



Presbyterian Mission
World Mission

Responding globally to the HIV/AIDS epidemic

By Ann Jones

First Presbyterian Church in Columbus, Indiana

HIV/AIDS remains one of the world's greatest injustices. After more than three decades, there are now signs of hope that the faith community is hearing the clarion call of God to recognize that many members of the body of Christ have HIV and AIDS. The General Assembly (GA) of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) first responded in 1983 to recognize the worldwide pandemic and invest time and staff. However, our church's commitment has recently waned as there is little staff support at the national level. The Presbyterian AIDS Network still exists and there are overtures brought before GA nearly every year it's held. *Becoming an HIV and AIDS Competent Church* is a publication created as an outcome of the 219th General Assembly (2010).

My congregation, First Presbyterian Church in Columbus, Indiana, and others like it have remained steadfast in their witness to prayerful support, education, advocacy and action. This stems from a trip I made to South Africa and Zambia in 2005. The trip was in solidarity with women of Africa who were both victims and caregivers of those suffering from HIV and AIDS. There were no medications and very few resources. I visited homes, hospitals and hospices. People were dying very painful deaths, wasting away. It appeared that the grandmothers were caring for children orphaned by AIDS, having lost their own children and often a spouse to the illness. The misinformation and stigma were global, but grandmothers were the glue holding the continent together.

As I visited over three continuous years, the epidemic grew to a pandemic. The disease was ferocious. The trips reflected whole systems of imbedded racism and gender inequality. How could millions of people (25 million at that time) be dying with the full knowledge of the United Nations, the U.S. government and many others issuing forth such a tepid response?

What makes people expendable? How does one conquer such passivity? How does one make sense of such passivity when surrounded by such carnage?

I came home calling on my congregation for support and providing educational presentations. After some adult nurture programs, the congregation responded. Our presbytery increased advocacy by having an AIDS-related service for all represented churches. At the national level, we used the staff delegated for HIV and AIDS to develop our local education and resources. I joined Presbyterian AIDS Network (PAN) and eventually became co-facilitator. In 2006, our church submitted an overture in order to gain more regular financial support



**Mission Toolkit:
HIV/AIDS**

Responding globally to the HIV/AIDS epidemic



from the national church. AIDS as a line item was morphed into the Peace and Global Witness Offering, which encourages churches to designate their 25 percent (proportional amount of giving) to AIDS-related service. Our church has held to this recommendation each year, giving their portion to a community-based pediatric AIDS program in Zambia, directed by a friend of mine.

In 2008, with the help of my church's support in membership and money, I established The Granny Connection — a growing group of women whose hearts were touched because they knew firsthand of grandmotherly love and grandmotherly challenges. The membership eventually spread communitywide and became more of a movement, sending help to our unknown sisters across the globe. The beneficiary is the pediatric AIDS program in Zambia — the Power of Love Foundation. They have served more than 700 HIV-positive children directly and an additional 4,900 indirectly. In addition, there are currently 372 women in the microloan program. Our social justice committee and mission committee financially help support the program yearly. HIV and AIDS has been one of four priorities of our social justice committee. We recognize that issues of poverty, hunger and housing as well as health care form the backdrop for discussion. The active Granny Connection group, spearheaded by our church, has sent \$130,500 to the Power of Love Foundation since 2008.

Each year our church recognizes Presbyterian AIDS Awareness Day, which has been associated with World AIDS Day, Dec. 1. We emphasize HIV and AIDS within our liturgy and usually have a related adult education program. This emphasis leads to advocacy and action. Within the past year, Indiana had a major outbreak of HIV within two counties. The Granny Connection sent financial support. In addition, our church is taking action within our community regarding the opioid epidemic, which increases the vulnerability to HIV.

New methods of prevention and treatment have been discovered yet we understand that a truly comprehensive approach to the root causes and social determinants of HIV requires political will, moral commitment, perseverance and the faith in our conviction that all are made in the image of God.

"I am grateful to Presbyterians in general and my local church in particular for their witness to AIDS injustices. We have broken the silence in our community and have compassion and understanding for greater prevention, treatment and care."

— Ann Jones