

# AIDS in South Africa

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Never before has the value of ordinary life which we take for granted, become so precious as it is in the face of the ubiquitous threat of HIV/AIDS (Human Immunodeficiency Virus / Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome). There is still a stubborn unwillingness, a refusal to come to terms with the reality of the disease, a refusal to recognise that AIDS is increasingly becoming a single cause of the disintegration of our communities and of the socio-economic fabric of society.

If we all firmly believed that AIDS is a destroyer of the gift of life we would all lend a hand towards the prevention of the disease, especially in view of the fact that a cure eludes the medical profession. AIDS is the very antithesis of life, an absurdity on the negation of the beautiful - It renders the gift of sexuality suspect, the very gift that makes life possible. Christians are to disseminate the Good News, they are to be healers as their Master. It is therefore consistent with Christian calling to be courageous and generous in giving care to those with PWA (People with AIDS). Church is not just a place of worship but also a refuge of healing and of friendship. We therefore strongly recommend that each Christian community, each community of faith, each congregation, has a responsibility of sharing the burden of those with AIDS by being available, by accompaniment, and by giving care. The absence of such gestures is in fact an inditement of Christian communities - about their much vaunted claims of love of neighbour, of caring for the other.

We are our brothers' and sisters' keeper. AIDS is putting that claim to the test. Each congregation ought to account how it has responded in an ongoing manner to the AIDS pandemic. As Church leaders we ought to hold each other accountable. What do we and our respective communities do about caring and ministering to PWA. What do we do about healing our brokenness with visible and tangible compassion?

Secondly, the Churches can go a long way towards helping to remove the stigma from PWA. The Jews asked Jesus about the man born blind: "Who has sinned? Was it he or his parents?" The Church's preoccupation with moral judgment, the temptation at passing judgement on PWA creates a serious problem. This is not to deny the fact that relationships are not morally neutral. Relationships entail a moral dimension. There are values of fidelity, of self respect, of respect for the other. Values are foundational to any relationship. Rather than being judgemental about PWA it is imperative that Churches help to develop a solid sense of moral responsibility in relationships. While AIDS disease offers us an opportunity for moral awakening in our responsibility towards each other, it is equally important to change our judgmental attitudes if we are to be open and effective in talking and doing something about it.

Thirdly, consistent with the overall goal of 'Love Life' - Churches could also usefully aim at targeting the youth, especially young people who are not yet sexually active, by helping them to cultivate a positive attitude about themselves, their self-worth and by helping them to unlock the world of possibilities and dreams of who they possibly can become. We can help to release energies in them, on an incremental basis, that will entice and compel them to hold onto their dreams, dreams of a radically different life-style and different living conditions from those of their parents. Such a vision of life, life

in abundance, is consistent with our being made in God's image. Children, pupils students ought to stay in school until they gain a profession. The only door that truly leads to genuine freedom, is self mastery, self respect, education and a profession. Let's talk about it and do something about it. (i.e AIDS) Let's impose a ban on 'spaza' teenage families in season and out of season, a refrain that needs to intumescence itself into the rhythm of youthful lives. We challenge the churches to adopt this positive goal of 'Love Life', avoiding teenage pregnancies, retaining pupils (students in schools for the sake of their future. Teachers are to do more than teach but also form, develop human growth. Fourthly, It is not inconceivable that all the organisations genuinely committed to the elimination and prevention of AIDS could collaborate in specific areas of common interest. 'Love Life' is a secular organisation, investing significant resources in the campaign against AIDS by encouraging the churches to identify those areas of possible collaboration with 'Love Life'. 'Love Life' has become the premier organisation that has publicly and significantly raised the level of involvement with young people throughout the country through its Youth Centres. There is need for collaboration. The bill boards help to drive the message home, at times in subtle ways, at times in a brutally frank manner, that annoys those who still want to beat about the bush about the rarity of AIDS. It is important too, to form on-going, committed and structured partnerships, which are clearly aware of ideological and theological moral differences, but are at the same time committed to a common goal of confronting HIV/AIDS headlong.

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