducted in Kenya, it was estimated that the rising cost of HIV/AIDS could consume as much as 15% of companies' profits by the year 2005 (AIDS in Kenya: 1996, 102). It reduces savings and investments as health care costs increase. And companies suffer enormous losses due to employee absenteeism and the loss of skilled labor.

The Christian business and loan association that Simon belongs to, is also faced with tough challenges. The members wonder whether they should give loans to HIV-positive candidates since AIDS could eat up their group savings and limit their

loan and entrepreneurial opportunities.

Joseph's wasn't the only case of HIV/AIDS Simon has dealt with—nor will it likely be his last. Even now, Simon suspects that one of his employees is HIV-positive, but he feels it is important to give him, and others like him, a chance to work. Simon firmly believes that because of his faith in Christ, he can make a difference with his business. He shakes his head disgustedly as he recalls how his former firm used to discriminate against HIV-positive applicants. Unfortunately, many reputable companies still have that policy today.

Simon's advice to others is this: people can die of many things besides AIDS and it's better to employ a person for the job he can do now, even if you know he can only work for 2-3 years. That way you'll be helping him support his family, treating AIDS as a normal sickness, and allowing the individual to work as long as he or she can. Don't dismiss them or substitute them because of AIDS, Simon says.

## Workforce Depleting

*Continued...*

affected by drought and famine, how can this be sustained? All of these results are connected and they all have an impact on the economic bottom line of these countries.

*What exactly are the implications?* Illness, death and the loss of skills and experience reduce productivity and profitability of enterprises and increase labor costs. Workplaces in the most seriously affected countries report increases in absenteeism, labor turnover, and the cost of recruitment, training and staff welfare. As a result, international competitiveness is reduced and foreign investment is discouraged. The World Bank has said that Tanzania's Gross Domestic Product, a marker of overall economic activity, will drop by as much as 25%. For countries already suffering economically, barely able to compete in the global market, the implications are too immense to comprehend.

Sadly, despite the economic stagnation AIDS is causing, one of the growing and thriving industries in many towns and villages around Africa is that of coffin-making.

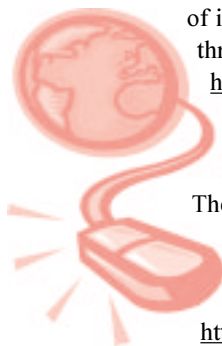
*(Source: International Labour Organization [www.ilo.org](http://www.ilo.org))*

Full-Scale Business Welfare Group (FBG) was founded in April 2000 by a group of Christians in Mombasa, Kenya. FBG is a program facilitated and supported by Partners for Christian Development (PCD/PARTNERS). PCD is an organization that longs to see a dynamic, worldwide movement of business and professional people who bear witness to their faith and love in Jesus Christ so that rich and poor, individuals and groups, communities and nations are transformed to more completely reflect the kingdom of God. To know more about PCD contact them at [membership@pcd.org](mailto:membership@pcd.org) or visit them at [www.pcd.org](http://www.pcd.org).

## GBC (<http://www.businessfightsaids.org>)

The **Global Business Coalition on HIV/AIDS** is a rapidly-expanding coalition of international businesses dedicated to combating the AIDS epidemic through the business sector's unique skills and expertise.

<http://www.worldbank.org/aids>



## ILO (<http://www.ilo.org>)

The **International Labour Organization** is the UN agency with special responsibility for the world of work. "AIDS has a profound impact on workers and their families, enterprises and national economies. It is a workplace issue and a development challenge."

<http://www.ilo.org/public/english/protection/trav/aids>

web  
sites

These web sites present information related to HIV/AIDS and social justice and they challenge us to think deeply about and take action on many issues. The content, statements or links found within these sites do not necessarily reflect the official position of, or endorsement by, the Christian Reformed World Relief Committee, the Office of Social Justice and Hunger Action or the Christian Reformed Church.