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Religious leaders' role in fighting HIV

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PETALING JAYA, Sun. - Religious leaders have an important role to play in the fight against the stigma and discrimination faced by people with AIDS/HIV, Malaysian AIDS Council (MAC) president Datuk Paduka Marina Mahathir said today.

Addressing the congregation at St Paul's Anglican Church here on AIDS/HIV, she said community leaders could set examples for others to follow and help banish the misconception that AIDS patients are sinners.

"This is not true as there are babies and children who are infected. There are many women who are infected by their husbands as well, so we have to stop thinking in terms of 'us and them'," she said.

Among the congregation were Anglican Bishop of West Malaysia Rev Tan Sri Dr Lim Cheng Ean and National Council of Women's Organisations deputy president Ramani Gurusamy.

Religious communities, she said, could form strategies to combat the ignorance of AIDS/HIV prevalent in society, with emphasis on teaching children.

She said people have to stop feeling squeamish about talking about AIDS and sex and stop accepting stereotype labels, especially those about gender.

"We think our sons do not need to be told about these things, so in the end they listen to their peers when it comes to sex and want to act macho," she said.

Religious leaders, she said, could also come up with strategies for the prevention of infection and not the prevention of immorality.

"We also should not say things like 'if you repent, we will help you' because after all, we are not so free of sin that we can push them away," she said.

On the disease, she said there were around 6,000 new reported cases last year and more women were being infected, a sign of AIDS/HIV entering into the mainstream of society.

According to the United Nations, she said, there were 14,000 AIDS 'orphans' in Malaysia, children who had lost their mothers to the incurable disease.

"We find that if the mother is infected or ill, she will still do everything in her power to continue caring and providing for her children but it is not the same with the fathers," she said.

The 14,000 figure, she said, was a reasonable estimate although the council did not know how the UN came up with the figure.

"We do not have the actual figures ourselves. The council is supporting over 100 orphans through the Paediatric Aids Fund but we know there is a sharp increase in children affected. This might be a very big problem in the future," said Marina.