

Christian Family Life Education Program in Namibia

Churches approach taboo subjects through new curriculum they helped develop.

Windhoek, Namibia – Elicia Naujoma, a 12-year-old Namibian girl, recently attended a workshop about reproductive health and HIV prevention – not in a school or clinic, but through her church. “They taught me more about my body, about how our bodies are not to be touched by anyone, and how to protect against rape,” she says.

Churches in Namibia and other countries have not always been willing to sponsor workshops on taboo topics such as puberty, sexuality, and violence. Late in 2005, Elicia was one of more than 200 youth in her region of the country to attend a weekend workshop on these topics, coordinated with churches. Churches held parent-youth activities to discuss sexuality. They also sponsored pastors’ forums during which adults discussed how their churches can work with youth to prevent early sexual debut and its consequences, including pregnancy and HIV infection.

These events, working with a new Christian Family Life Education (CFLE) curriculum, have already reached nearly 1,500 youth in Namibia. Launched officially in July 2005, the CFLE curriculum provides resource materials in short modules for younger youth from a Christian perspective. The workshops involve numerous participatory activities and opportunities for practicing new skills. The project is led by the Change of Life Styles (COLS) Project, a Namibian faith-based organization, and Family Health International (FHI)/YouthNet, with funding from the President’s Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief through the U.S. Agency for International Development/Namibia.

The CLFE program evolved from a 2003 participatory learning and action (PLA) assessment led by FHI/YouthNet and COLS. More than 600 youth, ages 8 to 16, took part in the

assessment in the communities of Windhoek, Walvis Bay, and Swakopmund. The youth discussed their knowledge, attitudes, and behaviors related to reproductive health and HIV/AIDS. Fifty-nine youth received special training and then led trainings with other youth and conducted focus group discussions with adult community stakeholders. The 59 youth were selected from churches, faith-based organizations, and other nongovernmental groups. (For more on the PLA process, see YouthNet Brief No. 8.)

The Namibia PLA results showed that the youth ranked churches very low as places to seek counsel on HIV/AIDS and related issues. “Pastors normally don’t talk to us, they only greet us,” said one youth. The youth participants said their relationships with churches occurred mainly through their parents.

The PLA included concrete recommendations for addressing the needs of young adolescents (ages 8 to 12) for information about sexual and reproductive health. One recommendation was to develop a comprehensive curriculum that faith-based organizations could use in HIV-prevention activities with children.

“We all knew the potential strength and influence of faith institutions on young people’s lives,” said Clive Willemse, director of COLS, “so we couldn’t understand why youth ranked them so low.” The PLA provided some answers.

Adults in the PLA discussion groups said that since younger youth spend a lot of time in Sunday school, it is an ideal place to discuss a range of problems related to sex and sexuality. “But they also acknowledged that pastors seldom approach children or young adolescents” about these issues, the PLA

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final report concluded. "The adults agreed that such attitudes must change and that pastors and Sunday school teachers should be better prepared to tackle these issues."

COLS shared the PLA findings with the Council of Churches in Namibia and the West Coast Ecumenical Forum to seek support for the proposed CFLE program. "The findings were a real eye-opener for the pastors," said Willemse.

The CFLE curriculum was developed through a series of workshops with COLS staff and volunteers, FHI/YouthNet, and pastors. This participatory process helped generate support from pastors and provide churches with a greater sense of program ownership. In late 2004, COLS sought endorsement of the program from churches, which helped identify potential educators to facilitate the program with youth. With these contacts, in the first year, COLS and FHI/YouthNet recruited and trained more than 30 church leaders as "master trainers" in using the CFLE curriculum. These leaders, in turn, can train others to use the curriculum.

The intensive effort of the PLA revealed the importance of talking about sexuality and HIV in this country, where more than 20 percent of adults are infected with HIV and more than half of the population is under the age of 15 years. The CFLE workshops pointed out the need for youth and adults to keep talking with each other. "The boys did not feel comfortable to talk about these things initially," said Danny Morkel, who works with COLS. "But as discussions became more involved and open, the boys also began to participate."

In October 2005, COLS and YouthNet completed an assessment among pastors, master trainers, educators, and youth to obtain feedback on the CFLE project and to begin determining its effectiveness. The assessment found that in addition to addressing sexuality and reproductive health issues, the CFLE is helping youth develop life skills such as family and civic responsibility, social skills, and personal safety tactics. Youth said that the program helped them strengthen personal values such as truthfulness, respectfulness, and kindness and to improve their relationships with family members and friends. Their main recommendation was for the CFLE program to have longer and more frequent sessions.

Church leaders and educators said that youth have become more open in talking about sex and sexuality, abstinence, and substance abuse since the inception of the CFLE program. Their main concern was that parents were reluctant to speak with their children about reproductive health issues. They recommended that the program develop closer relationships with church leadership in promoting the CFLE program and to continue sensitizing and encouraging parents to attend sessions and special activities with their children. COLS hopes to expand the project to more churches in the future and expects to reach another 1,500 youth in the first half of 2006. It wants to increase outreach to men as well, encouraging more participation from fathers, who are notably absent at most events.

— *Brian Goercke*

Brian Goercke serves as Program Officer for FHI in Namibia.

YouthNet Briefs is an activity of YouthNet, a five-year program funded by the U.S. Agency for International Development to improve reproductive health and prevent HIV among young people. The YouthNet team is led by Family Health International and includes CARE USA and RTI International.