

How Changing Behaviour Can Control a Killer

An Interview with Sr. Miriam Duggan published in *The Catholic Weekly* in Sydney, Australia on 2nd October 2005

IRISH missionary Sr Miriam Duggan knows more than most people what devastation AIDS can wreak on a community.

As the superintendent of the Kampala hospital in Uganda Sr Miriam found herself in the front line of a losing battle against the killer disease when in 1987 the first cases were diagnosed and a “culture of death” began overwhelming the people of the African nation.

Yet by 2002 she could report that the AIDS rate had fallen from a high of 28.9 per cent to 9.8 per cent according to United Nation figures.

That and her 30 years as a missionary in Africa have led to her being dubbed the “Mother Teresa of Africa” – a name she feels uncomfortable with.

By finding out that negative peer pressure is the wood on the fire kindling the AIDS pandemic in Africa, Sr Miriam, also a gynaecologist, was able to work out a successful way of stemming the spread of disease – change the peer pressure network.

“Many times when I speak to young people I ask them, where do they get their sex education from, and they say from TV, magazines and friends, and where do the friends get it? From TV, magazines and friends,” she said during a visit to Sydney last week.

“But I think the Church and the school need to play an important role in giving value based sex education to young people.” Speaking at a Youth Gathering at Seminary of the Good Shepherd, Sr. Miriam shared how she has lifted the hopes of the Ugandans by giving them a way and a place to be affirmed for making responsible choices.

Uganda is the first country to see a change that has led to a dramatic drop in the prevalence rate of HIV/AIDS since it was first being diagnosed in the 1980s.

According to 2004 UNAIDS/WHO report, the prevalence of AIDS in ante-natal clinics has dropped from 30 per cent in urban areas in 1991 down to 7 per cent in 2000.

Back in 1987 when AIDS was first being diagnosed, there were so many patients, the hospital couldn't cope.

After setting up home-based care programs, to make room to admit patients with acute illness, Sr Miriam said she noticed a need to look for reasons as to why the disease was so prevalent.

“It often struck me as I heard story after story of people who were sick and dying and young people whose dreams were shattered, that this disease is preventable – it shouldn't be just allowing it to spread because for any other disease we'd be looking at that infection,” she said.

This led her to start awareness programs, but the disease didn't seem to be abating.

In 1991, at an AIDS conference in Dakar, 50 people from different Christian denominations from different African nations met and discussed what could be some possible solutions to the problem.

“A lot of organisations were saying that the only answer was to give people the condom but we really felt that a lot of people could change their behaviours and attitudes and that we needed to call forth that and to support it,” she said.

Instead, Sr Miriam and her fellow missionaries set out to promote a behaviour change program written by Sr Kay Lawler called “Education for Life – a Behaviour Change Process.”

This involved inviting them to come to three or five-day sessions working with groups of 14–18- year-olds, 18– 25- year-olds and 25 upwards where they talked and worked through the issues.

Stage one of the program involved getting the participants to “look at the reality around them” as well as relationships and drinking habits.

After discussing sex and sexuality and what the best answer is, at the end of that stage, they are shown the mortality statistics on Uganda and are asked to look 15 years into the future.

“We get them to look at [the scenario of] if we continue in that present behaviour where will we be in 15 years’ time when maybe they are the leaders of the country,” she said.

“And they are asked what if people go on dying, people go on getting sick – the country’s just going to get devastated.”

Stage two is looking at alternative behaviours – abstinence before marriage and faithfulness with in it.

“What if people decide to wait until marriage to have sex or if people decide to be faithful with in marriage, is it possible? What will their friends say? Will they be able to remain friends? Will it be possible to stand against the negative peer pressure?” she asks.

Stage three is the action stage whereby participants in the group choose appropriate behaviour and commit themselves to it.

The belief behind Sr Miriam’s promotion of this behaviour change process is that individuals recognise that not only they need to change, but that they can change, and they can call on the Holy Spirit to help them.

As well as the statistical results in a decline in the AIDS rate over the last 10 years, the young people were coming back – saying they needed more help because the peer pressure was too negative – they needed to belong to something.

So Sr Duggan started “Youth Alive” Clubs – positive peer groups offering sports, musical festivals and drama as well as ongoing support and education for young people making positive life choices.

“We have these clubs where we give ongoing education around drugs, alcohol, self-esteem and honesty – all these things that will build them up in integrity, and help them to know how to make responsible choices.”

Fortunately, the Ugandan President Yoweri Museveni and his wife are on side, and have also been promoting faithfulness and abstinence. The government promotes the ABC method (Abstinence, Be faithful to one partner, and, if necessary, Condoms). The Catholic approach includes using the “C” for Character formation.

As well as offering these programs, Sr Miriam also encourages a “Gospel response” of reaching out in love and care to those suffering with the disease and their families.

“I have seen hundreds of people come back to God after getting the sickness, and even mothers becoming Christians, through witnessing God’s love and mercy in their sickness, and one young man said words I’ll never forget – ‘I had to get this disease to find my God’.”

Sr Duggan was only 19 when she decided it was her calling to be a nun, but now realises she knew all along that this was her vocation.

“I suppose that as I grew up I did think that maybe one day I would, but then Africa began to appeal to me and I was reading about people in Africa needing help and I saw a film one time [More than I Can – a film produced by the Franciscan sisters] which showed a lot of real need, especially medical and educational need among people in Africa where the Franciscan sisters worked so I decided to join them and go out there and work.”

Now the Congregational Leader of the Franciscan Missionary Sisters of Africa, and based in Ireland, the work of Sr Duggan is spreading across Africa with 11 other countries taking on the promotion of abstinence and faithfulness, including, Kenya, Zambia, Zimbabwe and South Africa.

“I think what you have to look at is condom promotion is only risk reduction. Teaching abstinence and faithfulness is risk avoidance.

“And I think we need the risk avoidance not just risk reduction,” she said.