

Caritas AIDS adviser says faith-based groups need more recognition

PERTH, Australia – Governments are bypassing faith-based organizations that do the bulk of the work with AIDS victims while spending billions of dollars on AIDS relief, said Caritas Internationalis' special adviser to the United Nations on HIV and AIDS.

U.S. Monsignor Robert Vitillo, in Australia to address local Caritas and health care workers, told The Record Catholic newspaper Oct. 26 that governments need to recognize faith-based organizations that are not receiving the funding to carry out their essential work.

He said that, while the Global Fund to Fight AIDS, Tuberculosis and Malaria has committed US\$10 billion to support programs for these diseases over the past two years, only 5 percent of those funds from the international financing institution have gone to faith-based organizations.

"Government agencies often bypass faith-based organizations even though they're doing the bulk of the work," he added.

This is despite the fact that, in Africa, up to 70 percent of health care is delivered by faith-based organizations, he said.

"There's a big difference between the burden of care and the funding for them to be able to give an effective response to HIV," Monsignor Vitillo said.

Caritas Internationalis has 165 member organizations working in 200 territories and countries, and Monsignor Vitillo said that, while sub-Saharan Africa is "still the epicenter of the AIDS pandemic," Caritas is also heavily involved in Asia and some parts of Oceania, especially Papua New Guinea, north of Australia.

Monsignor Vitillo said that when Caritas made HIV and AIDS one of its top action priorities in 1987 it was among the first agencies to do so.

In Geneva, Monsignor Vitillo heads the global Catholic HIV and AIDS network and assists governments and the United Nations in policy development. He also is leading discussions with pharmaceutical companies to lobby for more child-friendly medication.

He urged church-based organizations to respond to HIV in collaboration with programs tackling tuberculosis, because half of AIDS patients - whose immune systems are compromised - die of the infectious bacterial disease that spreads through the air.

Catholic agencies must work in partnership with others, including government agencies with conflicting ideologies, he said, as "no one organization can solve HIV (and) AIDS."

"There may be areas of disagreement, but we need to work on what we agree on, and we hope that funding groups like the Global Fund and governments will recognize better the strong role the church plays in responding to HIV (and) AIDS and will provide funding for an even more effective response," he said.

Monsignor Vitillo said that the response to HIV and AIDS should be within a wider response to ongoing development and health problems, because those who live in poverty have poor nutrition and compromised immune systems that might influence their vulnerability to HIV.

"We can't do women's empowerment programs, for example, without also including men in telling them how to prevent spreading HIV," he said.

Since its creation in 2002, the Global Fund has become the main source of financing for programs to fight AIDS, tuberculosis and malaria, with approved funding of US\$15.6 billion for more than 572 programs in 140 countries.