

By Davis Buyondo

Long before the first HIV/AIDS case was diagnosed in the 1980s in Kyeye sub-county, Kyotera district, the deadly virus had claimed dozens of lives.

Without any medical clue of what it was at the time, majority would relate AIDS to witchcraft. It is told that those infected would opt for shrines, mosques or churches for healing.

Since HIV was mainly transmitted through sexual intercourse, the faith-based organisations, mainly churches, focused their preachings on abstinence and being faithful. These have been their core underpinning for over 37 years.

In Greater Masaka region, comprising the districts of Masaka, Rakai, Kyotera, Lwengo, Lyantonde, Kalungu, Bukomansimbi, Kalangala and Sembabule, different faith-based organisations have been in the fight against HIV/AIDS, while several others joined the battle recently.

#### Masaka Diocese

"After realising that a strange disease was killing people without cure, the administration of my predecessor Bishop, Adrian Ddungu, began sensitising congregations and communities in the nine districts that it was not witchcraft," Bishop John Baptist Kaggwa of Masaka Diocese says.

He explained that they focused much on entry points, mainly Kasensero and Mutukula, a Uganda-Tanzanian border post (now in Kyotera). Having had no medicine to treat the disease, Kaggwa said they emphasised faithfulness and abstinence.

He adds that even after the first case was diagnosed, dozens continued dying due to lack of treatment.

"And as a result, many children were orphaned. There are about 800 child-headed families in the region. Imagine children left to look after their siblings," he says.

According to Kaggwa, general awareness campaigns in the form of music, dance and drama went on at least in every parish and schools in the diocese.

It was not until 1987, when the Medical Missionaries of Mary, began a unit at Kitovu Hospital to give palliative care for HIV/AIDS patients.

The unit later became known as Kitovu Mobile AIDS Organisation led by Robina Nakasirye Ssentongo, now the Kyotera Woman MP.

#### West Buganda Diocese

The Rev. Alice Kikulwe, the assistant health co-ordinator, said the dioceses has conducted health weeks every month of October for the last three years. In these programmes priests are given

# Where are faith-based organisations in HIV fight?



Faith-based organisations focused their preaching mainly on abstinence and being faithful to one's partner

counselling and training so as to counsel the congregants.

#### HIV/AIDS in parishes

"We deal with the spiritual and physical treatment. And we have been giving free HIV testing, counselling, and treatment of other ailments such as hepatitis and others. We have held these camps in 15 archdeaconries," she said. Kikulwe added that they are working closely with Rakai Health Sciences Programme (RHSP) to ensure effective HIV services, such as Prevention of Mother To Child Transmission

(PTCMT). She further said that RHSP plans to set up an anti-retroviral treatment (ART) clinic at the diocese, adding that by next year, it will be operational.

She argued that much as they have established initiatives to lessen the prevalence, the prevalence is still going up due to laxity and complacency among people in different communities.

"People tend to forget that HIV/AIDS still exists. We talk and do our part and then leave the decision in their hands. Now that infected

people look healthier, we should not give up sensitising people about HIV," she explained. However, she said has strongly emphasised abstinence and being faithful but does not promote condoms as per their church foundation.

Kikulwe explained that they left promotion of condom use to government.

#### Kalisizo Pentecostal

From 1989 to date, Bishop Charles Musisi, a senior pastor, says they have run different youth HIV/AIDS

projects. He said they used the meagre resources to sensitise people about HIV/AIDS and support children orphaned due to the disease.

"It was not until the Geneva Global project started under the Bush Fund in 2008.

However, it was phased out, but we continued with it because many people had come on board and we could not neglect them," he says.

As a church, they still conduct health Sundays with sessions mainly focusing on health.

In addition, they hold conferences every first week of May, where they and invite students and youth from different communities to talk about life skills and various health-related topics.

He said they invite different people Born-again (or not) for HIV testing and counselling to ensure they are well in the spirit and in flesh.

Therefore, he said, we encourage those on ART not to miss a dose but to take the drugs as we pray and counsel them. And through health education sessions, all that is preached must be in line with health such as basic hygiene, nutrition and HIV/AIDS.

He explained that they usually pick on health topics, debate them and later get professional guidance. However, they are still facing a challenge of ignorance and stigma, where people fear to open up.

He adds that the problem is exacerbated by poverty since

the infected cannot eat well yet Anti-Retroviral drugs requires a good diet. At the church, Benon Mayombwe, Co-ordinates a ministry called Youth of Destiny, which builds their capacity in the fight against HIV/AIDS through abstinence.

Mayombwe, also a medical laboratory technician at Rakai Hospital, says he directly deals with youth who are most susceptible to catching HIV.

"We also advise people on the tests they should take during marriage preparations such as blood group, hepatitis, Sickle cell and urinary tract infections (UTIs)," he said.

About the church's position on condom use being one of the means of preventing HIV, Mayombwe says in the church setting condoms do not come in.

But when it comes to communities outside the church, they encourage them to use condoms.

"Although sex before and outside marriage is sin (protected and unprotected), the one with condoms is a bit safer than the one who does not use them," he argued.

#### Uganda Muslim Supreme Council

Haji Nsereko Mutumba, the spokesperson of the Uganda Muslim Supreme Council, says it all begins with decent dressing for both men and women that ensures no arousal into sexual acts.

He added that they preach against adultery or fornication, alcoholism and other behaviours that can lead one into a trap of contracting HIV.

"Much as our faith permits more than one wife, it encourages being faithful to them. Going outside it is committing sin against Allah," he noted. Through other health initiatives, Mutumba said they encourage testing and counselling, as well as treatment of those infected with the virus. He explained that the different health centres have been put in place to offer HIV/AIDS services to Muslims, including circumcision and PMTCT.

However, before marriage, the bride-and-groom-to-be are taken through serious medical tests for HIV, sickle cell and others that may affect their marriage. Concerning condom use, Mutumba says they discourage it, except only for discordant couples.

"Why should a married man and woman have protected sex? But those who are not married should abstain.

## Faith-based non-governmental organisations

Kyotera Woman MP Robina Ssentongo (Kitovu Mobile) explains that different projects have been set up to support people Living with HIV/AIDS (PLWHA) and orphans in order to improve their lives so as to live longer.

She says they also work with different communities in the areas of prevention, comprehensive care and treatment plus capacity building.

Still through the diocese, Kitovu Mobile started sub-projects to support to their children. And through this project, she added, infected people are given food supplements, among other items.

In addition, the orphans' project cares for children whose parents died of HIV/AIDS. Under the project, the organisation offers scholastic materials such as books addition to training them to sustain their families. "Training PLWHA and orphans to modern farming helps them to be self-sufficient than waiting for aid" she says.

Other projects include grandmothers' empowerment, which cares for the elderly, as well as child protection initiatives to promote their rights and others.

A Seventh Day Adventist community-based organisation called Orphans, Widows and People Living With HIV/AIDS Welfare Association (PLWHA), has started greater initiatives in Lwengo district to support PLWHA.

At least 120 families have been enrolled to benefit from the project. Apart from the usual testing, counselling and treatment, the organisation offers monthly food rations (one 25kg sack of maize flour, beans and other supplements).

OWLHWA executive director, Wilberforce Busulwa says they have lobbied funds and built 50 houses and hope to build more in 2019. "This helps to fight stigma among PLWHA. With such assistance they get hope," he explains.