

GOING DEEPER 2 | AIDS

Southeast Asian Experiences of Children in Families affected by AIDS: New Life for Thai project – “*Christian response and remedy to HIV and AIDS*”

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NAZARANE COMPASSIONATE MINISTRIES THAILAND/ SOUTH EAST ASIA

Introduction

The Church of the Nazarene (CON) was founded to transform the world by spreading scriptural holiness. The CON world-region areas, include: Africa, Asia-Pacific, Canada, Caribbean, Eurasia, Mexico and Central America, South America and eight Regions in the U.S. (Central USA, East Central USA, Eastern USA, North Central USA, Northwest USA, South Central USA, Southeast USA and Southwest USA)

The CON is actively involved in the HIV and AIDS ministry. At the 2001 General Assembly (a supreme doctrine-formulating and lawmaking body) of the International Church of the Nazarene, a statement was formally approved by the delegation and added to the “Appendix” section of the Manual of the Church of the Nazarene, 2001-2005 [904.17] Note: See also 2005-2009 [903.15].

“Since 1981, our world has been confronted with a most devastating disease known as HIV/AIDS. In view of the deep need of HIV/AIDS sufferers, Christian compassion motivates us to become accurately informed about HIV/AIDS. Christ would have us to find a way to communicate His love and concern for these sufferers in any and every country of the world.” (2001)

In 2002, Nazarene World Mission Nazarene Compassionate Ministries issued a statement to cooperate with all the Regions of the Church and with its various educational entities, to:

1. Inform and educate Nazarenes on the issues of the HIV/AIDS pandemic, accessing appropriate tools and materials;
2. Teach:
 - Scriptural principles of purity before marriage
 - Faithfulness within marriage
 - Avoidance of risky behaviour patterns; and
3. Empower the Global Church, in partnership with other Faith-Based agencies, to develop programs of care for the infected and affected, without discrimination to any.

Presentation

Since 1999, my husband Tomoyuki (a Japanese) and I have been Nazarene missionaries in Thailand/Southeast Asia Field. We have 2 districts in Thailand: Thailand District and Northern Districts (Hilltribes). I have responsibility as Nazarene Compassionate Ministries (NCM) Coordinator for Thailand/Southeast Asia Field. We recently moved to the tsunami-hit area in Phang-Nga province last July 17, 2007.

I have been involved in two major compassionate ministries in Thailand - HIV and AIDS and help to the Tsunami affected persons. I will share today about the compassion to the children in families infected and affected with HIV and AIDS. Many of these children are the “invisible and marginalized.” They were abandoned, discriminated, forgotten, etc.

I had opportunity to meet these children through the Thailand District New Life for Thai (NLFT) HIV and AIDS ministry. Through the vision of the Thailand District Superintendent, he approached me about having partnership with NCM to start a HIV and AIDS project in Thailand. It is interesting to note that he shared this to me before I heard about the World Mission Statement response to HIV and AIDS. Presently, the partnership included the Nazarene Ministries Development Foundation of the Thailand Church of the Nazarene. Also, I joined the team as one of the project Consultant.

The NLFT is a compassionate ministry project to help those suffering from HIV and AIDS in Thai society. The volunteers caregivers are members of the Church of the Nazarene and are trained to share love and compassion with people living with HIV and AIDS (PLWHA). NLFT offers services of counseling, visiting, educating and training PLWHA. It also involves working with hospitals, health centers, and NGOs, who refer patients to the NLFT team. AIDS awareness/education seminars and training are also conducted in Nazarene Churches. Several PLWHA and their family members received Christ as their personal Savior.

When we started the project in April 2002, there was wrong understanding from some members that if volunteers visit AIDS patients, they will be the carrier of AIDS in the church to children and adults.

Through this AIDS ministry, I was able to share and preach about HIV and AIDS to my home church/district in Japan, family and churches in the Philippines and churches I visited in the U.S.

The conference theme “*Responding to Invisible and Marginalized Children*” reminds me of children who are infected and affected by HIV and AIDS.

Ministering to the children is not easy especially when we see them crying in grief because the father left them, asking questions why neighbors destroyed toys and clothes not knowing that she was discriminated, separated from brothers (affected) because a home for children do not accept infected children, abandoned by parents, etc.

Cases:

- Pinky is 9 years old. When I first met her, she was 5 years old and had many friends in the neighborhood. She was infected since birth. However, the neighbors later found out that she was infected. The other children did not play with her anymore. She wondered why they stopped coming to play with her. When the volunteer caregiver visited her she said, “*I do not know why the toys and clothes you gave me, our neighbor destroyed them.*” The volunteer caregiver and I could not answer her quickly and assured her of care. We hugged her and she responded. We showed her some more clothes (second hand clothes donated to the NLFT) and toys to give her. We could not say straight to her the situation. What she knew is that we love her.
- Baby is 8 years old. She is handicapped – cannot walk. Her mother is separated from the husband. She had difficulty taking care of her. The NLFT team helped Baby by referring to a Home for handicapped children. The mother had another man and not able to visit Baby at the home regularly. She also has TB. The NLFT team continued to visit and care for Baby. She is now ready to study next year but the Home needed quite a big amount to help her with her studies. She needs a helper to be with her while in school. We continue to look for special support for her studies.
- Ana is 12 years old. She was infected from birth. She did not know her HIV status when the NLFT team visited her. She likes to study and gets scholarship support from NLFT project. She was able to watch the Jesus Film shown at their home and she prayed to receive Christ. She read a brochure about HIV and AIDS and associated her sickness with it. She directly asked her grandmother if she was infected. When she came to know her status she said, “*Even if I am infected, I am better than other kids. The NLFT volunteer caregiver visits and care for me.*” She has a brother. They are both under the care of a grandmother and Aunt whose health is weak. They could not take care of their needs.

Through referral of the NLFT, Boy is now in a Home for affected children. Ana could not join because the Home's project does not include infected children.

Though there are difficulties encountered by the NLFT team and these children (infected and affected), there were ways to overcome them. The children valued their fun times with the volunteer caregivers. The NLFT has activities to bring children to the zoo, parks, museums, etc. They also learned songs, Bible stories, games, etc. While the parents have training, sharing, singing, playing games, and praying, their children are able to join with separate fun activities. They become part of the family of NLFT. They learned to love.

The children need to belong to a loving family. The NLFT became part of their family.

Through activities together with these children, their lives turned to joy. They learned to express love by hugging and kissing the NLFT team and felt secure. They began to attend church and mingle with youth and church members.

New Learnings

There are many groups and organizations working with children infected and affected by HIV and AIDS. In Thailand, very few churches are directly involved in HIV and AIDS ministries. Most of them are NGOs, foundations and organizations. The NLFT volunteer caregivers/staff are all Christians and church members. The services do not involve only support, help and care. It also involves showing some love and compassion of Jesus to the children. Some children in the NLFT project learned about the love of God. Their character changed. They learned to love and pray. They enjoyed mingling with Christians in church. They enjoyed life. I recalled one AIDS patient shared in one of our seminars, "I observed that the NLFT are doing this help to AIDS patients not as a job. They come to help and show love." This is the love of God to all... to the children!

Some parents shared they are aware that there is no cure to their disease. Their hope and joy are their children. They want to prepare for their children's future. They are happy when they see their children happy. The NLFT team has been a part of making the children happy and their parents, too!

It is my hope that you will leave this workshop with proper awareness and education about HIV and AIDS and a challenge to have a part in giving hope through Christ in the lives of children infected and affected by HIV and AIDS. I believe the experiences I share to you today will have more meaning if you can make a difference in your church and community in response to HIV and AIDS.

"There is still no cure to HIV and AIDS. But I believe that Christians can help "cure" the hearts of children in giving them hope and knowing the true meaning of life. I see one thing common that Christians will embrace – love and compassion. – Azucena "Ceny" Hirahara

Question and Answer

If a child, who is an AIDS patient, joins the children's Sunday School and worship service in your church, will he/she feel welcomed in your church? If no, why? What will you do?