

Channels of Gratitude, Generosity, Compassion and Justice¹

Experiences with Grants for Churches

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The earth is the Lord's and all that is in it, the world, and those who live in it; for he has founded it on the seas, and established it on the rivers. (Psalm 24:1, NRSV)

Introduction

I make my contributions from the World Council of Churches (WCC), a global fellowship of 349 member churches. For most part the programs, initiatives and activities of WCC are funded by the member churches and ecumenical partners that are church-related such as mission boards, ecumenical development agencies and foundations that identify with religious institutions. The conversation partners who make financial contributions to the life and mission of WCC are people we are usually reading from the same page – meaning they too are faith-initiated and based – even when we may be receiving the so-called “back donor grants” from governments in global north countries through the churches and/or church-related agencies.

Even though there is a great divide between the financial resources that come from global north and those given by churches in global south there is an underlying understanding that everything we have comes from God and it is supposed to be given and received in humility and gratitude to God. On the other hand, we are called to love kindness or generosity and to do justice (Micah 6:8b) to those in need, the marginalized people and those who cannot care for themselves (Matthew 25:31-46). In other words, as Christians we are invited to be in compassionate solidarity in the name of justice, peace and abundant life for all irrespective of their social standing.

Ideally we do not use the language of donor and beneficiaries, even though we have been successfully co-opted to use the secular language rather than invest quality time cultivating mutual respect and partnerships which demonstrate the source of our faith and resources. When practice does not match ideals relationships can go wrong and

¹ While writing this presentation I was inspired by the writings of two Roman Catholic priests, theologians and educators; Emmanuel Katongole, *The Sacrifice of Africa: A Political Theology for Africa*, William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2011 and Michael J. Kelly, *HIV and AIDS: A Social Justice Perspective*, Paulines Publications Africa, 2110.

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misunderstandings are bound to happen. As a result over the years, WCC and its major financial contributors have created Working Together and Round Table sessions that meets once a year to “reason together” about the work and the resources that are needed and how best to use what is at hand. Through these sessions there is common understanding that our faith and resources come from the same source, our creator and giver of life. As such we are called to be faithful stewards of everything we have received. I therefore wish to make my remarks from this basic understanding.

Faithful Stewardship

World Council of Churches (WCC) has addressed HIV since 1986. The fundamental role that WCC plays is to serve the churches and church related institutions including theological institutions or seminaries that train the future pastors, church leaders, theological educators and theologians. Because Africa has had the longest, deepest and most painful experience with HIV, since 1999 WCC has focused its HIV resources in pastoral accompaniment with churches and theological institutions in sub-Saharan Africa. Close to fifteen churches, mission boards and ecumenical development partners have designated resources to Ecumenical HIV and AIDS Initiative in Africa (EHAIA) even as they fund other programs of WCC. Having said that almost all of them fund other collaborating churches and partners in Africa and some have regional offices in different parts of Africa especially in Eastern and Southern Africa.

April this year EHAIA turned ten years. From the beginning three groups of partners were involved in the creation of a “November 2001 Plan of Action: The Ecumenical Response to HIV and AIDS IN Africa”, namely;

- churches & ecumenical and church related organizations in Africa;
- churches, ecumenical and church-related organizations in Western Europe and North America;
- World Council of Churches.

It was the responsibility of each of these different partners to own and to ensure that the plan of action is implemented. But WCC was charged with the specific responsibility of setting up a support structure in sub-Saharan Africa, which became known as EHAIA. To date EHAIA has eight offices; that of a coordinator in WCC headquarters in Geneva, Switzerland, five regional offices in Nairobi, Harare, Luanda, Kinshasa, Lomé and two theology consultants in Harare and Lomé who work with theological institutions. No study has been carried out to see how each of these partners have owned and implemented the Plan of Action, but EHAIA carried out impact assessment (2002-2009) http://www.oikoumene.org/fileadmin/files/wcc-main/2011pdfs/EHAIA_impact.pdf if indeed WCC has been a faithful steward of the task it was given in November 2001 Plan

of Action. For smooth running of EHAIA, an advisory group (International Reference Group, IRG) to the staff and general secretary of WCC was created and each of these three partners is represented. All EHAIA staff is African, except during the first five years when the Geneva staff was European.

The impact assessment was asked for by the ecumenical agencies from global north who sit at the IRG. The representatives from the global north agencies are very particular with the planning, monitoring, evaluation and reporting processes and audited financial reports and the narrative activity reports must be handed in by June each year. This is the standard procedure of all WCC programs.

IRG meets for three days once a year. We talk openly about specific activities, achievements, failures, strengths, weaknesses and challenges. As much as the Plan of Action is a very helpful tool as it guides IRG in setting the overall goal of creating and developing HIV competent churches and theological institutions and the broad based objectives — EHAIA staff work intuitively and listen attentively to where the people are, their strengths, their pain, struggles, screams and halleluiahs. Flexibility, common sense and faithful stewardship to God and the people who need the services come first. As much as we listen and respect what global north partners say and wish for — our ears and eyes are focused on the people who are most affected by HIV pandemic.

As a team we have allowed the suffering of the people to become our teacher as we unearth the underlying root causes of the pandemic, which in response has acted effectively as a lens or a spotlight that exposes the cobwebs in our homes, offices, churches and society at large. Given our colonial imperial history and the ways Africa is stigmatized and m/patronized we know where to put our ears, eyes, energies and creativity. Over the years we have learned to be bold and faithful to God's mission and calling. This is not to say we do not have weaknesses, limitations and failures that need the help of others but we have not allowed ourselves to be dictated by the power that comes with grants. Let me illustrate.

HIV Pandemic: A Brutal Injustice

When I joined EHAIA in April 2007, I had already accompanied the program from its inception. Still an employee of WCC in another program I was paying close attention to the direction HIV pandemic was taking us as Africans. What lessons were we learning as we faced this monster that has come to steal destroy and kill the beautiful children of Africa? I listened to and read my colleagues' reports as well as what churches and theological institutions was saying, doing or not doing. Above all, as an African I was personally affected as I had lost track of my former parishioners, and extended family

members who had succumbed to the pandemic.³ Like many concerned Africans I was angry and tired (still am) of needless suffering and death of my people. I knew pretty much that theologies of death and weak leadership (both religious and political) were part of the problem.

As a result I encouraged my colleagues to pay more attention to the root causes of HIV pandemic and because we work with churches and theological institutions – Christian faith and the bible are fundamental in all we do. I knew life-affirming and life-giving theologies must replace the death-dealing stuff that was going on in our churches and the deafening silence in theological curricula. Even though all this was well articulated in the November 2001 Plan of Action, I heard voices in the IRG from global north (with support by some Africans) that EHAIA is now doing too much theology! They wanted us to focus on development issues as an entry point as if theology as an entry point and focus does not address development issues. After all, development theories that was imported to Africa at the dawn of independence like the colonial patriarchal theologies that are the life blood in many of our churches need transformation. Furthermore, many pastors were asking for accompaniment in contextual theological reflection and bible interpretation that promote life and not death. On the other hand, by now we knew gender inequalities and sexual gender based violence had been identified as major drivers of the pandemic. It was therefore paramount that we reexamined our theologies of submission, victimhood, dependence and culture of violence and to recreate new theologies of empowerment, liberation and transformation. As pressure mounted that I was taking EHAIA in the wrong direction I refused to give in. I simply put my eyes and ears on what Christian faith requires of us and not where the money was coming from.

In retrospect deep down my belly I knew HIV is a brutal pandemic, oppressive and dehumanizing and the solutions will not come from the faint-hearted and those who cow-in to pressure. I refused to be patronized and matronized. I was ready to let go my job instead. I know as Africans, we do not speak with one voice or see things the same way and we should not. However, we have suffered enough from being told what is good for us. We also know our leaders and for those where honesty and integrity are secondary when they see the bottom line of the money that is pledged. I knew HIV pandemic is a justice issue of the first order. I was not ready to allow more injustice to be heaped on us. God is not amused that so much life has been thus wasted.

Parents and Midwives of Baby Justice

A voice is heard in Ramah, lamentation and bitter weeping. Rachel is weeping for her children; she refuses to be comforted for her children, because they are no more. (Jeremiah 31:15, NRSV)

³ For this reason I am a registered member of INERELA+ (International Network of Religious Leaders living with or personally affected by HIV and AIDS).

Since 2008 global financial crisis continue to threaten the hard won positive gains against the pandemic not because there is no enough money to go round but because we are changing cause prematurely. It is no longer fashionable to fund HIV interventions. Whereas some of the partners are sensitive and have attempted to explain the reasons they have reduced funding others simply move on to other priorities even without discussing the consequences. Having said that there are some WCC partners who are deeply committed, for instance, to see that EHAIA model and experience is extensively shared in other regions of the world most affected by the pandemic because they value its effectiveness and great potential in creating and developing HIV competent churches and theological institutions. Today, EHAIA staff is invited to other continents to share our experiences and expertise including global north.

Unfortunately churches that embarked on HIV interventions because there was money are hanging their nets even when they continue to bury their own. No doubt many churches have made major contributions, which remains largely undocumented especially the amount of time and energy spent taking care of the sick and the abandoned. The pastoral work with people living with HIV, orphans, widows, widowers and grieving grandparents who worry that there are no adult children left to bury them have no price tag only life-giving stories speak volumes of gratitude and courage. There is no way of measuring the compassion, kindness and restored dignity that many have received. Only God can tally. But to discontinue midstream is injustice and in itself dehumanizing and a sin against God. Matters of health, faith, justice, peace and life should not be taken rightly without reasoning together to identify new tactics and innovative ways of moving forward.

After all, HIV is not a one issue problem. We are restoring broken relationships, reclaiming lost confidence, declaring zero tolerance to violence, corruption and many other ills that have plagued our societies and lives. For once we have loudly and boldly exposed patriarchy and its otherwise unreachable tap roots. The hard job of unearthing and removing the tap roots has now begun. It is simply wrong to abandon the responsibility of mending the broken relationships including those HIV pandemic continue to create in our midst.

Many of us in this gathering of sharing lessons learned are parents and/or midwives well skilled with love, compassion, humility, boldness and kindness that have birthed and delivered Baby Justice in HIV-positive Africa. And there is no way we can turn our backs to Baby Justice before she has walked and stood up straight to protect her dignity and her God-given right to be. For too long, Africa like Rachel has wept for her children who are no more. We must turn this weeping into dancing and celebration because 30 years with HIV has forced us to dig deep into our wellsprings.

We have learned valuable lessons how to keep our children alive and how to demand justice and truth in the face of hard-hearted corrupt leaders. We know HIV, greedy dictators and death do not have the last word. We have gained knowledge, wisdom and boldness that needs to spread around to subvert injustice and dehumanization that is still experienced by millions of Africans. Above all we must keep Baby Justice alive like every responsible midwife, father and extended family do in case the mother dies at child birth (Genesis 35: 16-21). Rachel's midwife, Jacob and his large family made sure Benjamin survived even as they buried Rachael.

That is why it is most desirable to create long-lasting collaborative partnerships to share resources and expertise not because global north says so but because it is the noble and Christian thing to do. Withholding resources, knowledge, love, wisdom, compassion and kindness is a sin against God just like it is a sin if a midwife sees the baby coming and the mother is pushing hard and she pushes the head back into the womb! Consequently, we must carry on the legacy of Shiphrah and Puah who feared God and defied the king of Egypt (Exodus 1:15-17).

Parents and midwives have worked together to deliver healthy Baby Justice. Together as Christians in Africa, our partners from other continents and faith communities, governments, United Nations instruments and civil society must stay the cause because despite positive UNAIDS 2010 Report that HIV incidence rate has declined in 22 countries in sub-Saharan Africa, the region represents 68% of the global HIV burden. As if that is not outrageously bad news vulnerability of women and girls to HIV remains unacceptably high with about 76% of all HIV- positive women in the world live in this region. Besides, heterosexual sex remains the dominant mode of HIV transmission and infants are still at risk of becoming HIV-positive. Yes, many of us parents and midwives are exhausted, sometimes discouraged and distraught but as the Psalmist have taught us;

I lift up my eyes to the hills — from where will my help come? My help comes from the Lord, who made heaven and earth. (Psalm 121: 1-2)

All of us who care to see Baby Justice grow up are the channels of gratitude, generosity, compassion and justice in a continent where millions of grandmothers and grandfathers continue to weep because their children are no more. The dance must begin because HIV and death do not have the last word.