

WE HAVE AIDS

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The title of this newsletter is a little jolting at first. "What are you talking about? I don't have AIDS!" Many of us don't even know someone personally who is infected with HIV or AIDS, even though there are a lot of people suffering with the disease in our neighbourhoods and even in our churches. But if you put yourself in a global context, the reality that "we have AIDS" is overwhelmingly clear.

We—the global community—have 40 million people with AIDS. Even though a large percentage of those living with HIV/AIDS are in other parts of the world, our connections through the Christian Reformed World Relief Committee bring their realities closer to home.

And that is precisely the purpose of this newsletter: to invite you to discover what it is like for those in East Africa and southern Africa who have personal experience of what it means to say "we have AIDS," both individually and in their communities. This edition of *We Have AIDS* is the first in a series of eight that will run from May until World AIDS Day on December 1. The content will vary, including stories, biblical reflections, links from Africa to North American action, and statistics that reveal the scope of the epidemic.

Acknowledging that we have AIDS follows with a willingness to address the problem. This includes confronting sexual practices, and education about other

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CIDA/ACDI PHOTO: PIERRE ST-JACQUES, MALI

COMPASSION IN THE MIDST OF CRISIS

BY STEVE AND SANDI WRAITH

Western Kenya is being devastated by HIV/AIDS. It has the highest rate of infection in Kenya. No one is sure why. Some say it is because of its close proximity to Uganda. Others point to certain cultural practices, such as the communal shaving of heads at funerals, which can spread the virus. Many Kenyans blame the loss of traditional values. One thing we know is that the disease is devastating families and leaving thousands of orphans behind.

ORPHANED BY AIDS: Annette is the oldest child (16) of her father's first wife. Her father contracted AIDS a couple of years ago and, within a short time, had infected his two wives. First Annette's mother died. Then her father's second wife died. Then, finally, her father died leaving all of the children to fend for themselves. Annette's brother, the second oldest at 15, fled the family to look for work in town

leaving Annette alone to care for her younger siblings. Annette's father did have land but he had leased it out in his last days to get money to pay for his medical bills. Now, Annette is landless. It has been difficult for the children to seek help from their relatives because neither of the wives' families want to care for all of the children since some of them belong to the "other wife."

GROWING UP PREMATURELY: An alarming number of teenage girls and boys are forced to grow up quickly as they try to parent their younger siblings. The stress of trying to manage the household with no skills and in dire poverty leads many of these youngsters to simply run away and join the swelling ranks of those roaming the streets of Kenya's cities and towns. The boys beg or steal and the girls often fall into prostitution. Many become addicted to sniffing glue, and the loose life of the streets drives the infection rates of HIV ever higher.

In the midst of this tragedy, there is "huruma:" compassion.

The Huruma Women's Group in Western Kenya is linked to the Christian Reformed World Relief

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Compassion in crisis



CIDA/ACDI PHOTO:
BRUCE PATON, BOTSWANA

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Committee through the Anglican Church of Kenya. Their name reflects their compassionate care of over 200 orphaned children which AIDS has left them. The Huruma women's group has started schools for orphaned children. The women helped Annette establish small income generating projects to help her earn enough to keep food on the table. They also advocate for the return of Annette's family land.

Yet the compassion of the Huruma women is not satisfied with merely caring for the orphans which have remained in the village. Teaming up with other village leaders in pairs and small groups, they conduct regular forays into nearby towns to gather up their teenage orphans who have hit the streets. Like shepherds seeking lost sheep, they pursue their own relentlessly, at times taking them back by force if need be to their village home. Recognizing the desperation that led these young people to flee in the first place, they have enlisted the help of skilled carpenters and tailors who volunteer their time to teach them skills

that can open the door to a better life.

PRODIGAL SONS RETURN HOME: Meet Edwin and Daniel. These two boys lost their parents to AIDS and ran away from their foster homes wishing to get out of the "boring" village life and head for the bright lights of the town. But life in town isn't all it's cracked up to be. Many boys end up working for pathetic wages or even begging on the streets. Their shame is often too great to allow them to come home.

Elders of Huruma (Compassion) ministries learned of Edwin and Daniel's whereabouts and coaxed them off the streets and back home. Ministering to them in spirit as well as in mind and body, the men and women of the Huruma ministry are working to nurture the boys' faith as well as to teach them a livelihood. Thomas Were, a village carpenter, is volunteering his time to apprentice the boys. Western Region Christian Community Services has helped Huruma to mobilize funds to buy additional carpentry tools, so that Thomas Were's ministry can be extended to other village orphans. *Steve and Sandi Wraith live and work in Eldoret, Kenya.*

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ways this disease is transmitted. CRWRC is already engaged at a local level through its new HIV/AIDS program, the vision of which is "to develop and expand a response program with our Christian partners in Africa to facilitate and empower them to respond to HIV/AIDS in efforts aimed at preventing the spread of AIDS, supporting people living with AIDS, and supporting families affected by the disease."

But there are other threads of injustice around HIV/AIDS that go back to North America, such as access to medications and care. There is a Global AIDS Fund that is inadequately funded, patent laws that influence drug availability, and barriers that prevent spending on health infrastructure in developing countries. While each newsletter will highlight a different angle of the HIV/AIDS crisis, the centrality of inadequate access to medications and care affects all of the other aspects and will be the focus of our advocacy response.

Claiming to have AIDS takes a great deal of courage for many infected people. Especially when church and family support may be jeopardized by such an admission. Claiming as the Christian Reformed Church that "we have AIDS" is one way of standing with these individuals and their communities; one way of reaching out to them with the compassion of Christ.

How bad is AIDS in Africa?

These days, it's tough to think about Africa without thinking about HIV/AIDS. So what exactly is the extent of the disease there? How vast and how deep has it affected the women, men and children on that continent?

Consider this:

There are more than **28 million people living with HIV/AIDS in sub-Saharan Africa**. That's equal to the combined population of New York and Michigan. Imagine every single resident of those two states infected with AIDS.



Consider this:

Nearly **20 million people have already died of AIDS in sub-Saharan Africa**. That's the equivalent of two-thirds of the entire population of Canada (30 million).



The following CRWRC staff members, supported by Christian Reformed churches like yours, are working in East Africa and southern Africa.

Kenya:	Anja Buwalda Janet Janz Stephan Lutz & Alicia Zents Francis Muthoka Davis Omanyo Steve & Sandi Wraith	Tanzania:	Dwein Hodgson and Tricia Wind Margaret Njuguna
Malawi:	Larry McAuley	Uganda:	Jim Zylstra Brenda Melles Ida Mutoigo Peter Timmerman
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South Africa:	Lou Haveman		