

**‘A WALK FOR AFRICA’:
COMBATING THE DEMON OF HIV/AIDS IN AN
AFRICAN PENTECOSTAL CHURCH – THE CASE OF
THE REDEEMED CHRISTIAN CHURCH OF GOD¹**

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Abstract

The HIV/Aids pandemic is one crisis that has catapulted the African continent into global limelight, particularly in the last decade. In spite of the common rhetoric whipped by the international community, prevention and impact mitigation responses have been largely hypocritical, half-hearted and grossly inadequate. The scourge seems to have defied any discernible medical, therapeutic and curative measures, thus leaving it to gradually erode the fabric of these societies. Religious groups have been largely affected, especially as youth, the highest HIV/Aids risk-group, swell their membership. This shapes the responses of religious groups and poses a crucial challenge to their beliefs, ritual practices and worldviews. Using the example of the Redeemed Christian Church of God in Nigeria and Diaspora, this article demonstrates the various mechanisms employed to combat the epidemic. The RCCG conceptualization of disease and healing is central in understanding these responses and measures in combating HIV/Aids.

Key Concepts: Pentecostal theology, HIV/Aids

Introduction

The Human Immunodeficiency Virus/Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome (HIV/Aids) pandemic is one crisis that has catapulted the African continent into global limelight, particularly during the last decade. The epidemic has been acknowledged as the foremost development issue facing many African countries and the foremost threat to the survival of its teeming population (The World Bank, 2000). Although talks about Aids form a common rhetoric in the global community, not sufficient attention and collective attempts have been made towards ameliorating this cankerworm. Susan Hunter's *Black Death: Aids in Africa* (2003) successfully weaves together the history of colonialism in Africa and demonstrates how a history of the exploitation of developing nations by the West is directly responsible for the spread of disease in developing nations and the Aids pandemic in Africa. Her striking example of the reluctance of drug companies to provide cheap and affordable

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medication and vaccines in poor countries is a case in point. Tony Barnett & Alan Whiteside (2002) aptly argue in *Aids in the Twenty-First Century: Disease and Globalization* that both prevention and impact mitigation responses have been half-hearted and inadequate. In dealing with the social and economic impacts of HIV/Aids, they link its growth to national and global inequalities. (Cf. Alexander Irwin, Joyce Millen and Dorothy Fallows 2003; and Douglas Webb 1997).

To date, the scourge has defied medical, therapeutic and curative measures, thus leaving it to gradually erode the fabric of these societies. Most efforts at containing the plague have largely been prophylactic rather than therapeutic in their approach. Available evidence lends credence to its prevalence in some African countries instead of in others. The demographic impact of HIV/Aids has led to social disruption, a systematic slump in growth rates, reduction in life expectancy, and modification of population structures. It has an adverse impact on fertility, mortality patterns and alters the nature and composition of families. Although the risks of contracting HIV are especially high for the youth, its impact extends and cuts across all echelons of society irrespective of age, gender, class or religion. While the respective national governments, non-governmental organizations, international bodies and agencies have adopted measures towards mitigating the impact of the disease, the role and impact of religious groups has not been very conspicuous (cf. Mankekolo Mahlangu-Ngcobo 2001). Even where there are instances where religious traditions in Africa have addressed the crisis from their own points of view, such dimensions do not yet seem to attract the gaze of scholars and researchers. Rather, the focus of scholars, researchers, analysts and activists has been on the activities of international agencies, national and foreign governments to the neglect of other local imprints. My current research on new religious communities in Africa and in the Diaspora reveals some of the mechanisms used by churches to address the scourge and its victims.

Based on recent field experience, this article seeks to show whether, how and to what extent African new religious movements such as the African-led Pentecostal churches join in combating HIV/Aids. Youth swell the numbers of these churches in the contemporary period. HIV/Aids poses a crucial challenge to their beliefs, ritual practices and worldviews. Using the example of the Redeemed Christian Church of God (RCCG) in Nigeria and Diaspora (Europe and North America), this contribution demonstrates the various ways through which the church has attempted to contextualize and cope with the epidemic.

The Redeemed Christian Church of God: A Brief History

The RCCG is a typical example of an indigenous African Pentecostal/charismatic church, which has spread globally from Nigeria to about 60 countries with over two million members, scattered within Africa, America, Europe, Asia, Australia, the Middle East and other parts of the world. The RCCG was founded in Lagos (Nigeria) in 1952 by Pa Josiah Akindayomi, following a divine call to a special mission. Pa Akindayomi became popular for his charismatic qualities and healing activities, although the church he founded did not witness any large scale spread under his tutelage. Most parishes (branches) were limited to Western Nigeria with only a few in Eastern and Northern Nigeria. The leadership succession by Enoch Adejare Adeboye, a former University Professor of Applied Mathematics – Hydrodynamics, as the General Overseer in 1980 transformed the stature of RCCG and launched her onto global religious maps.² Through Adeboye's charismatic

² Some existing literature on RCCG in Nigeria includes Ruth Marshall, "Pentecostalism in Southern Nigeria: An Overview". In Paul Gifford, ed. *New Dimensions in African Christianity*, Ibadan: Sefer Publications, 1992.

qualities, healing activities coupled with modernization processes, the church has sustained considerable organizational and numerical growth, and geo-ethnic spread within Nigeria and beyond. It is believed to be the fastest growing and one of the most popular Pentecostal churches in Nigeria today. RCCG history on the official website records that:

Since 1981, an open explosion began with the number of parishes growing in leaps and bounds. At the last count, there are at least about 2000 parishes of the Redeemed Christian Church of God in Nigeria. On the International scene, the church is present in other African nations including Cote D'Ivoire, Ghana, Zambia, Malawi, Zaire, Tanzania, Kenya, Uganda, Gambia, Cameroon, and South Africa. In Europe the church is spread in England, Germany, and France. In the United States there are parishes in Dallas, Tallahassee, Houston, New York, Washington, and Chicago and also in the Caribbean states of Haiti and Jamaica.³

Current information gleaned from the RCCG website parish directory even suggests an under-representation of her geographical spread. The church presents a conservative estimate of over 5 000 parishes with a large membership in several other countries across the globe.⁴

RCCG parishes worldwide are organizationally structured into "areas", with each "area" subdivided into "zones" for administrative exigencies. Each zone made up of several parishes is assigned a coordinator.⁵ For instance, the RCCG North America area comprising the USA, Canada and the Caribbean Islands is divided into ten zones. At the RCCGNA Annual Convention held in Dallas (Texas) in 2003, over 120 parishes were listed.⁶ The first RCCG parish in the USA was founded in 1992 in Detroit, Michigan. From 1994 onwards, new parishes sprang up in Florida, Texas, Massachusetts and other states in the USA. The desire and enthusiasm towards establishing parishes in North America is not unconnected with the vision and goals of members as expressed in RCCG "Mission Statement":

It is our goal to make heaven. It is our goal to take as many people as possible with us. In order to accomplish our goals, holiness will be our lifestyle. In order to take as many people with us as possible, we will plant churches within five minutes walking distance in every city and town of developing countries; and within five minutes driving distance in every city and town of developed countries. We will pursue these objectives until every nation in the world is reached for Jesus Christ our Lord.⁷

In the case of RCCGNA, this statement took on a qualifying addendum in view of demographic peculiarity in the North American region. It also exemplifies how and to what

pp. 7-32; Ruth Marshall-Fratani, "Mediating the Global and Local in Nigerian Pentecostalism", *Journal of Religion in Africa*, XXVIII/3, 278-315; and some unpublished theses: Moses Adekola, *The Redeemed Christian Church of God: A study of an Indigenous Pentecostal Church in Nigeria*, PhD Thesis, Department of Religious Studies, Obafemi Awolowo University, Ile-Ife, 1989; and Asonzeh Ukah, *The Redeemed Christian Church of God, Nigeria: Local Identities and Global Processes in African Pentecostalism*. PhD Thesis, Kulturwissenschaftliche Fakultät, Universität Bayreuth, 2003.

³ See RCCG History, available at: http://main.rccg.org/church_ministry/church_history_main.htm

⁴ See "A Brief History of the Redeemed Christian Church of God", *Sunday School Manual, The Redeemed Christian Church of God*, 2002/2003 Edition, p. 127. A conservative list of parishes worldwide is available at the RCCG Internet Outreach: http://main.rccg.org/parish_directory/parish_directory_main.htm. This list is incomplete. There are several existing parishes that are yet to be included in the directory.

⁵ The Zonal Coordinator heads a local parish but also performs special functions in issues of doctrine, protocol, finance, legal and immigration matters, special programs and projects etc. See details in *The Structure, Administration and Finance of the Redeemed Christian Church in North America*, Dallas: RCCGNA Headquarters, 2003.

⁶ "The Latter Rain" 7th Annual RCCG North American Convention Program, Dallas, June 2003.

⁷ See the official website of the RCCG: <http://www.rccg.org> created and maintained by the RCCG Internet Project, Houston Texas, USA.

extent contextual factors can shape the growth of a religious movement and serve as a dynamic of change in a new context. For planting new parishes in North America and Caribbean countries, the location to any existing parish must be at least 30 minutes driving distance. "We believe in positioning our worship centres close to the people hence in North America we are challenged to establish parishes in every State, County, City and in fact within 30 minutes driving distance."⁸ Samuel Shorimade expressed the significance of evangelism in the RCCGNA, "The United States was often described in some circles as God's own country, but this country has become very slack morally and spiritually. So God is making us (RCCG) bring worship and praise to them (US) as well as in rediscovering God."⁹

The Demon of HIV/Aids: Theotherapy and Warfare Motif

One basic feature that reveals an affinity and continuity between African Pentecostal and Yoruba indigenous cosmologies is the belief in indiscernible spiritual forces. Linked to this is the tenacity with which ritual enactments take place. We would argue that indigenous religious epistemology makes sense in African Pentecostal ritual sensibilities. There is an observable resilience in the principles lying behind the concept of spiritual power, the belief in the reality of and ritual attitude towards the supersensible powers. Members believe that the physical world is populated by a multiplicity of incorporeal entities. However, a remarkable change is in the constitution of this spiritual repertoire, as well as the agency and strategies through which ritual enactments are authenticated. Basically, African Pentecostals share a similar mentality in their tradition of belief, employing an indigenous hermeneutic of spiritual power, but casting it within new conceptual frames of reference. The bedrock of the Pentecostal belief system is the pre-eminence of benevolent powers – God, Jesus Christ, and the Holy Spirit. Within an indigenous religious worldview, the benevolent powers (the Supreme Being, Divinities, and Ancestors) are propitiated through divination and sacrifice in order to ward off malevolent forces. Through elaborate rituals, they seek benevolent power and favour. This tendency has continued in the Pentecostal churches although the medium and object has changed. The benevolent powers of the indigenous worldview become translated as malevolent forces in the new Pentecostal rhetoric. They argue that the Bible clearly portrays human life as lived in a context of continual warfare between the kingdom of God and the kingdom of Satan. The appropriation of metaphoric language and imagery of warfare is significantly present in the Bible, pointing to the expediency and urgency for warfare on the part of God's forces to defeat the enemy – Satan and his demonic forces.

In a metaphorical way, the RCCG refers to HIV/Aids as a demonic spirit and those afflicted by the illness as victims of a spiritual demonic attack. Their conceptualization of disease and healing is quintessential in grasping the combined strategies adopted in coping with HIV/Aids. Such understandings of disease and healing must be located within the wider realms of personhood, society, life and thought. Healing takes on a holistic trend bordering on the physical, psychological, spiritual, mental, emotional and material dimensions. The interplay of the social context becomes significant in this case. Faith healing

⁸ See "Addendum – Our Poise", *The Redeemed Christian Church of God, North America and Caribbean Statement of Fundamental Truths*, a publication of RCCGNA, n.d. p. 39-40.

⁹ Personal Interview with Pastor Dr Samuel Shorimade at the RCCG Cornerstone Worship Centre for All Nations parish, Cambridge, Massachusetts, on 23 November 2003. Pastor Shorimade is the founder and current pastor of the parish.

becomes a highly attractive alternative source of health. RCCG offers spiritual power to overcome and heal the maladies of poverty. Banners, personal testimonies, sermons, hymns, and gifts of the Spirit give testament to the centrality of power in their spiritual discourse and praxis. This has led to the personification of certain illnesses as the outright manifestation of Satan, the devil, or the demons or in fact their replicas. There are frequent references to the demons of diseases, illness, HIV/Aids, barrenness, death, doubt, adultery, poverty, lying, drunkenness, etc. Adeboye writes:

Everyone has enemies. The enemy can be sickness, sorrow, failure, poverty, death, other people or whatever is warring against you. The enemy tries to put the cuffs on you and rob you of the joyful life God has intended for all His children to live ... Money is a defence. I pity those who say they don't want to hear about prosperity. I pity anybody who talks about nothing but prosperity. I pity anyone who preaches everything but prosperity. I am going to prosper. Poverty is a terrible thing. Your prayer should be that poverty should be a stranger to you.¹⁰

The paraphernalia of the devil has become enlarged to include anything that poses a roadblock to the attainment of good health and wealth. This lends credence to the multiple understanding and translations of poverty. It is also against this backdrop that the mechanics of the prosperity gospel can be better understood and interpreted. Thus, there is a remarkable difference in this conceptualization as compared to understandings of the prosperity gospel within American and European Pentecostalism.

RCCG members engage in deliverance rituals, healing rituals, night vigils, prayer and fasting rituals, and thanksgiving rituals (rites of passage) in order to counteract Satan's evil machination. Rituals in the RCCG are packaged to handle spiritual terrorist attacks such as sickness, HIV/Aids, unemployment, social insecurity, death, emotional stress, hunger, poverty, barrenness and virtually all life vicissitudes. They claim that the warfare motif in the Bible provides humans with ample instruments with which to thwart the enemy's plans. Prayer, fasting, repentance, forgiveness, righteousness, and every other human attitude and behaviour that stands in obedience to God can be seen as acts of war and means of enabling God to accomplish his plans in the human realm. Their liturgical tradition is thus a highly expressive action characterized by a heavy dose of rituals enacted to resolve individual and collective existential problems.

In the Christian dispensation, this spiritual engagement and warfare motif is legitimized with biblical reference to Ephesians 6: 10-17:

Finally, be strong in the Lord and in his mighty power. Put on the full armor of God so that you can take your stand against the devil's schemes. For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms. Therefore put on the full armor of God, so that when the day of evil comes, you may be able to stand your ground, and after you have done everything, to stand. Stand firm then, with the belt of truth buckled round your waist, with the breastplate of righteousness in place, and with your feet fitted with the readiness that comes from the gospel of peace. In addition to all this, take up the shield of faith, with which you can extinguish all the flaming arrows of the evil one (NIV).

Another often cited reference is II Cor. 10: 3-4: "For though we walk in the flesh, we do not war after the flesh for the weapons of our warfare are not carnal but mighty through God to the pulling down of strongholds..." There are several other biblical references that eulogize the rhetoric of the devil as enemy, thus highlighting the expediency of spiritual warfare (cf.

¹⁰ Enoch A. Adeboye (2002a). *Arresting the Arrester - Catching the Enemy in His Own Trap*, Largo, MD: Christian Living Books, 65 & 93.

1 Pet. 5:8-9; John 10:10; 2 Kgs 6:18; James 4:7; Isa. 54: 17; Psa. 27: 1-3 and Lk. 10: 19). Adeboye (p. 76-78) isolates ten methods of warfare, various ways in which God fights the enemy on behalf of members. For the RCCG and LCF, this military cum spiritual offensive and strategy can only be achieved through total dependence on God by faith. It is a spiritual warfare that can only be fought spiritually and not through any mundane means. Enoch Adeboye, the RCCG General Overseer recommends:

Do not wait for the enemy to hit you first; hit the enemy first. Every true child of God must be a terror to the devil and his agents. You must learn to take an offensive stance. If you don't get rid of the agents of the devil in your life, they are likely to get rid of you... You are to resist the devil steadfastly in the faith. Go on the offensive as soon as you know the enemy is around. God says our defense is sure. This defense is impregnable, so we are supposed to be aggressive... Demons recognize and tremble at the name of Jesus Christ.¹¹

The terrorism motif and theology assumes a more complicated dimension with a distinction made between two interrelated plains of spiritual warfare. The horizontal axis, referred to as the "ground-level warfare" involves dealing with the various spirits that inhabit people (demons), while the "cosmic-level warfare" is the vertical axis dealing with different shades of higher-level spirits. In every society, they argue, the horizontal warfare contends with the issue of ground-level demonization, and the indwelling spirits or demons may be of varying kinds, including family spirits, occult spirits, and "ordinary" spirits such as those attached to fear, death, HIV/Aids and homosexuality. Demons are believed to work at ground level in ways appropriate to the society in which they operate. They adapt their approach to the problems and concerns most prominent in any given society. The vertical warfare includes territorial spirits over cities, regions, and nations; institutional spirits such as those assigned to churches, governments, educational institutions, occult organizations and non-Christian religions; spirits assigned to oversee and encourage special functions, including prostitution, abortion, homosexuality, gambling, pornography and war. Other spirits are assigned to such things as objects, buildings, and other spaces as well as non-material entities such as rituals and music. It is believed that people regularly become demonized through contact with non-material, 'demonically' infested entities. Ancestral spirits are also assigned to work with specific families. The cosmic spirits are apparently in charge of ground-level spirits, although both are tightly interconnected. In spiritual warfare, African Pentecostals use a spiritual mapping technique in discerning and identifying cosmic-level spirits and the geographical areas, institutions, vices and objects that they are over as a step toward developing strategies to oppose and defeat them. The power encounter concept that is central to the spiritual warfare discourse is reminiscent of scriptural encounters such as that between Moses and Pharaoh (Exodus 7-12) and between Elijah and the prophets of Baal (I Kings 18). Healing and deliverance from demons are perceived as power encounters. Thus, any approach to Christianity and to spiritual warfare that neglects or ignores the three-dimensional balance of allegiance, truth, and power encounters is considered incomplete. While African Pentecostal/Charismatic Christians belief in the reality of these enigmatic forces that constitute terror, most Western Christians would be skeptical not only about their reality of existence but most importantly what to do about them.

¹¹ Enoch A Adeboye, *Arresting the Arrester - Catching the Enemy in His Own Trap*, 68ff.

Breaking Silence: African Missions (AM) and the Redeemed Aids Program Action Committee (RAPAC)

Public media have constantly drawn attention to the various measures adopted by national governments, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), international bodies and agencies towards mitigating the impact of the HIV/Aids. These efforts have been largely characterized by inadequate funding and inconsistent prevention and impact mitigation responses. The media has largely ignored the role and impact of religious groups, thus suggesting their non-engagement with mainstream Aids prevention work. In this way, they are portrayed as failing to extend their traditional care and support for the sick, the poor and the handicapped to persons living with HIV/Aids. Believing that infected persons are “sinners” has reinforced denial and stigmatization of persons living with HIV/Aids and persons affected by Aids.¹² Religious communities such as the RCCG have assumed one of the powerful mediums for breaking the silence on HIV/Aids. They have engaged theotherapy, providing spiritual succour, moral advocacy activities, and medical help with the provision of drugs, facilities and funds to the infected and the affected. Thus, RCCG’s public role becomes more and more visible and its extra-religious functions complementary in social contexts where efforts by local and international bodies and agencies have largely proved insufficient in combating the spread and impact of HIV/Aids let alone its amelioration.

African Missions was initiated by the wife of the RCCG General Overseer (also known as Mummy GO) in 1996 following visits to the missions’ field in the West African sub-region. She expressed dismay with the prevailing life situation and then concluded that the missions urgently required assistance such as in the provision of basic infrastructure with which to function. The scope of this assistance widened to include the rest of Africa thus leading to the change of its name from West African Missions Committee to African Missions Committee. It is on this foundation that what is now known simply as African Missions was birthed. Its main task was to “support the RCCG in reaching its vision for Africa in fulfillment of its end time mission of saving souls, particularly the oppressed and under-privileged.” It was charged with:

...recruiting brethren that can reach out to missions in various ways; to identify the needs of the missions and prioritize them, thereby making these missions self-supporting; to train pastors and missionaries to satisfy the large manpower need in Africa; to assist with the establishment of more mission schools and Bible colleges throughout Africa; to eradicate poverty by providing self-enrichment courses and community development programs; to educate on and reduce the spread of the Aids epidemic in many African countries.¹³

African Missions has both expanded its scope and seat of operation beyond Africa to Europe and the US. The South African Region (comprising Namibia, Botswana, Zimbabwe, South Africa, Swaziland and Lesotho) and parts of East and Central Africa were assigned to Africa Missions North America (AMNA).

During the RCCG’s 7th Annual Convention “The Latter Rain” held in Dallas-Texas in June 2003, the RCCG General Overseer Enoch Adeboye and his wife, Folu Adeboye, led the “Walk for Africa” around the downtown area of Dallas to raise awareness and financial assistance for HIV/Aids victims in Africa. On 19 June 2003, the AMNA organized “a walk for Africa to improve the quality of life of children, youth and families, help the needy, feed the poor, educate a child, help stop the spread of Aids and make disciples of all nations.”

¹² See “Reports and Studies: Engaging religious communities in breaking the silence on HIV/Aids”, Journalists Against Aids Nigeria Reports available at: <http://www.nigeria-aids.org/reports.cfm?read=13>

¹³ See African Missions web site available at: <http://www.africanmissions.org/aboutus.htm> - see also RCCG African Missions, Launching its North America Chapter, n.d.

Subsequently, on July 11, 2003 AMNA in collaboration with CitiHope International (a U.S. Faith-based humanitarian aid organization) donated HIV/Aids drugs (Pentam 300 – Pentamidine) valued at \$1.5 million to Nigeria for use in treating HIV/Aids related complications. They claimed that this was a move to support President Bush's faith-based initiative to fight HIV/Aids in Africa. This medication was distributed in five identified target areas (Abuja, the federal capital territory; Benue, Plateau, Ogun and Oyo States).

AMNA received assistance from the Redeemed Aids Program Action Committee (RAPAC) office at the RCCG Redemption Camp in the dispensing, monitoring and reporting of the drugs. RAPAC is an office within the premises of the International Office of the General Overseer in Lagos which deals with HIV/Aids from the spiritual and medical angles. Explaining the activities of RAPAC, Laide Adenuga, its coordinator remarks that the program collaborates with other health institutions and non-governmental organizations for treatment and clinical management of cases of HIV/Aids in addition to offering spiritual counselling.¹⁴ With some funding from the US Agency for International Development (USAID) through Family Health International's IMPACT Project, the RAPAC developed a dynamic HIV/Aids prevention program that focused on changing risky behaviour and advocating for those affected by the disease. The project empowers individuals and families to prevent HIV by using peer education, interpersonal communication and counselling, spiritual counselling, drama, and HIV/Aids education modules in the church's Bible college curriculum.¹⁵ For individuals, the church offers peer education and counselling to promote risk reduction behaviour. For families, the church emphasizes parent-child communication and conducts seminars to empower parents to discuss frank sexuality issues in the context of their faith and the growing epidemic. To further this process, RCCG recruited counsellors to incorporate HIV/Aids into church-based counselling. Over 300 peer educators facilitate education sessions in various parishes of the church in Lagos alone. Adenuga notes that regular reference to HIV/Aids in sermons and publications by the General Overseer, Enoch Adeboye, created an enabling environment for programming. Musical concerts, dramas, and sensitization seminars have also served as useful mediums of education. Church publications and drama productions reinforce HIV/Aids advocacy messages targeted at decision-makers.

The RAPAC discourse on HIV/Aids tackles age differences and gender divides in order to appeal to the church's complex and diverse membership and social composition as well as the public. The catchword for youths is total abstinence from premarital sexual relations. Posters and billboards abound, targeting youths with rhetorical inscriptions such as *Care for a Healthy Future? Say No to Premarital Sex* and *God loves you and do not want you to die prematurely. But do you love yourself? If so keep off the devils' trap*. The tone of the discourse changes somewhat in the case of adults and parents. As a way of encouraging dialogue on sexuality between parents and youths, RAPAC produced a bookmark that declares, *Sex: If you do not educate your children, somebody else will*. Such inscriptions convey intimidating signals to parents, charging them to wake up to their parental responsibility. For couples, the message is mutual fidelity. This is often backed up with biblical injunctions. The RCCG message that *"Everybody is at risk for HIV infection"*

¹⁴ Sola Ogundipe, "Living with HIV, Living with Faith", *Vanguard*, April 13, 2004. See Online Edition available at: <http://www.vanguardngr.com/articles/2002/features/fe413042004.html>

¹⁵ "Success Stories HIV/Aids: One Nigerian Church Takes HIV Prevention on Faith", U.S. Agency for International Development, Bureau for Global Health, Nigeria, October 2003. See story on USAID website, available at: <http://www.usaid.gov> - see also the text of email correspondence with Olaide Adenuga, RAPAC Coordinator, on November 17, 2004.

evokes a discourse that suggests a scourge without borders and limits. HIV/Aids is no respecter of persons, irrespective of age, class, gender, and social status. This approach debunks the myth in which Aids is perceived as a sinners' disease, a notion which has generated controversy within many Christian churches. As a way of mitigating the stigmatization on affected people, the RCCG evoked slogans of compassion such as: *Jesus cares for all. Care for people living with HIV and Aids*. Affected persons are neither quarantined nor berated by the church and members. In this way, a sense of belonging, a sense of community, and a ray of hope are rekindled.

RCCG's public role and place in civic life is further evident in the mutual relationship and enhancement between RAPAC and NGOs such as the Family Health International (FHI)/IMPACT. The RAPAC takes an active role in receiving and making HIV/Aids referrals. For instance, FHI/IMPACT refers persons living with HIV/Aids, transport workers, and youth to faith-based projects such as the RAPAC for spiritual counselling. In turn, the church refers its members to HIV/Aids care and support groups and other services provided through FHI/IMPACT programs.¹⁶

Conclusion

We have demonstrated above that RCCG strategies have been both precautionary and therapeutic through spiritual and medical means. The RAPAC was inaugurated to coordinate issues that revolve around the epidemic. On the spiritual level, HIV/Aids becomes personified as one of several demonic spirits, which populate the cosmos. One inherent implication in such a transformation, however, is that it blurs the distinction between natural and spiritual explanations of diseases and illnesses. All spiritually discerned problems are believed to be only resolved through spiritual means. Thus, the RCCG is perpetually engaged in spiritual warfare with the demon of Aids and other malevolent spirits. Elaborate prayer rituals are enacted and victims are believed to experience and undergo theotherapy (spiritual healing) as a consequence of the spiritual duel. On a more pragmatic level, the RCCG has launched several other programmes to combat Aids. Funds have been generated locally and internationally for the procurement of Aids related drugs. They evolve programs, which involve youth in Aids prevention and encourage creative activities diverting youth from a way of life that would lead to its acquisition. In this way, the RCCG performs religious, social and other extra religious functions in the global society.

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