

# Eradicating The Curse in West Papua

## Combating HIV and AIDS with Spirit

### Presenter

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**C**louds hang in the sky above Sorong city. From far away, the sounds of crying can be heard. A body lies on a bed, in rigor mortis. People are scared and don't come near it. Under the light of a lamp, people talk, unsure of what must be done. Their fear comes from knowing that the dead person suffered from HIV and AIDS. This is the disease they understand as being a 'curse'. No one moves to look after or touch the body for fear of attracting the 'curse'. That is why they sit, full of regret and blame.

The situation changes as volunteers come into the confused atmosphere. A woman in white clothing and a white veil goes to the stiff body.

She touches and assesses the condition of the corpse. A number of other volunteers help her and begin to prepare the body. The no longer young woman washes the hair and body and, with the help of the others, even buries the body, all in that night. Only one idea comes to the fore, that every person who dies deserves that final gesture of respect and must be treated in a humanitarian manner, regardless of race, ethnicity or religion.

That was the story as told by Sister Zita CB, the youngest of thirteen siblings, born in Yogyakarta 64 years ago. This experience drove her, with Yayasan Sosial Agustinus (YSA), to face the challenge and provide a deeper understanding to the community of HIV/AIDS. At the very least, Sister Sita proved that HIV cannot be transmitted via touch, living together, or sitting beside a Person living With HIV/AIDS (PLWHA).

For twelve years, since 1996, with Yayasan Sosial Agustinus (YSA), she has focused on the sickness which is running rampant in the community of Sorong city. Without fear they have been raising awareness about HIV/AIDS in the group at highest risk, commercial sex workers. They expanded their efforts to bar workers, massage parlors, fishing businesses, trafficking victims, and even to the general public. YSA provides support to poor families and PLWHAs, as well as running a collaboration program to reduce HIV/AIDS and protect children.

Sister Zita and the volunteers of YSA don't tire of traveling around the high risk areas. "If you're engaging in sexual relations, use a condom properly and consistently. Condoms protect yourself and your partner from HIV and also prevent other sexually transmitted diseases," she tells 300 commercial sex workers crowded into a meeting room in Malano, Sorong. Outreach activities like these are conducted in collaboration with the health department and the neighborhood leaders in the localities.

Other interventions from YSA include building relationships with the sex brokers in 48 bars

to provide understanding and education regarding HIV/AIDS that they can pass on to their girls before they begin to work. YSA also observes 24 massage parlors and 60 salons which are vulnerable in the HIV/AIDS transmission chain.

In addition to the YSA volunteers, there is also a network with the government and other NGOs with similar concerns. The supporters and volunteers of YSA come from different backgrounds and religions. She describes it as a fire place with five pillars; Muslim, Catholic, Christian, Hindu, and Buddhist. The people of these five religions work together with love to save other people's lives.

Hard work over the years has brought success. H.E. Sihombing, the head of the Sorong City Health Department, states that 80% of Sorong inhabitants now have a better understanding of HIV/AIDS. However, he is not willing to state that there has been a decrease in HIV/AIDS infection rates in the city. In October 2008, the total number of HIV positive people had reached 657 people.

The most interesting statements came from the PLWHAs themselves. Hen and Boy (not their real names) are two PLWHAs who have been active in the campaign to prevent HIV/AIDS transmission and understand what the needs are of living with HIV/AIDS. "I hope that I'm the one and only who is HIV positive and that's why I work to encourage the community to protect themselves," says Hen.

Kristi (not her real name) agrees. The transgender (waria) woman who works in a salon has the same drive. She has seen close friends of hers in the waria community die because of the fatal disease with no cure. "The most important thing is to take the medicine with discipline. The proof is that, after many years, I'm still alive. Therefore, I also encourage all my friends, both other waria and salon customers, to always use a condom," she said, smiling.

For Sister Zita and the other volunteers, her work in supporting and caring for PLWHAs is a spiritual calling. Among their efforts is teaching the community to not be hypocritical in facing this epidemic. One thing that she continues to do without reward to the best of her ability, is providing hospice services for the PLWHAs because they are often shunned by their friends and colleagues.

Sister Zita hopes that if they do have to die, at least they can face it calmly, that they won't end their lives with a spiritual burden stemming from discrimination from those around them who believe their sickness is a curse from God.

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