A Multi-Faith Response to HIV/AIDS in Ethiopia and Tanzania

Stories of Lives Transformed
Despite advances in prevention and treatment, the HIV/AIDS epidemic continues to ravage families and communities around the world. Religious groups—with their deep roots in affected communities and traditions of caregiving—have a vital role to play in responding to the epidemic. Indeed, communities of faith already deliver much-needed medical and social services to millions of people affected by HIV/AIDS worldwide.

Religions for Peace (RfP) is working to strengthen the religious response to HIV/AIDS, by building the infrastructure, reach and capacity of religious institutions. RfP works with in-country affiliates to care for the sick, provide for orphans and vulnerable children, and help people living with HIV/AIDS preserve their independence and dignity. And, by forging partnerships among diverse religious groups, RfP is building a multi-faith response to the epidemic that is greater than the sum of its parts. Much of our response to the AIDS crisis takes place where access to prevention, care and treatment is still very limited, and where religious communities are particularly well placed to respond.

Here, we profile two successful programs implemented by RfP and its affiliates in Ethiopia and Tanzania between 2008 and 2012. Both programs received support from the U.S. Health Resources and Services Administration through the New Partners Initiative (NPI) of the U.S. President’s Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief (PEPFAR). The programs worked to:

- Increase HIV/AIDS prevention services provided through faith-based organizations;
- Expand and strengthen the quality of faith-based programs for orphans and vulnerable children;
- Strengthen faith-based support to people living with HIV/AIDS, particularly in reducing the stigma that surrounds the disease; and
- Strengthen the capacities of national interreligious bodies to coordinate broad faith-based responses and to serve as key partners in national HIV/AIDS policy bodies.
The stories that follow illustrate our shared success in achieving those goals. Although the grant support for these programs has ended, both have left enduring legacies—in partnerships forged, services delivered—and in lives transformed.
In Ethiopia, RfP worked with its national affiliate, the Ethiopian Interfaith Forum for Development, Dialogue and Action (EIFDDA), to scale up HIV/AIDS care and support services in four regions of the country. The project was implemented by EIFDDA’s nine member organizations, which represent several different faiths with extensive networks throughout Ethiopia. In 2011 alone, through EIFDDA:

- 2,000 orphans and vulnerable children (OVC) and people living with HIV/AIDS (PLWHA) received material assistance, spiritual counselling and psychosocial and educational support
- 96 trained home-based caregivers provided quality care to 360 bedridden PLWHA
- 175 trained community volunteers provided care and support through home visits to 1,500 OVC
- Over 475 PLWHA and older OVC were trained in income generation and provided with technical and financial support to start a business
- Over 42,000 congregants were mobilized by 208 trained religious leaders to support OVC in their communities
- 687 OVC were given life-skills training and followed up in peer-support circles

In addition to providing direct services, EIFDDA advocates for effective, compassionate policies at the national level by working with the Global Fund, National AIDS Control Councils, and OVC task forces. Going forward, EIFDDA and its network members will continue to improve home-based and community care for people affected by HIV/AIDS, including orphans and vulnerable children. EIFDDA will also work to empower people to make healthy choices, and enlist people living with HIV/AIDS as leaders in the effort to defeat the stigma that deters so many from seeking care and treatment.
Asnakech Bogale

When Asnakech Bogale lost her husband to AIDS ten years ago, she was left with six children and a broken old sewing machine. Life was a struggle to survive; she was often unable to feed her children or pay their school fees. But, with help from the Religions for Peace New Partners Initiative (RfP NPI), Asnakech was able to parlay her old sewing machine into a secure future for her family.

Through RfP NPI, Asnakech attended a four-day training workshop, where she prepared a business plan and received startup funds. With those funds, Asnakech repaired her sewing machine and began to trade in used clothes.

Today, Asnakech is a skilled tailor. The profits from her sewing business enabled her to build two rooms onto her house, which she rents out to earn extra income. Most importantly, Asnakech is able to feed, clothe and send all of her children to school. She is very happy about her business and her life. And she has big dreams for the future: Asnakech hopes to buy a new electric sewing machine and open a clothing boutique.

With startup capital from the Religions for Peace New Partners Initiative, Asnakech launched a sewing business that sustains her family.
Habtamu

“I will be a doctor,” declared Habtamu to Dereje Zeleke, the Behirdar district coordinator for the Religions for Peace New Partners Initiative (RfP NPI).

Habtamu is a 13 year-old boy in Behirdar, Northern Ethiopia. For the last two years he has been consistently at the top of his class. Indeed, he has done so well that he has been promoted to the next grade every six months. Life seems good, and promising. But life has not always been this good for Habtamu.

A few years ago, Habtamu’s father passed away. His mother became sick and was diagnosed as HIV positive. They lived on the streets in a plastic shack near the town’s hospital. She became so weak that she couldn’t leave the shack.

Habtamu became the provider. He would collect leftover food from the hospital dump, taking care to remove any dirt from the food. Sometimes he would find gloves in the food, or syringes. He made sure that his mother ate. In the afternoons, he walked the streets trying to sell sugarcane; at night he studied under the lamp at the main entrance of the hospital, sometimes until midnight.

When the RfP NPI project was launched in Behirdar, Habtamu was one of 113 orphaned and vulnerable children chosen to receive support. Thanks to RfP NPI, Habtamu’s school fees are now waived, and he receives free uniforms and school supplies. Habtamu’s mother was also enrolled in the project, through which she received nursing care, medicine, food and counseling. When she became stronger, RfP NPI provided her with training and seed money to start a business baking injera, the local bread. Now she supplies two restaurants with injera every day and earns enough to sustain their family. They have since moved from the streets.

“God used you to change my life,” Habtamu’s mother told Dereje.

“You know the name Habtamu means ‘rich man,’” said Dereje. “He will be a great man.” Inspired by what his mother endured, Habtamu is determined to excel in school and become a doctor in a hospital where he can help the poor.
Yoseph Mulu

Yoseph Mulu is 17 years old. At an age when most boys are studying and playing football with friends, Yoseph is the breadwinner and guardian for his 9-year-old brother and 11-year-old sister.

As a young child, Yoseph left his impoverished home to work as a shoeshine boy. When he heard that both of his parents had died of AIDS, Yoseph returned home to care for his orphaned brother and sister. He took a job as a porter, but it was not enough to support his family of three. Often, they managed to eat just a single meal each day.

Fortunately, Yoseph met a volunteer from the Ethiopian Interfaith Forum for Development, Dialogue and Action (EIFDDA). The volunteer told Yoseph about an income-generation program for guardians of orphans. The program was offered by EIFDDA, in collaboration with Ethiopia’s Ministry of Trade and Industry, with support from the Religions for Peace (RfP) New Partners Initiative.

For Yoseph and his family, the program has made all the difference. After an intensive three-day training in entrepreneurship, Yoseph received a grant of $85 to start a business. Now, in addition to his shoeshine business, Yoseph operates a telephone center with a regular clientele. And RfP and EIFDDA are also helping Yoseph’s brother and sister attend school, by providing them with uniforms, school supplies and other necessities. The family has moved from a plastic shelter to a permanent rented house, and they are able to afford regular meals.

“I want to express my deepest gratitude to EIFDDA and RfP on behalf of my younger brother and sister,” said Yoseph. “They now have the opportunity to continue their lessons and hope for a better life.”

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Back in 2009, Tamirat Wondimu knew something was wrong. He suffered from repeated lung infections, had no appetite, lost weight and couldn’t do his usual tasks. At the urging of his sister, he went to a nearby health center to take an HIV test. Unfortunately the result was positive.

Today, Tamirat is back on his feet again—thanks to the compassionate support he received from Behailu Beyene. Behailu is a home-based caregiver trained through the Religions for Peace New Partners Initiative (RfP NPI).

Behailu was motivated to get involved in HIV work after he lost five sisters to AIDS. Behailu witnessed his sisters’ suffering from stigma and discrimination; they died with little care and support. RfP NPI gave Behailu the opportunity to alleviate the suffering of those in similar circumstances. The positive feedback he gets from those he supports encourages him to continue with the service.

As Tamirat says, “Behailu was not only my home-based care provider, but also my brother. He helped me like a brother.” In addition to counseling and practical support, Behailu helped Tamirat adhere to his treatment regimen. And Behailu linked Tamirat to others who provided medical and spiritual support. “The spiritual counseling I got from my religious leader, Abba Woldegiorgis Abeje, really helped me to change my life,” said Tamirat.

Today, Tamirat has regained his strength and returned to work. “Thanks be to God and to all the other people who contributed to the improvement of my health,” he says.

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– Tamirat Wondimu
Mulu Getahun

Mulu Getahun was employed as a commercial sex worker when she learned that she had contracted HIV. But rather than give in to despair, Mulu decided to make a better life for herself and her two children. From the local university hospital, she received anti-retroviral medication that kept the virus at bay. And she launched a business selling a local beverage called tella. However, without any source of legitimate capital, she turned to loan sharks, who charged exorbitant interest rates. Soon Mulu was deeply in debt.

Then Mulu was selected to participate in an income-generation program for people living with HIV/AIDS. Offered by the Ethiopian Interfaith Forum for Development, Dialogue and Action (EIFDDA), in collaboration with the Ministry of Trade and Industry, the program was made possible by support from the Religions for Peace New Partners Initiative.

Mulu attended a three-day training and received seed capital of $144 to pay off her debts and start her business afresh. Within two months, Mulu was making a profit of $50 per month—enough to provide for herself and her children. She continues to receive support and technical assistance to help her business thrive and grow. Mulu has even expanded her business—selling injera, the local bread.
Tanzania

In Tanzania, Religions for Peace (RfP) worked with its national affiliates — the Interreligious Council for Peace Tanzania (IRCPT) and the Tanzania Women of Faith Network (TWIN) to expand HIV/AIDS prevention, care, and support services in 11 administrative districts.

Along with our partners, we were able to capitalize on both the national and grassroots networks of religious communities and leaders – including women and youth – that are an integral and permanent part of society in sub-Saharan Africa. In the course of this project:

- 200 peer educators and 200 religious leaders and women of faith were trained in prevention
- 34,101 youths were reached with prevention messages
- 20 facilitators were trained to work with 1056 orphans and vulnerable children (OVC)
- 968 OVC received care and support
- 20 women were trained to facilitate village community banking opportunities and support groups for 500 OVC and people living with HIV/AIDS
- 9 local organizations strengthened their capacities

With a focus on multireligious collaboration and cooperation, RfP was able to build the capacity of IRCPT and its women of faith network. In addition to providing direct services, IRCPT advocates for effective policies at the national level. Today IRCPT is engaged with the Tanzania Commission for AIDS and has entered into multi-year partnership with UNICEF to help children affected by the epidemic.
Nesifora Lowrance Mkude

Vibrant, laughing, sometimes clapping her hands, Nesifora Lowrance Mkude tells the story of her life.

Though her demeanor is joyful, the tale she tells is full of hardship. A decade ago, her father passed away; then her husband. Next her business—selling soup from a market kiosk—failed. “So, there I was,” she recalls, “with four children and nowhere to go and nobody to turn to.”

Determined to support her family, she took a job in a bar with the plan to save enough money to restart her business. But soon she became too ill to work, and discovered that she was HIV positive. “As if this was not enough, I also lost my baby,” Nesifora remembers. “I was deeply depressed at that time.”

But soon Nesifora would begin a new chapter of her life. She met Isaya Chigonele, district coordinator for the Interreligious Council for Peace Tanzania (IRCPT)—Religions for Peace’s national affiliate and implementing partners in the Religions for Peace New Partners Initiative (RfP NPI) project. Isaya helped Nesifora get the medical care she needed to restore her health. And, with business training from IRCPT, Nesifora was able to re-launch her soup business, which flourished and expanded.

Isaya also linked Nesifora to other women living with HIV/AIDS, and helped them start a Village Community Bank (VICOBA). The VICOBA is a savings club that also makes loans to members, based on their accumulated savings, or “shares.” IRCPT has incubated VICOBAs throughout Tanzania.

“With VICOBA, I have been able to easily save my money,” says Nesifora. The VICOBA has enabled Nesifora to put funds aside for her children’s school fees, uniforms and books. And it helps her to grow her business: “I take loans to boost my supplies for large catering orders,” says Nesifora. “With bigger business comes bigger profit margins and this helps me pay back my loans at once without a problem.”

Today Nesifora serves as chairperson of the VICOBA in her village. The group has expanded to include community members who are HIV negative, and sets aside funds to help orphans and other vulnerable children. “VICOBA has taught us that many hands make light work,” says Nesifora, “we support and care for one another.”
Rebecca Mwakapesa

Like millions of young people orphaned by HIV/AIDS, Rebecca Laban Mwakapesa was compelled to grow up quickly. Rebecca’s father died of AIDS in 1996 and her mother followed two years later, leaving behind five children. “We were devastated by the loss of our parents, who were our pillars of strength and survival,” says Rebecca.

Rebecca used the family’s meager savings to start a small business cooking chapati and other snacks to sell to the neighbors. “My duty was to wake up very early in the morning to make the food,” remembers Rebecca, “I would then sell a little, and leave the rest with my sister Rose to sell while I went to school.”

Gertrude Mwanakadudu heard about Rebecca and her sisters’ struggle to survive. A member of the Tanzania Women’s Interfaith Network (TWIN), Gertrude was trained through the Religions for Peace New Partners Initiative (RfP NPI) in the care and protection of orphans and vulnerable children. Gertrude recommended Rebecca for assistance by a VICOBA (Village Community Bank) group founded by the Interreligious Council for Peace Tanzania (IRCPT) with the support of RfP NPI.

The VICOBA gave Rebecca a savings account worth Tsh. 60,000 (about USD $37) and provided her with business training. Rebecca soon bought more shares in the VICOBA with the profit from her business and took out a loan to expand her wares to include fabric and charcoal. “Life started looking up and things got a little bit easier,” Rebecca said. “I thank RfP NPI for the opportunity it has given me to increase my knowledge and grow my business.”

Rebecca is not alone. In each of the RfP NPI 11 districts where IRCPT works, people living with HIV and AIDS orphans are participating in VICOBA groups, which provide them with loans and other assistance. The VICOBAs also enable them to help one another: In one village, VICOBA members made contributions to enable one of their members to attend journalism school in a nearby city.

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– Rebecca Mwakapesa
Sheikh Aidha Hassan Kaywanga

“To be honest,” says Sheikh Aidha Hassan Kaywanga, “We leaders from different religions never used to relate with each other or communicate.” Now, thanks to The Religions for Peace New Partners Initiative (RfP NPI), that has changed. Sheikh Kaywanga and other Tanzanian religious leaders from many faiths are working together to address the HIV/AIDS epidemic that has caused so much suffering in their communities. By working in partnership through the Interreligious Council for Peace Tanzania (IRCPT), a national affiliate of RfP, they are shifting attitudes and behavior, which can reshape the trajectory of the epidemic.

“The RfP approach was clear from the very beginning,” says Sheikh Kaywanga. “Their goal was to unite the community’s religious leaders to work together, not to convert us or change anyone’s religion. Every leader would keep their faith but we would work together for the sake of our community. First we as leaders sorted out our differences, and this then passed on to our respective congregations leading to a more integrated society.”

“We began to train our congregations on HIV/AIDS prevention, testing and counseling,” says Sheikh Kaywanga. “The fact is that we as religious leaders have a lot of influence among the faithful and therefore to the larger community.”

Religious leaders are using that influence to change the way people think about HIV/AIDS. One leader—Sheikh Sharifu Miradji of Bagamoyo—says that before the IRCPT training, he did not take these issues seriously. Now he preaches regularly in the mosque and during public events about HIV prevention, stigma reduction and parent-child communication.

And the religious leaders are working together to raise resources for orphaned and vulnerable children. “After all,” says Rev. George Mwalo Renartus, a religious leader, “these children are ours. We have to take responsibility for their care and help where we can.”

Rev. Renartus says that it can be challenging to unite religious leaders. “But,” he adds, “it is very powerful when religious leaders speak with one voice.”
Mwajuma Saleh

Mwajuma Saleh wants to be an engineer when she grows up. Just a few years ago, that dream seemed impossibly distant.

First, Mwajuma lost both of her parents to AIDS, and was sent to live with her grandmother. When her grandmother died, she went to live with a great aunt who could not afford to keep Mwajuma in school. Mwajuma had already missed her first term of high school when she was chosen to receive support through the Religions for Peace New Partners Initiative.

Now Mwajuma is a student at the Matimbwa Secondary School, in Tanzania’s Bagamoyo District. Mwajuma quickly caught up with her classmates, and is working hard to complete Form 1. Her dream of being an engineer—once so elusive—is now within her grasp.
The toll of HIV/AIDS is devastating—even for those who have been spared by the disease. When parents, breadwinners and caregivers are lost, relatives can be left with overwhelming responsibilities.

Samuel Materu knows this first hand. A decade ago, all was well in his life. With a successful career and four children—three of whom graduated from post-secondary school—he looked forward to a comfortable retirement.

Then, in 2004, everything changed. His wife’s brother and sister-in-law died of AIDS, leaving behind four children. Samuel and his wife took the children into their home, and have cared for them ever since. Next, his wife’s sister learned that she had HIV after her husband passed away. Though she has responded well to anti-retroviral therapy, Samuel and his wife help pay the school fees for her six children. And the losses continued: Samuel’s brother died of AIDS, leaving behind a wife and three children. Then his father-in-law succumbed to the disease, leaving an HIV-positive wife, who is struggling to care for herself.

Caring for his own extended family has inspired Samuel to help the larger community. He now serves as a district coordinator for the Religions for Peace New Partners Initiative (RfP NPI) in Tanzania’s Iringa District. In that role, Samuel oversees 20 peer educators, 22 volunteers who support orphans and vulnerable children, and two Village Community Bank (VICOBA) facilitators. He also keeps tabs on a large group of faith leaders and others involved in the project at the community level. Through RfP NPI, Samuel makes sure that other families have the resources they need to survive—and thrive—after devastating loss.

“My feeling as a religious person is to help others. It touches me when I see the difficult situation of my family and community. Since I am in a position to help, I must help.”

— Samuel Materu
About Religions for Peace

Founded in 1970, Religions for Peace (RfP) is the world’s largest and most representative multireligious coalition advancing common action for peace. Headquartered in New York and accredited to the United Nations, RfP works through 92 national and regional interreligious councils and women of faith and youth networks on the national, regional and global levels.

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