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## What is involved in twinning parishes in Ireland with those in Africa in an effort to assist in the fight against HIV/AIDS?

by

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### 1. Introduction

In my earlier paper on AIDS in Africa<sup>1</sup>, I proposed that the institutional Church in Ireland should establish, in close association with its counterparts in Africa, a programme for twinning parishes in this country with those in the countries in Southern Africa<sup>2</sup> aimed at helping in the fight against AIDS. Southern Africa was chosen as the target area because it is there the pandemic is greatest at the moment but, obviously, the case for twinning is also strong for other parts of Africa and of the developing world where HIV and AIDS present major problems<sup>3</sup>.

This proposal envisaged establishing groups of people in each parish who in association with likeminded groups in individual African parishes and communities would plan and implement action programmes aimed at relieving the problems of those living with AIDS, be it those who are infected, family members or communities in which HIV/AIDS is rampant. These programmes should address some or all of the main aspects of the fight – prevention, treatment, support of those infected and their communities, relief of poverty.<sup>4</sup>

Before entering into detail as to how such a programme might be organised, the following preliminary points should be made:

- Despite the available statistics on HIV/AIDS and the stories of the effects of the disease on whole communities, some of which were referred to in my first AIDS paper, it would seem that there is not a general appreciation of the horrific effects the disease, in common with other diseases such as TB, malaria and pneumonia, is having on African society. Participants in twinning/partnership programmes would need to accept and re-act sympathetically to the reality of the AIDS crisis in Africa and to join in expressing the need for Christian communities to accept their responsibilities for participation in a programme aimed at fighting the disease. The Irish have been prepared since the Middle Ages to bring the Christian message to

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<sup>1</sup> “How can we assist in the fight against AIDS in Africa?”

<sup>2</sup>For present purposes Southern Africa is considered to include South Africa, Botswana, Lesotho and Swaziland. While, in total numbers, South Africa has the highest number of people infected with AIDS, 25% of the population of Lesotho is infected and in Swaziland the infection rate is 42.6% and, in the case of pregnant women aged 25 to 29, the rate is 56.3%.

<sup>3</sup> The choice of Southern Africa was also based on the fact that Bishop Liam Slattery OFM, Bishop of Kokstad in South Africa has indicated his willingness to participate in such a twinning programme. Kokstad is a rural diocese, about the size of Munster, close to the border with Lesotho. It is among the poorest regions in South Africa and is one of those with the highest incidence of HIV/AIDS. The diocese comprises 15 parishes, has 18 priests (4,000 Catholics per priest) and 54 other religious (16 male, 38 female).

<sup>4</sup> A note on Catholic Church policies and activities on HIV/AIDS in South Africa based on a report prepared for the World Council of Churches is set out in Appendix 1.

those in distress, be it in Europe or beyond. They continue to work in the World's neediest fields but much more effort is now required to face up to the AIDS pandemic;

- An anti-AIDS programme while demanding strong financial support would also seek to bring necessary skills, be it professional, planning, advisory, implementation and management skills, to bear on the crisis. It is likely that these skills would for the most part continue to be based in Ireland and the programme would have to devise means to transfer the expertise involved to the African parishes. Wherever available, local African expertise, should be called on;
- At an operational level, while it is envisaged that parish anti-AIDS activities should involve as wide community participation as possible, the strong support of the parish clergy being, of course, an important element in that involvement.

## **2. Establishment of twinning arrangements**

Establishment of links with parishes in Africa can come about in a variety of ways:

- through contacts with religious orders, known missionary priests or other religious in Africa;
- individual or group involvement within an Irish parish in AIDS projects in Africa;
- contacts with non-governmental organisations (NGOs) or individual aid workers.

A number of Irish parishes are already engaged in programmes involving African Church communities. These may have originated in funding local Church projects – building of churches, schools, educational and health care projects<sup>5</sup>. What is now suggested is that existing twinning arrangements be adapted, as considered appropriate, to meet anti-AIDS programme needs.

In recent years, there has also been a strong trend for schools in Ireland to send children to Africa where they can see for themselves the gravity of the HIV/AIDS problem. Such visits have a strong effect on the visiting children and these also provide a framework within which twinning/partnership programmes may be undertaken. In other cases, individuals or groups from Ireland have identified needs in the fight against AIDS – building of houses, programmes for construction of centres for the care of those living with AIDS (be it orphans or others infected with the virus) or provision of educational facilities.

On a more ambitious level, consideration might be given at Diocesan or Hierarchy levels to involvement of appropriate Catholic Bishops Conferences - the Southern African Catholic Bishops Conference (SACBC) in the case of Southern Africa. SACBC is proactively involved in pioneering community responses to the AIDS pandemic<sup>6</sup>. Other Catholic aid organisations, such as Caritas International are also working with the SACBC in their anti-AIDS campaign.

To the extent that linkages are initiated at parish level, it will be a matter for each parish to explore the various possibilities for twinning, all the time taking cognisance of similar activities with those being undertaken by other groups, be they Catholic or

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<sup>5</sup> For a description of partnership projects involving 14 parishes in Cos. Mayo and Galway see point 7 below.

<sup>6</sup> For further details see Appendix 1.

other Christian parishes, NGOs, or other bodies<sup>7</sup>. The question of coordination is discussed in more detail at point 8.2 below

### **3. Composition of Parish Groups in Ireland**

The composition of each group will depend on a variety of factors, including

- Strength of interest of individual parishioners or groups,
- Existing contacts with target parish,
- Content of proposed actions and plans,
- Professional and other skills likely to be called on by the group,
- Need to coordinate with other existing parish commitments.

Very likely a parish group will be formed following a general parish meeting where the parish priest or someone deputed by him would present an initial outline twinning proposal. Part of the purpose of that meeting would be to select as members of the group people who might be in a position to define the content and thrust of the partnership plan. The group might also include others, not necessarily parishioners (e.g. organisers of student exchange programmes, members of religious orders with relevant experience of working in Africa and other experts who could contribute to the programme planning process).

The preliminary group so formed would be given the task of drawing up the preliminary plan within a limited timeframe in consultation with all relevant interested bodies and would report back after an appropriate interval to the Parish Council or other appropriate authority.

### **4. Preparing the outline plan**

The process of preparing the plan depends in the first instance on the amount of information available to the group. Have they identified a target parish? Have they any idea of the problems to be tackled in that area or how to go about them?

Let us assume that those driving the initiative within the Irish parish have some ideas to bring to the formulation of an outline plan. They have probably been in touch with a counterpart in the target parish or diocese, be it a religious, an institution or whoever. They may have discussed it with a religious Order with a strong working base in Africa. The planning group would in such circumstances have before it a preliminary proposal to help an anti-AIDS project or programme in the target African parish with, perhaps, an indication of what was involved in terms of costs and rough content of the project<sup>8</sup>.

The group would then have to consider how the Irish partner might participate in developing the project. Consideration would also have to be given to the financial consequences of its programme (including possible effects on other parish

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<sup>7</sup> In the original AIDS in Africa paper I recommended that other Christian Churches in a parish would join with the Catholic parish in the twinning programme. Indeed, parish partnerships should involve all like-minded groups, be they Church or not

<sup>8</sup> Bishop Slattery of Kokstad has a programme at present in which women in 14 parishes provide day-care for AIDS orphans and other infected people. He wishes to extend the programme and to improve the facilities which are, at present, primitive. He also wishes to upgrade the training of the women carers. There is plenty of scope here for participation by several parishes in parish twinning plans.

commitments), as well as any staffing implications (which would, perhaps, be part-time, at least in the first instance).

It would be necessary to examine how the Irish parish could link up with the African parish. The group would need to know the characteristics of the African partner, including an outline of how the latter could contribute to the development (e.g. through provision of local labour, expertise, project management, coordination with public authorities). It would also be important to have leadership of the African partner designated by the relevant Church authorities. It is important that at African level a suitable person should act as programme advisor and monitor and that he/she should generally run with the project. Networking with religious institutions in Africa – or, indeed, in Ireland - which might participate in programmes (e.g. in managing projects such as care centres and hospices) will also be needed. In reviewing the role of the partner, account should be taken of possible obstacles on the African side, be they bureaucratic, political or whatever<sup>9</sup>.

## **5. Plan preparation and agreement**

Following completion of an outline plan, say, 2/3 months after commencement of the launch of the twinning initiative, the group should submit the plan to the Parish Council or the body nominated to approve the twinning proposals. This presentation should facilitate wider consideration of the initiative leading to decisions on projects to be agreed with the partner parish as a basis for an action programme.

Consideration would also cover issues such as level of detailed participation by individuals or groups in Ireland, whether in the parish or elsewhere (e.g. Trocaire and/or other NGOs, experts), financial implications both in terms of the project(s) and procedures for raising funds. Account would also need to be taken of any local relevant African aspects of the plan – implementation timetable, local financial and other contributions (including provision of local management), monitoring and evaluation procedures, any training requirements and how they might be met.

It is to be hoped that discussion of these issues should bring the plan to the stage where formal negotiations should commence with the African partner with a view to finalising the content of the plan and agreeing an implementation programme. The procedure for carrying out negotiations with the partner might involve some travel to the twinned parish region by a few members of the parish group either to meet the partners or to discuss with relevant authorities (e.g. the local Bishop, the SACBC AIDS Office).

In completing the plan, some legal or other professional considerations might arise – for example, issues surrounding property to be acquired for the project. To the extent possible, it would probably be more appropriate to engage local African experts to carry out such professional work, subject to general supervision by the local Bishop or the SACBC AIDS Office in the case of Southern Africa. A formal project agreement will also need to be drafted.

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<sup>9</sup> Political corruption, whether at local or higher levels, may present problems. It will also be necessary to agree projects with local chiefs and to take account of land tenure arrangements. These are, however, issues mainly affecting the African partner.

## 6. Plan Implementation

Once the draft plan has been agreed and the project agreement signed, the implementation phase will commence. The Irish parish will know what activities are called for and will have designated someone, whether a staff member or a suitable volunteer, to direct the plan. The director will call on whoever have roles to play in the implementation process and will oversee that process, engaging as, appropriate, in required networking and consultation with relevant organisations and individuals. It will also be necessary to keep in close contact with responsible people in the partner parish/diocese to ensure progress in implementing the plan and to deal with any problems that may arise. The director should also report back at regular, say, monthly intervals to the parish group on progress and on matters calling for parish decisions. It would also be important to publish a regular newsletter (half yearly or yearly as deemed appropriate) containing information on progress and seeking parish comment.

## 7 Case study in parish partnerships

A significant exercise in parish twinning has been in operation for almost a quarter of a century between parishes in Cos. Mayo and Galway and those in Kenya, Tanzania and, more recently, Malawi and Mozambique<sup>10</sup>. The initiative started in 1982 when the people in Westport (pop.3,500) twinned with Aror (pop.25,000) in NW Kenya in consultation with the Irish Missionary Union (IMU) and the Medical Missionaries of Mary (MMM) who then ran the mission in Aror. This area was chosen not only because of its special need but was one where a positive contribution could be made by a partnership between local communities in Ireland and Africa.

The programme for Aror covered healthcare, small scale agricultural assistance and educational facilities. Up to the end of 2004, funding of almost €400,000 had been sent from Westport for the development of health, education and community facilities. The Westport/Aror partnership is helping the people of Aror to deal with the AIDS crisis through the provision of an AIDS counselor, who not only gives guidance but, with the patient's consent, tests for the disease and gives ongoing support. The partnership is also funding an AIDS educator to work with young people in schools and the community, educating them about the dangers of casual sex and challenging them to change their behaviour. Most recently, the Westport/Aror partnership decided to adopt, in association with MMM, a new project involving a health centre in Mukuru, one of Nairobi's slums, that offers AIDS-related treatment and counseling.

The Westport initiative of 1982 has since been taken up by a number of other parishes in Cos. Mayo and Galway – Mulranny, Currane, Kiltimagh, Ballina, Clare Island, Ballinasloe, all partnered by parishes in Kenya, and Ballintubber, Atherny, Tourmakeady, Carnacow, Roundford who partner parishes in Tanzania, Claremorris (Malawi), Belmullet (Mozambique). These partnerships engage in a wide range of support activities - famine relief, involvement in AIDS programmes, especially in Tanzania, maintenance of clinics, antenatal care, provision of lab facilities, water and energy projects, provision of vehicles, drugs, various economic projects,

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<sup>10</sup> A fascinating description of the development of the Westport/Aror partnership is contained in "Letters from Africa" published by the Partnership in 1997 as 'a Commemoration of its first 15 years'

sponsorship of students, child day-care centres, educational programmes, etc.

The following are some guidelines for setting up partnerships drawn up by the Westport group:

- The aim of a partnership is to create an awareness of the developing world within communities in the developed world. We need to break down the immensity of the problem of underdevelopment and disease to manageable proportions and give people an opportunity to become involved in a personal way, while at the same time creating an awareness of what day to day life is like in less fortunate parts of the world;
- The Westport/Aron Partnership is an association of like-minded, highly motivated individuals from every section of the community. Despite the essential work of the Sisters, and the welcome support of bishops and clergy on both sides, the partnership is primarily a lay movement;
- Pick an area in the developing world with, if possible, an Irish presence, where English is spoken and which is reasonably accessible. The Government should also be amenable to outside help;
- Choose an area/project where you are likely to achieve an early success;
- Partnerships between Irish communities and those in the developing world must have a conduit of support for both communities. MMM have filled this need for Westport. The policy of the Sisters is to indiginise their missions and make the people they serve as self-sufficient as possible;
- While partnership involves fund-raising, experience has shown that the best way to sustain partnership is to get as many people as possible to contribute small amounts on a regular basis;
- No deduction for administration;
- Communication between partners is essential – letters, photographs, visits in both directions;
- Aid should be developmental rather than relief;
- Learn from the mistakes of others and consult with those such as Westport who have been down the road.

## **8. Other Considerations**

### **8.1 Corporate Organisation**

In developing a twinning programme, parishes here would need to examine what formal organisational structure would be most appropriate for their work. It would be necessary to acquire charitable status in the context of its financial activities. The parish would no doubt also seek legal advice on the various aspects of its corporate responsibilities, including programme evaluation and control (see point 8.4 below).

### **8.2 Coordination**

Consultation and coordination are essential at all stages of the parish twinning process in order to

- Maximise information flow;
- Avoid overlapping;
- Ensure that the various activities are carried out at the appropriate level, be it parish, groups of parishes, diocese, NGO or other;

Maximisation of the flow of relevant information is essential in order to facilitate the parish in preparing, implementing and evaluating its programmes. Open channels of information – at inter-parish levels, with the diocesan authorities, NGOs, government agencies (e.g. Irish Aid <sup>11</sup>) as well as with the appropriate agencies in the African parish sphere of influence - are a sine qua non for achieving the best results.

Open information channels will also prevent unnecessary overlapping between parishes and others. Such overlapping can occur, for example, where individual parishes duplicate requests for assistance to public authorities which have already been made by other parishes or organisations.

The consultation process should include, as appropriate, NGOs working in the target area, religious orders with experience in carrying out anti-AIDS programmes, specialist workers in HIV/AIDS (e.g. research bodies, universities), other agencies or individuals engaged in relevant anti-AIDS projects. Other parishes in Ireland with linkage programmes or which may be interested in twinning should also be covered.

It can be argued that where a number of parishes are engaged in twinning programmes or where significant levels of such programmes involve consultation with the Church authorities in the target country (SACBC AIDS office in the case of South Africa) or with Irish government agencies, parish twinning programmes should be coordinated at diocesan level. In such cases, the parish group would work closely with the diocesan authorities, keeping them informed of its plans and in return would receive assistance in mounting its programme.

All this being said, it is natural that parishes would, in some cases wish to keep their plans to themselves lest they be pre-empted by others.

In considering its programmes, parish groups should have particular regard for the position of Trocaire as the Catholic Church's principal development assistance arm. In deciding how to raise finance for its programmes, parish groups will not wish to cut across those of Trocaire which draws a large part of its funding from the annual parish Lenten collection. There is, however, some evidence to suggest that in parishes where the awareness of the problems of less developed countries has been nourished by the fruits of parish partnership, the contributions to Trocaire in fact increase.

Trocaire has, of course, considerable experience in developing countries and, in the case of South Africa, has provided funding for Church HIV/AIDS programmes. As the Irish member of Caritas International, the official Church agency for development assistance, Trocaire may be in a position to assist in the development of twinned projects in Africa.

### **8.3 Funding arrangements**

Depending on the obligations in the parish partnership arrangements, it can be expected that twinning will involve serious fund raising. Sources of funds include, in addition to normal fund raising activities such as Church collections, regular donations by parishioners, golf outings or other organised functions, resort to public

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<sup>11</sup> Until recently, Development Cooperation Ireland (DCI)

development funds, notably those available from Irish Aid. However, as indicated above, Westport/Aror recommend “small, often and across the board” as the best formula for funding.

While it is unlikely that individual parish programmes would require resort to financing above the level of the national authorities, other supra-national sources of finance are also available –the European Union and other multilateral aid (e.g. World Bank, WHO, UNAIDS). To the extent that such funding might be called on, it would probably be better coordinated at the level of consultation between the Hierarchy (or individual dioceses) and, in the case of Southern Africa, the SACBC. Access to such funding would need to be presented in a framework appropriate to the operations of the donor. For example, the European Commission usually invites expressions of interest from time to time in seeking finance for programmes falling within its budget headings (e.g. framework programme for external action to confront HIV/AIDS, malaria and tuberculosis). Usually, such programmes cover actions stretching over a period of years and are of sufficient scale to warrant the administrative costs involved in international funding (say, several million euros).

In seeking funding for its programme, Irish parishes may also wish to seek corporate sponsorship. In particular, where parishes are involved in ARV programmes, they may seek support from interested pharmaceutical companies. Again, such fund seeking should be coordinated to prevent overlapping.

#### **8.4 Evaluation and control**

Procedures for evaluation and control of programmes should be worked out from the start between the Irish and African partners and between the agencies to which each partner is responsible – the SACBC AIDS Office and the diocesan authorities in the case of the Southern African partner, the parish, and, as appropriate diocesan authorities in the case of the Irish partner. Periodic on-the-spot visitation of projects by the appropriate authorities, or their agents, to ensure that they comply with programme requirements should be envisaged. Suitable legal conditions covering monitoring, evaluation and control should be written into twinning agreements.

#### **8.5 Moral Issues**

In entering into twinning arrangements, it is well to be aware of a number of moral issues that have arisen in dealing with HIV/AIDS in developing countries. One relates to the appropriateness of use of ARV drugs to prevent transmission of HIV from pregnant mothers to unborn children on the grounds of possible adverse side effects of such drugs on the child. The medical view here which would not appear to have been challenged by the Church is that, whatever risks there may have been in using early version ARV drugs – and these risks have been contested, newer drugs present lesser risks and the balance in assessing risks is in favour of use of drugs.

A more controversial issue relates to the use of condoms as part of AIDS prevention programmes. Some national anti-AIDS programmes in Africa and other developing countries advocated distribution of condoms as part of so-called “safe sex” policies. There has been a considerable debate within Catholic Church ethicists<sup>12</sup>, the main

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<sup>12</sup> The ethics of use of condoms in a world of AIDS has been discussed at length, notably in “Catholic Ethicists on HIV/ AIDS Prevention” ed. James F Keenan (Continuum International Publishing Group, 2000), “Responsibility in a Time of AIDS” ed. by Stuart C Bate (Catholic Theological Society of Southern Africa 2003).

argument advanced against condoms being that, in the case of married couples, where one partner (perhaps, the husband) has been infected, unprotected sex could put the other partner's life at risk.

The official Catholic Church teaching was most recently presented in Pope Benedict's address to the Southern African Bishops in June, 2005. While sharing the concern of the Bishops over the devastation caused by AIDS and related diseases, the Pope stated that abstinence is the only "fail-safe" way to prevent the spread of HIV. He added that *"it is of great concern that the fabric of African life, its very source of hope and stability, is threatened by divorce, abortion, prostitution, human trafficking and a contraceptive mentality, all of which contribute to a breakdown in sexual morality"*.

The SACBC "Message of Hope" issued in 2001 is largely in line with the Pope's teaching but with the following nuance addressed to married couples:

*"...where one spouse is infected with HIV/AIDS they must listen to their consciences. They are the only ones who can choose the appropriate means, in order to defend themselves against the infection. Decisions of such an intimate nature should be made by both husband and wife as equal and loving partners."*

### **8.6 Sustainability.**

Once the twinning process is launched, the sponsoring parish undertakes obligations to its African twin which it will need to be in a position to meet in the medium to long term. Given the deep seated nature of the HIV/AIDS problem in Africa and, indeed, in other parts of the developing world, twinning arrangements are for the long haul. Fortunately, there is evidence of sustainability in the case of existing parish partnerships with projects in Africa and elsewhere.