

Bishops, government partner to get more Brazilians tested for HIV

BRASILIA, Brazil - A new partnership between Brazil's Catholic bishops and the federal Ministry of Health is designed to get more Brazilians into clinics to be tested for HIV, the virus that causes AIDS.

Church and government officials are counting on church volunteers to reach the poorest Brazilians, people usually missed in official government campaigns.

The campaign was launched Oct. 23 in Brasilia under the slogan "Declare Your Love to Yourself." It will mobilize 13,000 church AIDS ministry volunteers to raise awareness about the importance of getting tested for HIV.

AIDS ministry volunteers work in 142 of 272 dioceses in Brazil. Another 260,000 volunteers from the Catholic children's ministry and 80,000 from the health ministry will work on the campaign. The church also will sponsor print, radio and TV ads in the campaign, which will begin in five state capitals before extending across Brazil.

"We want to put our pastoral networks, with their tendrils throughout the country, in the service of life," said Auxiliary Bishop Dimas Lara Barbosa of Rio de Janeiro, general secretary of the Brazilian bishops' conference.

"The church always declared its preferential option for the poor. All who suffer are preferential targets of the church," he added.

According to Brazil's Health Ministry, 60 percent of the Brazilian population has not been tested for HIV, although the tests are free and widely available. Health Minister Jose Gomes Temporao said this is why the partnership with the church is so important.

"This meeting is the meeting of life," he said.

Bishop Eugenie Rixen of Goias, head of the bishops' commission on AIDS, said he believes the church can reach more people than the government can.

“The Ministry of Health knows the church reaches where they can’t reach. We have contact with the underworld of the poorest and most excluded. They are part of our option,” he said.

The idea for the campaign was conceived following a church-sponsored seminar on AIDS prevention in October 2008. The resulting document called attention to the importance of early diagnosis and suggested wider HIV testing.

Early detection followed by treatment is one of the main factors in increasing life expectancy and the quality of life for people living with HIV. Brazilian Health Ministry data show that, between 2003 and 2006, 43.7 percent of people with HIV who sought treatment already had the symptoms of AIDS.

About 630,000 people in Brazil have HIV or AIDS. Officials estimate that 225,000 people have HIV but do not know it.