

# Helping people with HIV-AIDS HELP THEMSELVES



Alu Aisi SVD with two members of Minivava.

embarked on establishing its own groups at the district level. Each district currently has its own committee and leader to co-ordinate their activities. Minivava has invited Mercy Works to visit them at the district level to give some skill training sessions in budgeting, sewing, cooking, men's and women's health, and to raise human rights issues and social issues affecting the country.

The initiatives taken by Minivava have not been easy; the group trusts that Mercy Works will play an active role in raising HIV awareness in the minds of the people in the villages and communities.

On World AIDS Day last year, December 1, Mercy Works, in collaboration with AusAID and Oxfam, enabled the Minivava group to host activities to observe the event. Significantly, it was the first time that Minivava had come into the open, and a first for such a group in Goroka to come out in public. Through the emotional support of Mercy Works, the group has been able to give their trust and faith totally as partners in our programs. ■

*Mercy Works PNG was established in 2006 by the Sisters of Mercy, PNG in partnership with Mercy Works Inc. Through a range of community development initiatives, the project is empowering young women, men and their families in the Eastern and Western Highlands Provinces to address unemployment, domestic violence and HIV-AIDS.*

*Alu Aisi, a Divine Word Missionary Brother and member of the Mercy Works PNG team, mentors a support group called Minivava, established by and for people living with HIV-AIDS in PNG's Eastern Highlands. In a country where HIV-AIDS is prevalent and there is significant stigma and discrimination attached to the illness, groups like Minivava are crucial. Alu Aisi SVD, reports.*

**P**apua New Guinea, the largest of the Pacific island countries, has a rich and diverse culture with more than 700 languages spoken by its estimated 5.9 million people. Australia's nearest neighbour is also facing the enormous challenge of reversing the spread of HIV and dealing with its impact. New HIV infections are not only rising steadily across the country, they are also escalating into the rural areas where the majority (85%) of our people live.

Mercy Works PNG, through its projects and activities, has seen the need to help these vulnerable people to fight against HIV-AIDS. We have helped to establish a group of "People Living With The Virus" (PLHIV) called Minivava, which simply means in the local dialect "to live forever and inspire our children".

To support these vulnerable people

living with the virus, we have tried to bring them together from the four districts of Goroka, Daulo, Bena and Kainantu in the Eastern Highlands Province. It was not easy in the beginning; it took months for them to understand why Mercy Works was interested in them.

In 2008, four people walked into our office and told us who they were. Through these four people, the Minivava numbers began to grow, and now in 2010, we have 55 members. Most of them are single or their partners have died or have left them due to their current situation.

Two workshops were organised in May and July 2009 for Minivava: "Introduction to HIV and AIDS" and "Home-Based Care". These were held in Goroka and funded by the National AIDs Council of PNG.

Minivava is now organised and has