

AIDS ministry in Zambia offers Circle of Hope

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LUSAKA, Zambia (BP)—No one in the clinic's waiting room is smiling—except Anna Banda. She chats happily with people at the Circle of Hope clinic on the outskirts of Lusaka, Zambia. There are few—if any—empty seats as they wait to be tested and treated for AIDS.

A Zambian man who is HIV-positive rests on a mat in his hut near Lusaka, Zambia. He receives a visit from missionary Troy Lewis, who checks to make sure the man has the medications he needs. The conversation soon turns to spiritual matters. Before Lewis, an IMB missionary from Dallas, leaves the hut, the man accepts Christ as his Savior. (IMB PHOTO)

One mother leaves the clinic carrying bottles of medication in one hand and an infant in her other arm. A trash can overflows with empty medication boxes people have discarded before leaving the facility.

Banda knows all too well the pain these people feel.

Nearly six years ago, Banda was dying of AIDS. She shows a photograph of herself during her darkest days. In the picture she is not smiling. She sits on a bed with her shoulders slumped, staring blankly into the camera. She appears frail, sad and near death.

At that stage of the disease, many people die within days or

months—maybe a year if they are fortunate. According to [UNAIDS](#)—the Joint United Nations Programme on HIV/AIDS—statistics, AIDS claims nearly 4,000 lives in sub-Saharan Africa every day.

As Banda's immune system began to shut down, she often felt weak, nauseated and unable to keep food down—on the edge of becoming another AIDS statistic.



Baptist missionary Troy Lewis prays for teenagers at a True Love Waits meeting in Lusaka, Zambia. The group provides a support system for students with a desire to live a life of sexual purity, integrity and one focused on a relationship with Jesus Christ. (IMB PHOTO)

Then she began to take life-saving medication—antiretroviral therapy—and found encouragement at Circle of Hope clinic. A doctor put her on a strict regimen of medication each morning and evening.

Today, she appears to be the picture of health. She now works at the clinic, is studying to be a receptionist and recently got married. The medication Banda continues to take is not a cure, but if taken regularly, it can get people back on their feet, and living and even enjoying life again.

“Some don’t believe it when I tell them I’m HIV-positive,” she said. “They

say, 'No, you're just trying to make us feel better.'"

AIDS continues to kill and infect thousands every day, but Southern Baptist missionary Troy Lewis finally sees some progress. Lewis and his wife, Tracey, were appointed as missionaries in 2001. The couple from Dallas has two sons.

For the past decade, Lewis has led AIDS-related ministries in Zambia, joining forces with clinics like Circle of Hope. [The Lottie Moon Christmas Offering](#) and the Cooperative Program fund International Mission Board work overseas.



Troy Lewis, an missionary from Dallas sent out by Southern Baptists' International Mission Board, teaches Christians near Lusaka, Zambia, how to help homebound people who are infected with AIDS. They learn how to offer suggestions on healthy living and share their Christian faith. (IMB PHOTO)

Having AIDS no longer is the automatic death sentence it once was, Lewis insists.

"We've seen people get up off their sick bed and walk," he said. "The greater availability of antiretroviral therapy is saving lives."

Lewis' work has branched out not only to clinics, but also into working relationships with Baptist partners, local churches, ministries and other nongovernmental organizations to help get medication to people who need it. Clinics once limited to HIV testing are now distributing medication and a chance at a new life.

These partnerships have helped bolster AIDS education and training for those seeking new ways to help. Lewis also promotes ministries like True Love Waits, a program that teaches abstinence before marriage, along with biblical principles.

Many of the churches Lewis works with help support more than 30,000 orphans and vulnerable children in six of Zambia's nine provinces. Lewis estimates they've also trained 1,700 caregivers to help those infected with AIDS.

Some provide home-based care for those who are unable to travel to see a doctor.

One morning, Lewis and a group of local Christian caregivers duck through the small opening of a dying man's hut about an hour from the capital city.



Zambian Christians and Troy Lewis, a Southern Baptist missionary from Dallas, walk into a village to visit a man who has HIV. During the visit the man accepts Christ as his Savior. (IMB PHOTO)

They are checking on Solomon, making sure he's taking his medication.

The man lies on a thin sheet on the floor of his hut. He used to be busy working in his fields. Today, he is inside, closed off from his community.

Solomon appears to be entering the last stages of AIDS. His clothes swallow his thin frame. Sitting up is a slow, difficult process. Although the outcome for Solomon looks grim, he recently began taking the ART medication to build up his immune system.

Although the number of deaths in sub-Saharan Africa has dropped slightly, people still are being infected and dying at a rapid rate and leaving behind thousands of orphaned children.

At times, keeping up with the latest AIDS statistics—for instance, which African country's numbers are the worst—can be overwhelming, Lewis admits.

"I used to have all of those (statistics) right on my fingertips," he says. "Then I stopped looking at it so much. It's just bad."

Some local Baptist churches have mobilized slowly during the past decade, but they are gaining traction, Lewis said. For some congregations, overcoming the negative image of AIDS still remains a challenge.

The church has not always been a safe place for people to reveal they have AIDS.

"Sometimes ... they did not have a church to lean back on," Lewis said. "There is a lot of stigma, a lot of discrimination."

Fighting the pandemic, he contends, boils down to finding hurting people and ministering to their needs like Jesus did.

"Doing ministry that touches the soul" as Lewis puts it. "People were so

open to Jesus' message ... it got into their DNA that way."

Banda—with her smile and new life—prays that others will continue to find the happiness she has found. She also prays for a cure.

Banda remains confident in Christ's power and love, adding, "My faith tells me that one day God is going to come through for those people who are providing the cure."