Allies against AIDS: Faith activists meet in Bangkok

by Paul Jeffrey in the September 7, 2004 issue

We are here, we are there, we are everywhere!" Every day the Thai sex workers formed ranks and paraded through the convention center, their signs demanding acceptance, their chants in practiced English reverberating off the giant pharmaceutical company exhibits and booths touting flavored condoms.

Though not as noisy, activists from faith-based groups also made their presence known at the XV International AIDS Conference in Bangkok in July. Anywhere you looked, Buddhist monks, Catholic nuns and religious leaders of all stripes were telling stories of those living with HIV and AIDS. The activists demanded better access to lower-cost antiretroviral drugs, and debated the proper balance of promoting abstinence, monogamy and condoms—the ABC of many AIDS prevention programs.

Such visibility for religious groups is rather new, as past conferences have left faith off the AIDS agenda. At the last conference in Barcelona, "faith-based people weren't really welcomed," says Bob Vitillo, a New Jersey priest who advises Caritas Internationalis on HIV/AIDS policies. Requests to present abstracts, display posters or even find meeting space were denied. Though not as unpopular as the U.S. government officials, who were booed in Barcelona for their policies against condoms and generic drugs, AIDS activists from religious communities were routinely shunned.

Not any more. Although admittedly a small part of the show in Bangkok, where 20,000 people chose between hundreds of seminars and waded through thousands of abstracts, faith-based groups were firmly on the agenda. For the first time a religious leader spoke to a conference plenary session. Gideon Byamugisha, a Ugandan Anglican priest living with HIV, told delegates that churches and other religious groups "have a unique presence and reach within communities. We have unique structures and programs that are already in place. We are available. We are

reliable. And we are sustainable. We were there long before AIDS came and we will still be there when AIDS goes away."

Byamugisha ended his talk by having an African choir join him in getting the crowd to hold hands and sing a lively anti-AIDS anthem. After several days of debate on the minutiae of prevention policies and vaccine testing, it was a refreshing moment, one that should help get religious leaders even more stage time at the next world meeting in Toronto in 2006.

Not everyone was happy with the higher profile of religious groups. One protest group planned a theatrical assault on an interfaith exhibit on July 15, only to have the Thai government—which closely monitored events from behind the scenes—veto the action. The exhibit included Buddhist monks, and publicly criticizing Buddhist monks is not tolerated in Thailand.

In an address to religious leaders at the conference, Hilde Frafjord Johnson, Norway's minister of international development, complained that some faith leaders "have added to rather than alleviated the burden of HIV/AIDS by letting tradition trump theology, by upholding discriminatory attitudes, by ignoring or distorting known medical facts, by being silent, oh so silent, or by being judgmental of homosexuals and sex outside marriage, by giving people a double burden rather than relieving them of the one they carry."

Yet Johnson, whose government funds several church-run AIDS programs in Africa, also declared that religious leaders "are in a unique position to influence and inspire. They can reach into people's hearts and minds in a way no other group can. They can change norms and values. In many countries, faith-based committees and societies are also the best civil society network in existence. Religious leaders must realize the power they have in the fight against HIV/AIDS, and use it to the fullest."

This mixture of criticism and praise for religious responses to the AIDS pandemic, which has killed 20 million people and left 38 million infected, may best be explained by examining the wide gap between pastoral workers on the ground who cuddle HIV positive babies after burying their mothers, and church officials and theologians—and born-again U.S. presidents—who dish out moral decrees that ignore the hard realities of daily life.

According to John Galbraith, president of the U.S.-based Catholic Medical Mission Board, something "gets lost in the translation" between pastoral workers on the

ground and church hierarchies.

“When you listen to some of the statements I’ve heard come out of the Vatican . . . my first reaction is that anyone who could say something like that as a general statement really should spend a month in a clinic in Haiti and watch the people coming in, see who those people are, see the work that the church and everybody is doing, and then start making pontifical pronouncements. I think they’d have a different way of thinking,” Galbraith said.

Seeking to set a new tone, leaders of faith-based groups in Bangkok hammered out a joint statement confessing that their response to HIV/AIDS has often been one of “prejudice, ignorance, fear and judgmental attitudes.”

Recognizing that effective strategies against HIV/AIDS must also confront hot topics ranging from intellectual property rights to gender politics, religious leaders promised to continue their struggle to “eliminate the root causes of the HIV and AIDS pandemic, including gender inequality, prejudice against those whose way of life or sexual orientation is different from the majority community, systemic injustice and unequal distribution of wealth.”