

Week 3: Reaching out to HIV and AIDS affected communities in South Africa



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Selinah, 62 lives in Mmakau, a rural area sixty kilometres north of Pretoria in South Africa. Five years ago her daughter Monica died from an AIDS related illness. Her husband died of poor health the following year. She is now the primary care-giver for her three grandchildren, Petunia, 16, Rose, 14 and Thabang, 12.

Selinah must cover the nutritional, educational and clothing needs of her four member household on a pension of \$168 a month. She could not apply for child support as according to law, the births of her three grandchildren were not registered and they had no birth certificates. They live in a four room, corrugated iron house where Selinah has established a garden.

South Africa has one of the highest incidences of HIV/AIDS in the world with more than 5.3 million

people estimated to be infected by the disease. In South Africa there are over one million orphans and vulnerable children. These children, deprived of parenting and with fewer role models, are being burdened with adult responsibilities beyond their age and maturity which has serious consequences for the future development of society as a whole.

The girl-child is often expected to leave school to care for a sick parent or younger siblings. She is then vulnerable due to lack of education and is often exploited emotionally, physically and sexually. Due to sheer necessity and desperation many children embark on a 'begging career' while others, particularly girls, engage in prostitution as a means of income for the family.

The productive population of the country has been eroded leading to decreased food production, income generation and nutritional levels.

Poverty due to HIV/AIDS is denuding communities of adult caretakers necessary for the care and protection of children. Even in the most impoverished communities, women, who themselves are extremely poor, reach out to the children of HIV/AIDS affected families with love and care, displaying a sense of generosity that is remarkable. Fortunately there are many volunteers who contribute their time with no reward except the satisfaction of knowing that they are benefiting the community.

Caritas Australia has joined with Siyabhabha Trust (Caritas South Africa) to embark on a large-

scale, community-based HIV/AIDS program to help mitigate the impact of this pandemic. This program is working to build the capacity of community-based organisations to provide practical care and support to individuals, families and communities affected by HIV/AIDS.

In 2000, Siyabhabha Trust talked with the community in Mmakau to discuss their needs. It was decided that 500 volunteers would be trained to provide home-based care to people living with HIV and AIDS, to reduce the levels of poverty faced by HIV-affected households and increase the school attendance rates of children orphaned or made vulnerable by HIV/AIDS.

It has provided training in organic farming, trauma counselling and accessing government grants as well as providing safe drinking water, community housing schemes and exemption from school fees. Since learning to grow vegetables, Selinah has harvested beans, spinach and cabbage.

Siyabhabha Trust have built a room with corrugated iron from which they run activities including cooking, sewing, knitting and helping children with their school homework. Seventy-eight orphans and 20 families have been assisted by this activity.

Selinah's grandchildren, Thabang and Rose, now attend school and participate in activities after school, during weekends and holidays. "This project has brought life to my house," Selinah said.

Your donation to Project Compassion will ensure this support for people living with HIV and AIDS continues.