



## FIRST PERSON HIV-Positive Pastor Helps Battle Stigma

### A religious leader boldly breaks taboos against HIV/AIDS



Photo: Pact/Geoffrey Mubanga

Reverend Annie Kaseketi, who stunned officials and Members of Zambia's Parliament with her revelation that she is HIV positive.

***As more HIV-positive community leaders make their HIV/AIDS status public, more ordinary citizens are getting HIV tests. In collaboration with the President's Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief, USAID is a leader in efforts to fight HIV/AIDS in Africa.***

Stigma and discrimination are major impediments to tackling the HIV/AIDS epidemic in Zambia. Some people still view HIV/AIDS as a disease that results strictly from immoral behavior, and many influential community and religious leaders still discuss HIV/AIDS in these terms. Some churchgoing Zambians refuse even to discuss HIV/AIDS, and matters are made even worse when an HIV/AIDS victim is a church leader. In fact, church leaders are hesitant even to be tested for the disease because they fear the stigma and discrimination it brings.

Despite this challenging climate, Reverend Annie Kaseketi decided to disclose her HIV-positive status during a workshop in Kabwe central province sponsored by USAID. Participants, including government officials, Members of Parliament, and civil society leaders, were shocked when she revealed that she was living with HIV/AIDS. The leadership and capacity-building workshop was the ideal place for Reverend Kaseketi to make a bold statement.

Reverend Kaseketi shared her story and described how she lost her husband, a trained pastor, and three children before she learned that she was HIV-positive. After listening to her, leaders at the workshop resolved to fight all forms of stigma and discrimination through information and advocacy campaigns and by encouraging people to undergo voluntary HIV/AIDS testing and counseling services. By getting tested, people who are HIV positive can begin to receive life-prolonging anti-retroviral treatments. To demonstrate the importance of HIV testing, 16 participants went for testing soon after the workshop.

Since 1995, Reverend Kaseketi has been an ordained Pastor under the Apostolic Church of Zambia. She learned of her HIV/AIDS status in August 2003. Since then, Reverend Kaseketi and her only surviving son, who is 11 years old, have been taking anti-retroviral medications and their quality of life has improved. In addition to performing her duties for the church, Reverend Kaseketi runs HIV/AIDS training programs and counseling services, traveling widely in Zambia and abroad to advocate for better policies and the rights of people living with HIV/AIDS.