

No topic taboo for Catholic AIDS ministers

Karen Osborne

Florida Catholic correspondent

WINTER GARDEN — “No referrals, no treatment, just, ‘Oh, by the way, you have full-blown AIDS,’” Lynda Canatsey recalled. “They didn’t expect me to live a year.”

Canatsey was signing the hospital release papers after recovering from a bad case of pneumonia when a doctor came to tell her the news. That 2007 hospitalization should have been a “red flag” right away, she said. But Canatsey never thought a diagnosis of AIDS could even be possible. She lives on disability. She doesn’t engage in risky behaviors. She hasn’t been in a relationship of any sort for six years.

This week, Canatsey and her parents — Jean and Jack Canatsey, parishioners of St. Mary Magdalen Parish in Altamonte Springs — attended the second annual Southeastern Conference of Catholic AIDS Ministers assembly at Resurrection Parish in Winter Garden in hope of getting some of the answers that have been so long in coming.

“People here will be asking questions that are taboo in public,” Canatsey explained about the Aug. 5-6 gathering.

Attendees came from across Florida, as well as from Georgia, Illinois, Ohio, Hawaii and El Salvador for the gathering. The regional group of ministers formed three years ago after the closure of the National Catholic AIDS Network made it harder for AIDS ministers working in Catholic churches, hospitals and in the community to share their stories, new information, developments and best practices.

In straitened economic times, funding for AIDS ministries is often the first to go — but “when it seems like doors are closing, we have to open windows and share what we have,” explained Southeastern Conference of Catholic AIDS Ministers speaker and co-founder Irene Miranda, director of the Archdiocese of Atlanta’s HIV/AIDS ministry. “SECCAM came out of a vision — we know we have a responsibility to be a voice for the voiceless. It is our concern when our brothers and sisters are sick. It

is our concern when they are in pain.”

The organization, she said, wants to make sure that ministers are prepared to meet the needs of those infected and affected by AIDS.

COMPLACENCY SETS IN

Participants began the conference at a Mass celebrated by Bishop Thomas Wenski, who recalled his days as pastor of a Haitian parish in Miami that was greatly affected by the disease. In the early ’80s, most of his Haitian parishioners were in their 20s and 30s; nevertheless, he still buried 80 or 90 people a year, many of them AIDS victims, he said.

In the early days of the epidemic, AIDS ministers had to overcome “ignorance and fear,” Bishop Wenski told the gathered ministers. “Today, you

still have to fight against ignorance — but, perhaps, complacency has replaced fear.”

That complacency is partly responsible for a new re-emergence of the disease since 2003, according to Miranda, who developed an AIDS education curriculum for the Archdiocese of Miami in the mid-1980s. Today, there is “less education and less awareness” about AIDS among all segments of the population, leading to a greater spread of the disease; and, she explained, in no place in the country is HIV/AIDS growing faster than in the Southeast.

Florida is among the states that have been particularly hard hit, Miranda said. “Myth No. 1: AIDS is under control in the United States. People have grown complacent. That complacency is not an accident,” she explained.

These days, infection rates in the South disproportionately affect communities of color — Hispanics and African-Americans who are less likely to see a doctor until it’s too late, who more likely to be mobile, and who are less likely to want to talk about it. Other communities at risk include youths, prison inmates and the elderly, Miranda said.

‘AIDS DOESN’T DISCRIMINATE’

Ainhoa Tollinche, a world religions teacher at St. Bernard High School in Miami, runs the school’s



four-year AIDS education curriculum and advises its AIDS Awareness Club. She brought binders full of teen-tested ideas, Powerpoint presentations, activities and small group activities to share with assembly participants. Most important for teens to know? “AIDS doesn’t discriminate,” she said.

Also in attendance were Kathryn Hampel and Peg Nye of St. Timothy Parish in Lady Lake, who attended assembly to help restart an AIDS ministry at their parish. As an AIDS minister in the Diocese of Paterson, N.J., Hampel once stayed with a young man who was dying from the disease because his of the shame his mother felt; she stayed away from his bedside because “she was too pained and embarrassed.”

“His mother was so grateful that I could be there, because she couldn’t,” Hampel said.

The spread of AIDS affects the idyllic life of retirees in The Villages, too, she said. “We get the phone calls,” she said, explaining that many of the residents of the retirement community in central Florida have children or grandchildren with AIDS, and they “don’t know where to turn,” she said. The elderly often feel too ashamed or frightened of talking about what they can do for their family members or how they feel with friends or neighbors, Hampel explained.

In Catholic AIDS ministry, “the Lord opens doors and you have to be willing to walk through them. And this is the beauty of this ministry — God’s love is available to so many people, as long as we’re willing to go there,” she said.

FEAR STILL RAMPANT

Among those sharing their knowledge during the assembly were Michelle Fisher, director of the Diocese of Orlando’s Youth and Young Adult Ministry, who spoke on how to teach chastity to teens; Carl Berger, head of a successful AIDS ministry for native Hawaiians in Honolulu; Sandy Gallagher, the program director for the AIDS ministry of the Diocese of Venice; Dominican Sister Rachel Sena and Maria Cristina Acosta of the Florida Catholic AIDS Network; and Jesuit Father Kenneth Overberg, professor of theology at Xavier University.

AIDS quilts made by parishioners of Good Shepherd Parish in Orlando in memory of friends and family members who died from AIDS were displayed in the main hall. Small groups and small parishes such as Good Shepherd can do quite a bit to help those with the disease, according to Janice Griffin of Our Lady Of Lourdes Parish in Atlanta, who came to speak

about her parish ministry to an Atlanta AIDS residence.

Through the parish project, which involved the ministries such as the choir, the men’s group and religious education classes, parishioners at Our Lady of Lourdes “realized that people living with AIDS are people just like you and me. They are our neighbors.”

But silence — and fear — still rules the day when it comes to AIDS, participants say.

Canatsey has been rejected by friends and family because of her diagnosis; they’re afraid that she will infect them, even though science has proven that AIDS cannot be passed by simple acts such as touching, hugging, or sharing a water bottle or a Communion cup, she said.

Father. Dennis Rausch of the Archdiocese of Miami still hears tales of Catholic churches around the country that deny the Eucharist to AIDS patients for fear of infection — most recently, he told the gathering of writing to one Texas parish that was afraid of allowing a child with AIDS to participate in first Communion with the rest of his class.

One Kissimmee Catholic, who attended the gathering to get information on becoming an AIDS minister, has lost friendships to the truth: She is HIV-positive. Diagnosed when she was pregnant, the doctors counseled her to abort. She chose otherwise, and her baby was born without the disease. Some members of her family still do not know about the diagnosis she received nearly two decades ago, which is why she wished to remain anonymous. “I know I have to tell (them),” she said. “I just need an angel to be with me.”

In AIDS ministry, “there’s a lot of work that needs to be done,” Miranda explained. “We need to do a better job at getting information out there. AIDS has never been just a gay white disease. We as a Church need to be a place of welcome, so that we stop burying people in silence.”

For many people with AIDS, even a little more awareness and understanding could make a world of difference, according to Canatsey. She’d like to begin with something very simple — for example, to be connected with a real Seminole County support group for people with AIDS. It’s harder than it looks, she says.

“They keep on sending me to Alcoholics Anonymous groups, because they say ‘it’s the closest thing,’” she said.