

## **Myths propel AIDS pandemic, separate people from God's love**

NHLANGANO, Swaziland – Some myths about HIV/AIDS put people at greater risk of infection.

Some myths multiply the rate at which the virus spreads.

But the most destructive myths are the ones that keep God's people from sharing the Good News of His love with people in need.

In 15 years as a Southern Baptist missionary in Swaziland, Barbara Myers has heard almost all the myths about AIDS, ranging from simple ignorance like "You can get the virus from another person's sweat" to downright evil suggestions that having sex with a child can cure AIDS.

Myers recalls seeing a newspaper item in Swaziland that claimed a "tinyanga" (witchdoctor) had, "under the strict guidance of the ancestors," created a cure for AIDS ailments from plants and that the cure was available for \$110 a quart – a snake-oil pitch guaranteed to dupe desperate, naïve souls.

At other times, the bad advice comes from sources people instinctively trust.

"One husband took his sick wife to a witchdoctor, who told him the two other families living on their homestead were causing her to be sick," Myers said. "He chose to believe that nonsense even though he has been told that both he and his wife have AIDS.

"Another woman, who had been told several years ago that she was HIV positive, recently visited a clinic for an illness and was told she had tuberculosis due to windy weather conditions," Myers said. "Now she is living the myth of believing she will fully recover if she takes her TB medicine."

Damaging myths about HIV/AIDS aren't limited to poverty-stricken countries where many people are under-educated, said Dale Hanson Bourke, author of *The Skeptic's Guide to the Global AIDS Crisis*. A number of myths keep people in developed countries from focusing their individual and collective resources on stopping the pandemic and caring for people living with HIV/AIDS.

Bourke lists 10 myths about global HIV/AIDS that make people think the disease doesn't affect them, including:

- HIV/AIDS is mostly a disease of homosexual men
- HIV/AIDS is mostly an African problem
- HIV/AIDS spreads mostly because of poor moral choices
- There is no hope for people with HIV/AIDS

– There is nothing I can do.

In fact, HIV/AIDS worldwide is primarily spread by heterosexual sex and infects as many women as men, Bourke notes. Infections are growing most rapidly in countries outside of Africa and many people are infected because a spouse brought the virus home or a child was born to an HIV-positive mother. Strong prevention programs can make a difference, and churches provide hope when they reach out to people in need, Bourke says.

Confronted by the staggering numbers – 22.5 million people living with HIV/AIDS in Sub-Saharan Africa alone – it’s easy to think of the global crisis as “just a bunch of statistics,” said Mark Hatfield, a Southern Baptist who directs work in Sub-Saharan Africa for Baptist Global Response, an international relief and development organization.

“All you have to do, though, is visit in the home of someone with full-blown AIDS who is experiencing a slow, painful death or stop in a home in which a 14-year-old is caring for three brothers and sisters because no adult is left to head the home,” Hatfield said. “Then you begin to see the HIV/AIDS crisis as an extremely personal issue.”

While it is true that poor personal choices, lack of development, and false beliefs contribute to the seriousness of the crisis, it also is true that many people are innocent victims, Hatfield adds.

“And what is even more true is that, no matter the reason, these are all individuals who are loved by our Lord,” he said. “These are all people He asks us as His followers to reach out to with a touch that shares compassion and care.”