HIV/AIDS: Staying vigilant

December 1 is World AIDS Day

From the National Episcopal AIDS Coalition

Our church, the Episcopal Church, along with our country, and the rest of the world still has AIDS. In the US there are now more than 1 million people living with HIV. More than 450,000 people have died from complications from AIDS in the U.S. More than 40,000 new infections are occurring in the U.S. each year. Of these, approximately 50% occur among young people aged 25 years and younger. HIV/AIDS is not only a health issue but also a social justice issue because of the social stigma still attached to the disease in the minds of many.

Internationally, HIV infections have now surpassed 40 million; more than 25 million have died; and AIDS is one of the leading causes of death among people aged 15 to 59. Through the work of The National Episcopal AIDS Coalition, Episcopal Relief and Development, and countless parish-based outreach programs, the Episcopal Church is proclaiming our awareness of this reality and responding to it in ways that are rooted in the Gospel virtues of faith, hope, and love.

What Is at Stake: Out of Sight, Out of Mind

Through the past decade, substantial progress has been made in the treatment of HIV, resulting in a decrease of the mortality rate due to AIDS, particularly in the United States. This is most welcome news. Its unintended consequence, however, has been unjustified complacency. Media attention on the issue has dropped precipitously, particularly with regard to HIV in the U.S. Public awareness of and discussion about HIV and AIDS have diminished. People living with and/or affected by HIV disease in the U.S. have become largely invisible, and the sense of urgency around the issue has dissipated nearly entirely. To the extent that Americans today are mindful at all of the disease and its ramifications, they tend to see it as an international issue – one that is far away from home – and thus, while perhaps important, not immediately so.

But, HIV and AIDS are still with us in the United States. In fact, new infection rates are going up again, particularly among young people. The epidemic, with all its implications, remains unresolved and, by some measures, is getting worse. AIDS has not gone away – just our focus on it.

Our Work: Telling the Story – Until It’s mvHeard

In view of the current state of the epidemic and the disengagement on the part of many from it, the work we have been given to do is quite simple (not easy but simple): tell the story – until it is heard, until there is a response. The church is an advocate, in essence. Our aim is to make people aware that the problem of HIV/AIDS is still with us and still critical, touching people whom we know and love and respect in our local churches and communities. Our further aim is to encourage renewed commitment to involvement in HIV-related ministries, in response to God’s call to us to love mercy and seek justice.

This is work that must be done on several levels and in a variety of ways in order to be most fully effective. And so we raise our voices in gatherings ranging from parish forums to national conventions and we seek to promote responses as varied as individual pastoral care, collective political advocacy, and worship services and spirituality resources that
In the early days of the epidemic, when death rates were haunting so many of our churches, Episcopalians were commended for their early and compassionate response. The founding of The National Episcopal AIDS Coalition in 1988, and the many General Convention resolutions calling our church and our government to respond to the HIV/AIDS pandemic, are living testimony to our church’s care and concern for those infected and affected. When the history of HIV and AIDS is at last written, we must make sure that the ministry of our Church in this area did not wane but stayed strong and vital until all those living with and affected could themselves stand strong.

The Circle of Concern: Wide Open

In some respects, HIV is not like other diseases. For a variety of reasons, there is often a social stigma that afflicts those who are infected with HIV, putting even more strain on their already compromised physical health. Religious biases too have had a tragic impact on how people are treated and, consequently, even how they treat themselves. It is not only to those called to healing ministries, then, that our Church issues its call but also to everyone for whom it matters when justice is denied or dignity assaulted or compassion withheld. It is a call to everyone who loves mercy and seeks justice and desires to walk humbly along a path that people of faith regard as the path to God.

More on the National Episcopal AIDS Coalition is online at: http://www.neac.org

‘One Sunday’ targets MDGs

By Alexander D. Baumgarten

“If anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: Everything old has passed away; see everything has become new!”

– 2 Corinthians 5:17

Today, the Episcopal Church and other faith communities in the United States celebrate ONE Sunday, a day for prayer and action on behalf of the Millennium Development Goals. The MDGs are a series of eight commitments by the U.S. and other governments to end the global poverty that kills one of God’s people every three seconds of every day in the world. (To learn more, visit www.episcopalchurch.org/ONE). The celebration of ONE Sunday began last year in the Episcopal Church, and has now been adopted by other faith communities around the U.S. who are part of ONE: The Campaign to Make Poverty History.

The ONE Campaign is a movement of more than 2.5 million Americans working to see that the U.S. government keeps its commitments to fighting global poverty. Citizen advocacy to governments is essential to achieving the MDGs. If you’re not a member of ONE – and the Episcopal Church’s partnership with ONE called “ONE Episcopalian” – today is a good day to join. On the website above, you’ll find helpful resources for you and your congregation on ONE Sunday, and ways to carry forward your action throughout the year.

What would be accomplished if the United States government kept its commitment to the MDGs? It would prevent 10 million children from becoming AIDS orphans; put 104 million children in grade school; provide safe drinking water to 900 million people around the world; and save 6.5 million children from death before their fifth birthdays.

That would be a world that looks a lot more like God’s will for it. That would be a foretaste of the New Creation