

Three way partnership aims to Improve health care in Africa

By Linda Green

MEMPHIS, Tenn. (UMNS) - Two United Methodist-related entities and a research hospital have entered a partnership to advance health care in Africa by training medical providers to respond more effectively to infectious diseases.

Africa University, Methodist Healthcare of Memphis and St. Jude Children's Research Hospital in Memphis have engaged in a partnership to equip health care professionals from Zimbabwe to deal with HIV/AIDS. The partnership is helping health care providers address the pandemic through education, prevention, treatment and infection control in their communities. Though the partnership is 3 years old, officials discussed it for the first time in recent interviews with United Methodist News Service.

The partnership provides a way for Africa University to do outreach and expand the church's ministry as well as change health care across Zimbabwe, said James Salley, associate vice chancellor of development at the United Methodist-related school.

"My dream is that United Methodists would see this joint ministry and their investment in Africa University as a good thing because of the human good now being done and the potential it has for the future," he said.

The school's new Faculty of Health Sciences will assist Methodist Healthcare and St. Jude in developing the program. The Medical Center of the University of Kentucky is also providing assistance.

The three-way partnership began with a conversation in 1999 between Methodist Healthcare Chaplain Elvernice "Sonny" Davis and Dr. Raul Ribeiro, director of St. Jude's International Outreach Program, about AIDS in Africa. As a United Methodist minister, Davis knew about Africa University and thought it could be the avenue for helping stem the pandemic in Africa.

Further talks focused on Africa University becoming the site of distance-learning opportunities for health care programs and St. Jude providing on-site training. The conversation paved the way for a study trip of health care professionals from Methodist Healthcare and St. Jude to Africa. The doctors and nurses observed the quality of facilities and staff, and the high rate of patient death and illness resulting from HIV/AIDS in Zimbabwe.

Each day across the African continent, nearly 7,000 people die from HIV/AIDS. In many parts of Africa, the health care system is so poor that, instead of being a tool for treatment, it actually becomes a transmission agent - through the re-use of needles - in spreading the virus. Globally, AIDS is the leading infectious cause of death. An estimated 42 million people worldwide - including 3.2 million children under age 15 - are living with



UMNS photo by Mike DuBose

United Methodist-related Africa University in Mutare, Zimbabwe, serves 1,283 students.

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Between January 2001 and October 2003, Dr. Miguela A. Caniza, director of Infectious Diseases in St. Jude's International Outreach Program, hosted 10 fellows from the university and Mutare, including four nurses and four physicians who trained for two months at St. Jude in HIV/AIDS education, prevention and treatment, and infection control.

One participant was Dr. Tendai Manyeza, the doctor at Africa University and Mutare Mission. The training gave him and the other health care providers up-to-date information and practical knowledge about HIV/AIDS, Caniza said.

"The ultimate goal is to improve the survival

(rate) or prevent AIDS in places where it is so prevalent," she said. One day, she said, she hopes that trials of a proposed vaccine will be conducted from Africa University.

"The university is a good partner because of its location, its mission, its resources and its environment," she said. "Africa University just fit beautifully into what we are doing here at St. Jude and what they are doing over there."

The university's Faculty of Health Sciences is identifying key people for training and helping determine how St. Jude can best be the conduit for that.

"Africa University is significant because of its relationship with the local community," Caniza said. One hope is that the university would become a referral center for other countries, so that people could go there to learn about HIV/AIDS instead of traveling to St. Jude.

"The school's mission of educating leaders is critical to St. Jude and Methodist Healthcare's international outreach efforts," Caniza said. HIV/AIDS is rampant in part because of the lack of education among lay people and health care providers. That, she said, produces a stigma of isolation and discrimination of people with HIV/AIDS and other infectious diseases.

"Africa University is the key for education ... and in the health science center, this is what they are going to be doing - training and producing health care professionals," she said. St. Jude and Methodist Healthcare would not be providing training to beginners or "from scratch. We are going to complement their education in providing information in HIV/AIDS," she said.

One way to do that will be through distance education, which Caniza says is "becoming an incredible tool in the age of globalization." St. Jude already uses this approach to provide educational opportunities electronically in other countries. Through a format such as video conferencing, the hospital can deliver lectures, lessons, presentations and diagnosis assistance.

The hospital uses Cure4Kids, an international online medical education and collaboration network that helps health care professionals in countries with limited resources treat children with infectious and catastrophic diseases.

Along with lack of resources, isolation is a problem for physicians in poor countries, according to Dr. Judith Wilimas, a director in the international outreach program. "One of the things we can easily provide them is the help and support ... which allows them to go on with their program." ■

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