

The medicines may be getting better, but there is still stigma surrounding HIV. A resource is being launched that breaks down myths and misunderstanding and will be a pastoral support for Christians living with HIV / **By VICKY COSSTICK**

Positive thinking

IT WAS THIRTY years ago, in 1987, that the Church in England and Wales was shocked into recognising the devastating pastoral reality and profound theological implications of the HIV/Aids pandemic.

The next few years were an uncomfortable period of learning, but also saw the Church at its best. HIV rarely makes the headlines these days, and the widespread availability of anti-retroviral drugs means it is no longer an inevitable death sentence. But it hasn't gone away.

There are some 104,000 people living with HIV in the UK. About half are gay men, and a third black African, of whom two thirds are women. An estimated 3,000 gay men contract the virus annually. Stigma, fear, discrimination and ignorance still prevent people from coming forward for testing, and late diagnosis reduces the effectiveness of ARVs.

HIV diagnosis, says Vincent Manning, chair of Catholics for Aids Prevention & Support (Caps), the only UK organisation specifically serving Christians with HIV, remains a "traumatising and life-changing experience, which challenges faith".

Next Wednesday, Positive Faith, a new range of innovative website and video resources produced by Caps and designed for churches, pastors and Christians living with HIV, will be launched at Romero House in Lambeth, hosted by the Catholic Archbishop of Southwark, Peter Smith, and his Anglican counterpart, Bishop Christopher Chessun. Timothy Radcliffe, former Master of the Dominicans, will give the address.

CAPS OFFERS spiritual and psychological support through ecumenical, mixed and inclusive groups of black Africans, gay men, refugees and former asylum seekers. "Our starting point", says Manning, "is our common baptism – in Christ there is neither male nor female, slave nor free – we recognise the different pastoral needs of, for example, gay men and African mothers, and our model embraces diversity – people can care for and learn from each other. Prejudice and fear of the other cannot survive personal encounter."

Funded by Public Health England, Positive Faith includes 25 videos made by filmmaker Kip Loades over the last year, based on interviews with 15 Christians, including ministers



and people living with the virus. Moving and powerful, most participants were willing to appear on camera, foregoing their anonymity. As well as lively discussion material for congregations and small groups, the videos tell the stories of Christians living with HIV. But perhaps most importantly, it is hoped that they will be a lifeline to people who have just have been diagnosed. Participants speak directly to camera, describing their own experiences of living with HIV. Their stories offer hope, comfort and reassurance.

"The medicines are getting better," says Anglican priest Revd Ije Ajibade, "but people are still living with the stigma." She hopes that Positive Faith will encourage the Churches to break down myths and misunderstandings.

GRAEME CALE, diagnosed in 1985 and who lost thirty-two friends to Aids in the following decade, agrees. "It's all about education, education, education," he says. "There is ignorance and fear, and being in the videos enabled me to get the message out that I am a normal person like everyone else." Brought up a Baptist, after periods of non-churchgoing, Graeme has found a gay-friendly Anglican church with a woman priest where he feels at home.

HIV remains a global and political issue, says Horcelie Sinda Wa Mbongo, who was born HIV positive in the Democratic Republic of Congo, where there is still little health care and no medication for people with the virus. Horcelie has a degree in fine art, is a winner of Miss Congo UK and has been campaigning for the last year with Youth Stop Aids.

For some Christians in her community, she says, being born with HIV can be a particularly difficult challenge. "They could be asking why God would allow this to happen," she says; as a result "they might have mental health issues and depression". Horcelie was happy to appear in Positive Faith to encourage and give hope to Christians and others who are HIV positive.

IN THE HEALTH service, there has been a growing understanding of the role of faith in the way people manage their illness. In 2016 Public Health England gave a total of £600,000 in grants to thirteen HIV agencies; Caps is the only faith-based organisation amongst them. In Hertfordshire, which has a high proportion of black Africans with HIV, and a higher than average incidence of late diagnosis, Caps works with local charity Hertsaid, which has sought innovative ways to reach people in faith communities.

"We hear horrendous stories of self-healing through prayer and of congregations being told there is no need to take medication", says Hertsaid director Suzanne Bannister. Twenty local pastors were trained in HIV awareness; Positive Faith resources will now be there for them to use to open up discussion with their congregations.

In Lambeth, Lewisham and Southwark, which have the highest numbers of people with HIV in the country, Rosie Burrridge is one of the five-member clinical nurse specialist team which reaches out to the 5 per cent with HIV who for a range of reasons don't take their ARVs.

She has referred people to Caps and attended a meeting at which the videos were piloted. "There are a proportion of people who are attending church and living with the fear of being found out. They may move from church to church, and it is so important for them to know there are churches where they will be welcomed."

As Ije Ajibade said during a talk in Southwark Cathedral: "Christians need to remember that it is not an HIV-negative church reaching out to HIV-positive outsiders. It is their church that is HIV-positive; that the Church is living with HIV."

For more information see the CAPS website, www.caps-uk.org

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