

Firelight Newsflash! 29 June 2009

Started in the Free Methodist Church, Association Urukundo Rw'Imana (“Love of God”) provides support to people living with HIV/AIDS in Kigali, Rwanda. The organization's programs include child and youth counseling groups, vocational apprenticeships, and awareness-raising activities to combat stigma. Urukundo Rw'Imana's trained counselors offer emotional support and household assistance to children through weekly visits to homes of bedridden adults. Association Urukundo Rw'Imana has been a Firelight grantee-partner since 2007.

Immaculée Muhawe is the Secrétaire Executive of Association Urukundo Rw'Imana and shares the following testimony as an inspiration to us all! She and her husband demonstrate to us the power of strong families in the fight against HIV and AIDS!

Thanks to François and Immaculée for sharing their wisdom, bravery and encouragement through their story!

Merci beaucoup de votre sagesse, courage et encouragement!

Testimony of a Couple: François & Immaculée

(This testimony has been shortened for fit the format of the Newsflash.)

Introduction:

We have realized by experience that the church must play a crucial role in the fight against HIV/AIDS, through its message of repentance and hope. The message of hope from men and women from different churches will help persons who are infected or affected by HIV/AIDS to live in a positive manner without fearing death and misfortune.

By abiding to the principles of God, we shall love our neighbors and shall not harm them in any way. This constitutes the best preventive measure.

Concerning caring for vulnerable people, all religious denominations call for that; James 1:27 “What God the Father considers to be pure and genuine religion is this: to take care of orphans and widows in their suffering and to keep oneself from being corrupted by the world”.



The BAKAMIRNTASI-MUHAWE Family
Left to Right: Jeanne, Jean Luc,
Jeannette, François, Claude, Imaculée

The Purpose of our Testimony:

- Encourage those who follow our testimony to adopt a positive attitude towards HIV/AIDS and check their sero-status through voluntary testing.
- Encourage couples that are infected and affected by HIV/AIDS to change behavior.
- Show the importance of family involvement in the fight against HIV/AIDS.
- Show the goodness of “Stepping Stones”

1. The importance of leading a positive life:

The life experience of a couple: François Bakamirintasi and Immaculee Muhawe

We went for voluntary testing as a couple in 1992 at the San Francisco project which was carrying out research on HIV. My husband and I, we were informed that we were infected with HIV/AIDS. We were overpowered with unprecedented discouragement, spending sleepless nights thinking about death. At that time we had two sons; Jean Claude aged 6years and Jean Luc 5years old. I personally started talking about my death to my younger sisters and friends. I pleaded with them to take care of my children after my death.

We lived in that fear up to the time (that is three months after we discovered that we were HIV positive). I started receiving biblical lessons which emphasized on the duties and rights of the children of God. These lessons helped me to change attitude towards HIV/AIDS. From that time I made efforts to focus on God’s promises rather than thinking about HIV/AIDS. The following verses helped me to overcome my fear:

“Trust in the Lord with all your heart. Never rely on what you think you know. Remember the Lord in everything you do, and He will show you the right way. Never let yourself think that you are wiser than you are; simply obey the Lord and refuse to do wrong. If you do, it will be like good medicine, healing your wounds and easing your pains.” *Proverbs 3:5-8*

Despite all that, we could not face the reality posed by HIV/AIDS, we chose to avoid all the advice given by doctors and live as if we had no problem. We never wanted to talk about HIV/AIDS, because such talk always brought about arguments between us.

Seven Years Later:

In 1998, my husband became seriously ill. Then our neighbors started to suspect us. We spent one month in the hospital but there was no improvement in François’ health. He lost weight from 60kg to 40kg. At the time we were going back home, I asked the social worker to give me the results of the HIV/AIDS testing, and it was given to me. Although we had opted to ignore HIV/AIDS in our conscience, and we had bore two more children, Jeanne and Jeannette. It became necessary for us to take the problem seriously.

Regarding my sero-positive status, to me the solution was simple. I was thinking that 7 years living with a sero-positive husband, I did not need to go for more testing. I only had a bad feeling about my two daughters whom, I thought were infected, especially because they were sick most of the time.

In February 2000, we joined an association of people living with HIV/AIDS.

2. Advantages of being trained

In 2001, I was trained for the first time by “Stepping Stones” Organization. I was encouraged to talk about the problem of HIV/AIDS positively with Francois. We also took my two daughters for testing and the results were negative. They were not infected.

Later on, François was also trained by “Stepping Stones” Organization. We then organized a family meeting in order to talk to the children about his health situation. When they learnt about the bad news, they were very worried, but with time they learnt to live with it.

In 2002, I started taking antibiotics without the doctor’s prescription, but I did not like taking medicine, so I stopped taking them. In 2004, during the month of March, when ARV’s were distributed free of charge, I told myself that I should start taking drugs like others. I went for the CD4 test and the results were encouraging because I had 876m3 compared to my husband who had 39 when he started taking ARVs in August 2003.

3. Importance of Voluntary Testing

HIV/AIDS cannot be tested using eyes only. That is why individuals should go for the test in order to check their status. In most times we prefer to close our mind and fear to face reality.

In 2004, that is 12 years after the first test when my husband found out he was seropositive, I managed at last to escape “sero-ignorance” (for 12 years I believed in my mind that I was sero-positive). I took the HIV/AIDS test and I was negative. It was really for me a surprise.

We went back to the San Francisco project to get assurance about our situation as a couple. We spent one year and a half with the project and accepted the reality of a “discordant couple” (when one partner is negative while the other is positive). We thank God for having protected us, especially our children.

Currently, we have accepted our serological status, and we use condoms during our sexual intercourse.

We can conclude by saying that living positively is about confronting HIV/AIDS and fighting to survive rather than giving up and dying. Our children have grown up, our first son is doing his university and second son has just graduated from high school. We are

assured that with God's help, he will also continue his studies to university. Our last born is completing primary 6.

4. The importance of family involvement in caring for sero-positive persons

When a person has been infected by HIV, he/she does not suffer only physically, the sickness also affects the patient psychologically, as well as family and social life. Although the family should be the first to know about the serological status of the infected person, it is not the case in most situations. Due to fear of being rejected, many people living with HIV/AIDS prefer to keep it quiet towards their respective families. The attitude of family members and especially that of the spouse plays an important role in the support of infected persons.

In the case of discordance, several couples tend to reject each other. Others choose to abstain from sex. In this case, the individual keeps thinking about the sero-positive status and that is not constructive.

Basing on our own experience, we can testify that contrary to what people say, a person who lives with HIV/AIDS needs a fulfilled life emotionally and sexually in the same way he/she needs a balanced diet and medication.

These days, we also inform the house workers about the health status of François because they must respect all his hours of rest, his diet and the time on which he takes his medication....

5. Message for couples infected and affected

Without love there is no way one can live positively with HIV/AIDS. Indeed for mature believers, HIV/AIDS should not force us to mutual rejection but instead it should present an occasion to experience love.

“...Love is powerful as death...Water cannot put it out, no flood can drown it...” *Songs of Songs 8:6-7*

6. Recommendations for those who intervene in the domain of HIV/AIDS

In most situations, we tend to ignore the power of the community, but now wisdom instructs us to realize that no one so called expert can pretend to bring magic solutions to problems that are identified in a community.

Let us hope that you will be blessed through our testimony.

If you need additional information, you can contact us:

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As part of the Firelight Foundation's Monitoring, Evaluation and Technical Assistance (META) Program, Firelight provides "Newsflashes" to share relevant resources and information with our active grantee-partners via weekly emails and via post on a monthly basis. We hope that by facilitating access to information for grassroots, community-focused organizations, programming for children and families, as well as organizational development, is enhanced. Past editions of the Firelight Newsflash can be found on our website: <http://www.firelightfoundation.org/newsflash.htm>.

We welcome your comments, feedback and ideas for upcoming Newsflashes at newsletter@firelightfoundation.org.