

THE POSITIVE VOICE TO AND BY THE CHURCH

ALL PROTOCOL OBSERVED

The Church is a community of faith that encounters God in the way we relate on a daily basis. I am reminded that faith without action is meaningless and as such one might ask, is the church correctly placed to respond to this pandemic. It is undisputable that during the time Jesus Christ walked this earth he healed the sick. To prove his powers of healing, Jesus brought the dead back to life. Lazarus is a very good example of such powers. Jesus confirms the powers of healing in the belief and faith. The emphasis is, however, placed on the spiritual healing. "Whatever we ask in God's name he shall give" says the Bible.

Unlike the times of Jesus when he performed miracles physically, it is rare today to find miracles happening physically, especially in the area of HIV and AIDS. However God has given us the opportunity to use our local means and responses to obtain the healing we need.

This part of healing may be scary because we find church being dragged in the mud for abuse of powers and mis-information so that it gains popularity by not allowing affected people to access the scientific help required to be able to prolong their lives. We must be careful on the role we play not to accelerate the problem as it is sometimes widely reported that we hide parishioners under the pretext of prayer and healing and deprive them of medication.

My point is that some religious leaders have misinterpreted the precious opportunity that God places in the hands of experts who have acquired the wisdom from God to make the drugs available to treat God's people. For instance as Christians we should believe that the discovery of ARV's was Gods miracle at work since God gives the wisdom to doctors and scientists to manufacture the drugs. Therefore if God has provided the opportunity through others, we don't need to challenge God's plans. As Christians/Religious leaders we need to encourage the congregation to use the available opportunities to better their lives

Religious leaders and the church need to emphasis the power of prayer, care and support for those infected and directly affected. HIV and Aids can be so stressful and isolating. Therefore, prayer can be more comforting and helps to rebuild the lost hope. When things are not going well, conversation with God can provide an opportunity of overcoming negative thoughts of expressing grief.

Church has come a long way to understand where we are today. There have been issues of stigma and denial. HIV has changed our way of communication and the way we look at one another. The language we have had to use to explain to Sunday school children up to adults on issues of sexuality and affirming one another has created a positive healthy life in the

communities. God created sex. Sex is a natural and positive thing. We as church promote safer sexual practises. We have to deal frankly and openly with the issue.

Why Involve the Church?

We all know that HIV and AIDS affects everyone in the society, therefore church must understand the complex issues and factors relating to the spreading of the virus such as poverty, socio-economic status, gender, sexual ethics and culture. We need to re think our way of thinking, listening to experts and learning from one another.

An HIV competent church will therefore have the ability to relate among other things, to KNOWLEDGE, about facts and modes of transmission and have corresponding SKILLS to relate to the disease to avoid harmful practises and lastly and crucially is the RESPONCE to the pandemic.

Why should issues related to HIV and AIDS be addressed in the religious institutions and by religious leaders? These matters affect everyone in our societies and need to be addressed. UNICEF and UNAIDS have pointed that “Religious leaders are in a unique position of being able to alter the course of the epidemic” and that “there is undoubtedly still untapped potential within the faith based communities to contribute to the AIDS response” For example Religious leaders can:

- Shape social values
- Increase public knowledge and influence opinion
- Support enlightened attitudes, opinions and policies and laws
- Redirect resources for spiritual and social care and raise funds for prevention, care and support
- Mobilise and promote action from the grassroots up to the international level.

Pastors and church leaders have a ready audience. If Church leaders see the importance and relevance of speaking and educating people about HIV and AIDS, they do not need to search for a receptive audience. There **are no additional costs to educate** members who come to the church on Sundays and during the week. In some African communities, people do not have access to a counsellor, psychologist, family planning counsellor or a medical professional. In such circumstances, people have been turning to religious leaders for help. Bishop Felton May has pointed out “Churches cannot conquer AIDS alone, but it will not happen without us”

We are at a stage that without doubt needs to scale up and own with sustenance the processes of continued healing and counselling of our people. This calls for innovative ways to find within ourselves locally from the lessons learnt, how we can reduce or limit our dependence on external funding and increase funding from within.

For the church the time is now to ask the difficult questions about our traditional African culture. What is it that we can save and what should we advocate to drop and that which perpetuates the spread of HIV. We need to be the drivers of change and not wait while we continue to bury our people every day. Is it not sad that while there is so much information out there and a lot of effort into campaigns people still ordinarily die from simple avoidable things? What are we not doing correctly to package a message of positive living and hope outside of sex?

In conclusion, what do we see in the society today? Tired eyes, demanding jobs, aging people and so on. We have no time to be still before the Lord. If we speak we all speak with no time to listen to one another. Poverty, disease and orphans are not new to us and yet they are the topical issues with no resolve on sight. The landscape has changed, how do we articulate the churches position given the conditions at the grassroots? HIV has enhanced the battle ground and we fear to meet the challenge, all we need to be is ourselves and rebuild Africa and seek lasting grassroots partnerships.

Church is everywhere, is it possible to build partnerships with health departments for easy Access of drugs, what can be done?

What policies are in place in church to mitigate stigma and denial?

Give possible ways of locally generated funds for HIV programs?

Acknowledge material:

What's faith got to do with it-Stephen SSenkima

Towards an HIV and AIDS Competent Church

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