

Daily Herald

Big Picture . Local Focus

Palatine man devotes resources to fighting AIDS in Africa

Posted Friday, July 13, 2007

Hollander0713 — na1

Hollander0713 — na2

Photos courtesy of the Cameroon America AIDS Alliance

Cap1

Palatine resident Francis Ntowe, director of the Cameroon America AIDS Alliance, holds the child of a patient at the alliance's clinic in Africa.

Cap2

Pastors attend an HIV/AIDS conference held in January by the Cameroon America AIDS Alliance.>

Growing up in extreme poverty, Cameroon native Francis Ntowe's father cautioned him against accepting gifts or help.

"Whatever you are given, you must be willing to give back twice as much," his father would say.

It is this admonition that led Ntowe, a Palatine pharmacist, to step forward and help start the Cameroon America AIDS Alliance last year, along with other members of the Fourth Presbyterian Church of Chicago.

Ntowe has been actively working in the fight against HIV/AIDS for 15 years. He helped to find hospice care for a Chicago-area AIDS patient whose family refused to help in any way. It struck him that if this is how AIDS patients are treated in America, with all its education and resources, how much worse it is for those in Africa where ignorance, superstition and poverty are rampant.

Unfortunately, the fight against AIDS in Africa has not been coherent, cohesive or effective, Ntowe said. Focusing only on the treatment of AIDS does little to stop the spread of the disease, he said. It is only through education and understanding that real progress is made, he said.

Getting the church and pastors involved is the key, Ntowe believes.

"How do you focus your energy on prevention? The answer has to come from the church. The church has to engage its population ... The minister can get up there on the pulpit and preach to the congregants and say 'HIV, my brothers and sisters, is a disease that is caused by a virus and this is how you can catch this virus,' " he said.

The group has set up a clinic in Cameroon that provides treatment and testing for HIV/AIDS, along with training for local health-care providers. Dr. Bernard Blaauw, 72, a retired Chicago physician and researcher, has committed to working in Cameroon for a year and sees patients daily there.

In addition, the group is running seminars for pastors in Cameroon to educate them about AIDS and encourage them to influence people to get tested and treated.

Ntowe has been encouraged by the success of the alliance. When the clinic opened Dec. 1, Dr. Blaauw saw 22 patients the first day alone. The first seminar for pastors in Cameroon drew about 90 participants and a second about 75.

"After the conference ... more than 60 percent (of the pastors) get up in the pulpit for the very first time and talk about HIV and AIDS. That's amazing," Ntowe said, adding that more than half have formed HIV/AIDS committees in their churches.

Training will not be limited to Cameroon. Ntowe also envisions doing more educational training about HIV/AIDS here in the Chicago area as well.

Ntowe hopes this effort in Cameroon will serve as a successful pilot program that can then be copied throughout Africa. He envisions a modern, fully equipped HIV/AIDS clinic in Cameroon.

Such a dream will take the efforts of many. Ntowe said the alliance wants to work with both church and nonchurch entities.

"It will take everyone's effort, each doing the little that we can do and, therefore, eventually we will be able to stop the spread of this virus. With everybody's effort, it can be done and it should be done," he said.

When asked why he has devoted so much time and energy to this effort, Ntowe just smiles knowingly.

"The curse that we have as Americans is that we have been blessed with plenty. We have been blessed with leadership," Ntowe said. "We cannot run away from it. We have to take that leadership and we have to give back."

"With all the blessings I have had, I have to give back. I have the knowledge ... I have the strategy in my head and the answers in the church ... I have to go do it."