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STORIES FROM THE FIELD

Faith Restored

Counseling by local religious group brings HIV-positive family back together



PHOTO BY HEALTH POLICY INITIATIVE

After intensive counseling and encouragement from faith-based leaders working in HIV, a healthy Imani proudly strolls through his village of Benacco-Kasulo with his daughter Leah on his shoulder.

Imani and Helen are a working class couple who live in Benacco-Kasulo, a village in northwestern Tanzania. Helena runs a small grocery store and Imani, whose name means faith, earns his living by tending cattle for wealthy ranchers in the area. With its close proximity to the Rwanda border, their village has a considerable number of refugees and, as a result of high-risk behaviors commonly associated with border crossings, a relatively high incidence of HIV.

The happily married couple, eager to start a family together, were overjoyed when they found out Helen was pregnant. At the time, it seemed unimaginable that this good news could carry dire consequences for the young family.

When their daughter Leah was born, Imani, Helena, and the baby tested positive for HIV. Their dreams of living together as a family unit changed overnight. The marriage transformed into a bitter battle, as each accused the other of infidelity. Overwhelmed by despair, their health deteriorated rapidly and both were certain they would soon die. Anguished and ashamed, Imani left his ailing family and fled the village, despite family members' attempts to intervene.

Leaders from the Muslim Council of Tanzania, the Pentecostal Church of Tanzania, and the Christian Council of Tanzania learned about the situation and teamed up to find Imani. The interfaith coalition had received training from the Health Policy Initiative (HPI) on the basics of HIV transmission and learned how stigma and discrimination erode the bonds of family, community, and country.

HPI has been working with faith-based organizations in Tanzania to reduce stigma and discrimination in effort to create a supportive environment that encourages HIV prevention, care, and treatment.

The religious councils searched for Imani. However, by the time they found him, his mental and physical health had declined significantly.

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Imani's T-cell count measuring the strength of his immune system, which should normally range between 500-1,000, was gravely low at 46. Staff from the faith-based coalition advised him that he could live with HIV and be healthy if he obtained proper nutrition and sought medical treatment to control the symptoms.

Following intensive counseling, Imani returned to his family with his hope restored and a reinvigorated determination to live a healthy, happy life with his family. Good nutrition improved the family's health and Imani's T-cell count rose from near fatal levels to within normal range, registering at 600.

With the help of local religious leaders, it is now a common sight to see a healthy Imani proudly strolling through Benacco-Kasulo with Leah on his shoulder. The influence of the interfaith council is an example for all Tanzanians, showing that it is possible to bring families and communities together to support people living with HIV.