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Volume 3 – 2011

**Manifesting the Grace of God to Those with
HIV and AIDs**

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Introduction

In John 2:1-11 Jesus gives people the choice to drink or not to drink the wine he made in the wedding at Cana knowing very well the dangers and possibility of overdrinking.

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If he was faced with the question of condom use among Christians my wonder is whether he would prevent their access to condoms in the hope that they would refrain from unsafe and unlawful sex or whether he would release the condoms after giving the Christian information on self-respect, safety and mutual respect in relationships? Another three questions one might want to ask in this paper are:

1. Are Christians having sex outside or before marriage?
2. Can Christians contract HIV within or before marriage?
3. Does the grace of God exclude those living with HIV?

A pastor's wife presented her case to Federation of Women Lawyers in Nairobi (FIDA) office having being neglected by the husband in her 7th month of pregnancy who had taken another lady for a wife. The Church listened to the case and gave pastor and wife a 1 year separation during which time the pastor was expected to give Ksh 4000 to the wife for up keep.

This is a story reported to FIDA offices and the person was in need of legal help. It is from the Church done by the Church to her very own members.²

What is unknown is the HIV status of the pastor, the wife and the new found lover and their previous partners if any. We also do not know whether the three have other sexual relationships outside the stated ones and whether either of them opens' doors to other partners in the future. The fact is that the virus has an open door and especially if they are having unprotected sex.

Since the first case of HIV identified in 1981, over 30 million people have died of HIV and AIDs related diseases³. Given the large number of people infected and affected by HIV and AIDS, the church cannot afford to ignore the plight of PLWHAs as they form part of the congregation. Is the Church therefore right in keeping quiet about people living with HIV and condemning some prevention method assuming that the married couples are remaining faithful and that the unmarried are abstaining till marriage?

² Interview with Pauline Chege, Feb. 2011.

³ Genrich, D. (2007). *The Church in a HIV+ World: A Practical Handbook*, p 5.

A. HIV and AIDs Scenario

Acquired Immune Deficiency syndrome (AIDS) is a global pandemic which is one of the greatest challenges facing mankind. Peter et al (2002) argues that we are entering the third decade of what may be the most devastating epidemic in human history. It is evident from World Health Organization (WHO) and UNAIDS statistics that by (2009) the number of people living with HIV and AIDs rose from around 8 million in 1990 to 33 million by the end of 2009. According to UNAID (2009), Sub Saharan Africa has a population of 22.5 million PLWHAs.⁴ This form 68% of the PLWHAs residing in Sub Saharan Africa and by 2007 the world was losing 2.5 million to AIDS and 1.6 million of these deaths were from Sub-Saharan Africa. 60 % of infected adults were women. Teenage girls are noted to be five times more likely to be infected than boys⁵.

With such high rate of infection; one might expect PLWHAs to be accepted. On the contrary, stigma and discrimination is prevalent even among the Christian. Some of the deaths reported in the UNAIDS statistics are definitely coming from the Christian community.

Those who are HIV positive among Church members are likely to experience hostility from faith leaders and communities who more often consider HIV infection as the result of sinful sexual behavior. This is because the spread of HIV and AIDs exploits one of the most complex areas of human life: the sexual relationships. These relationships in turn are shaped by human knowledge, values, beliefs, customs, habits and power relations. Unfortunately, HIV and AIDs touches on human sexuality, which is not openly discussed in church. This silence on sexuality makes PLWHAs to be assumed to have got the disease as a result of sexual immorality whereas other modes of acquiring are normally ignored. Medically, the virus is concentrated in the blood, vaginal fluid, and semen and breast milk. Therefore, one gets infected with HIV through contact with the infected blood, infected mother to unborn baby during birth and while breastfeeding and through sexual intercourse with an infected Person.

⁴ UNAIDS 2009 Report.

⁵ UNAIDS 2007 Report.

The spread of the disease is alarming and the Church needs to come out and be instrumental in transforming the world through her understanding of the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ particularly to those living with HIV.

B. The Church First Response to HIV and AIDs

The church's initial response to the epidemic was characterized by fear of contagion and as a consequence, ostracism of the infected and affected. The Church never saw herself being threatened by the virus as long as we members remained monogamous and faithful to their spouse and the church leaders chose to be silent about HIV and AIDs. When Church members started dying of AIDS even from among the clergy that rung a wakeup call for the Church leaders on the realities of HIV and AIDs. Prior to AIDS related deaths among the Church members, Church leaders around the globe issued inflammatory sermons, speeches and publications condemning promiscuous groups of people. The assumption was that if one is a member of a given congregation, he or she is exempt from HIV and AIDs since this virus is transmitted only in those involved in illegal sex which could not involve church members. Among the Methodist a spokesman advised Christians to maintain their matrimonial vows and whoever breaks them would be disciplined to save both their physical body and soul from eternal fire. The church was living in a spirit of self-righteousness and a belief that monogamous marriages would withstand the wave of the pandemic. Therefore, church leaders' message to the congregation distorted the truth allowing the virus to spread unabated.

Across the globe, World Council of Churches (WCC) sensed danger as the HIV and AIDs spread throughout the world, observing that HIV and AIDs is calling the church to be a healing community⁶ The WCC identified pastoral care, preventive education and social response against stigma on PLWHAs as important in the fight against HIV AND AIDS. African church leaders under the auspices of All African Council of Churches (AACC) met in November 2001, to draw an ecumenical plan of action for responding to the HIV and AIDs pandemic and noted that the most powerful contribution the

⁶ Geneva: W.C.C.1987 *Facing Aids The Challenge, The Church Response*. Geneva: W.C.C publication, p. 26.

church can make in combating HIV transmission is the eradication of stigma and discrimination.

In 2002 the National Council of Churches of Kenya (NCCCK) organized regional advocacy forum of the church members across the country⁷. During this forum the clergy were sensitized on stigmatization of PLWHAs and how to support the infected and the affected. The same concern and redress is observed in the Catholic Church, the Roman Catholic Church in collaboration with other Catholic organizations, has disseminated huge amount of information about stigma on PLWHAs. While addressing the World Aids day in 2005, Pope Benedict XVI, encouraged the Ecclesiastical communities to eradicate stigma and feel close to PLWHAs and their families⁸.

African countries initially responded with fear and denial. Some churches in Kenya neither permitted those with HIV and AIDs to have their burial service in the church nor attend the church. As a consequence fear and shame that accompany HIV and AIDs weakened social network and exclusion of PLWHAs. Stigma has robbed so many off their friends due to the view that protecting against the virus involves protecting oneself from those who bear the disease. The absence of others while one is suffering constitutes the greatest moral hardship similar to what Jesus experienced in Gethsemane⁹

C. Stigma and the Message of Grace

From the outset, HIV and AIDs was associated with a high level of stigma and discrimination. This prejudice rose in part because it was linked to groups such as gay men, prostitutes and intravenous drug users who were already highly stigmatized. In 1982, when HIV and AIDs was reported in America, there was little information about the disease. In fact, the PLWHAs like Ryan White were barred from attending school for the fear that other children may pick AIDS¹⁰. In India HIV and AIDs patients in 1980s were considered as outcasts and some were given separate houses to sleep and were prevented

⁷ Dube M.W. (2002). "HIV/AIDS and the curriculum, Method of Integrating HIV," in *Theological Programs*, p. 57.

⁸ Vitillo, J.R. (2007). "Pastoral Training for Responding to HIV/AIDS," p. 164.

⁹ African Jesuit AIDS Network, (2005). "Aids and the Church in Africa," an article by Fr. Alexandre M. "AIDS and the doctrine of the Catholic Church," p. 66.

¹⁰ *Time*, April 23, 1990, p. 8.

from coming into contact with anyone¹¹. In Africa as early as 1982 AIDS was viewed as a disease of people who had multiple sexual partners regardless of gender.¹²

The initial response to HIV and AIDs by the Church drew heavily from the biblical view point. In the old-testament stigma was prevalent in the Jewish community for sickness like leprosy. In Leviticus 13-14, lepers were declared unclean by the priest and therefore seen as social misfits. HIV and AIDs today, like leprosy in the Old Testament that had no cure, was viewed as being sent as punishment for sin (Numbers 12:10, 2nd King 5:27, and 2nd King 15:5). The church entrenched the false notion of HIV and AIDs as being an expression of anger by the divine majesty and encourages judgmental attitude and thus discriminate those who suffer¹³. This may explain why PLWHAs are being perceived as immoral and therefore sinful. Consequently, this forms the basis that stigma is prevalent in the church. This is elaborated further in the episode where King Uziah was struck with leprosy for his support of idolatry (2nd Kings 15:5).

The argument closes her opportunity of showing God's love to the sinner and therefore claiming him/her back to God. The Church as a faith community must reach the level of humbly obeying Christ by challenging stigma and discrimination and restoring the dignity of all human beings. This would effectively curb the devastating effect of HIV globally. But it would not happen until the Church stop viewing HIV as a punishment from God.

When HIV and AIDs is conceived as a punishment for specific sins, there is a high level of denial among Christians living with HIV and AIDs because they live in constant fear of being ostracized and being expelled from the church and therefore hide in fear.¹⁴ Some Churches that believe in faith healing further puts the blame of sickness on the sick when they fail to get well. Further discrimination is noted in some Churches that do not believe in the efficacy of

¹¹ Takyi (2011), "Reducing HIV Stigma and Discrimination in Ghana Keba," *Africa Magazine*, p. 5.

¹² Ibid., Geneva: W.C.C., 1987, p. 6.

¹³ Dube (2002), "HIV and AIDS and the Curriculum: Method of Integrating HIV" in *Theological Programmes*.

¹⁴ Shorter and Onyanacha (1998), "The Church and Aids In Africa: Case Study of Nairobi City," p. 64.

medical treatment and emphasize faith healing. If the adherent fails to get healed after prayer he/she is seen as a person of little faith and is further stigmatized.

The Church can be blamed for the fear that has swept the world faster than the virus because some congregation have reinforced a negative attitude to those living with HIV and this stigmatization is somehow associated with one's fear of death and one tends to deny or reject what they fear.

Stigma is further aggravated by use of certain names like 'victims' which tends to perpetuate and cause a lot of suffering to PLWHAs because stigmatizing words are strong and insulting¹⁵. They have tremendous power to humiliate the PLWHAs and destroy their self-esteem. This is case also applies to children whose parents have died of AIDs. The society refers to them as AIDs orphans yet they are no different from accident orphans or diabetic orphans. This gives an immoral connotation to the orphan and he or she may not receive support. For "HIV and AIDs orphans" people try to talk more on the cause of death and some take a moral ground on the person who has died and leave the bereaved to die with the stigma¹⁶. The Church need to revisit Romans 8:28 where Paul writes that all things work for good to those who love the Lord and walk according to His will and extend this grace to the orphans unconditionally.

PLWHAs do not always find the support they seek in church because fear and prejudice has caused Christians to close the door on them. In America, because of homosexuality link, mainstream churches were slow to respond to the Aids crisis¹⁷.

D. Methods of HIV Prevention, Stigma and Manifestation of God's Grace to HIV+

Stigma can and is fuelled by Christians' hung up about sex because it is idealized as something beautiful and fulfilling but only within marriage, then it is associated with temptation, immorality, sin and evil in extra and premarital affairs. This raises a level of intolerance of sex education programmes and HIV preventive

¹⁵ Wanjama, (2007), *HIV/AIDS The Pandemic*, p. 15.

¹⁶ Wagura, *Daily Nation*, April 20, 2011, p. 5.

¹⁷ Nicolson, R. (1996). *God In AIDS: A Theological Enquiry*, p. 53.

measures by the Church to those outside wed lock¹⁸. Generally the Church particularly in Kenya has a cold response to condom use as a preventive measure to those using it outside wedlock. This can be evidenced by the Roman Catholic opposition to the use of condoms where the late archbishop Cardinal Otunga on August 19th 1995 demonstrated this making a bonfire stoked by boxes of latex condoms and sex material¹⁹. This action, coupled with Catholics opposition to the sex bill in 1990s, explicitly demonstrates the church intolerance of condom use and failure to address the issues of sex and sexuality openly despite the fact that virus is mainly spread through sexual intercourse. Condoms are not 100% safe but there is a percentage of success particularly when used consistently and regularly. That consistency can mainly be possible in marital circles. This is argued to be necessary especially if either of them has a tinted past or is actually not faithful.

Most African Christian couples would trust their partners to be faithful and will therefore not use condoms but they run a high risk of contracting HIV if either of the partner has sexual contact with someone else who is HIV infected. While some people are indeed faithful to their marriage partners, the risk is increased by the fact that it is not possible to tell a HIV+ from a HIV- before the act whether in marriage or outside divided on this guidance as she is also divided by denominations. The message is without blood test.

A video message by a clergy living positively with HIV points out to the church that condoms are necessary for all including married couples so as to reduce the risk of spreading HIV in the society through marital lawful sex²⁰. The Church in Kenya is therefore not clear to the members and it is left to the individuals to make a decision. The Christians in Kenya have a stigma on use of condoms as they are assumed to presume promiscuity, judgment and condemnation. Added to the African philosophy on sexuality, illness and witchcraft; condom use is far from being absorbed as a regular

¹⁸ Moleny (2008). "Counseling For HIV/AIDS. The Use Of Counseling Skills For HIV/AIDS," p. 11.

¹⁹ Orabator (2005). "From Crisis to Kairos, The Mission of the Church in the times of HIV and AIDS Refugee and Poverty," p. 91.

²⁰ Video (2004). "What Can I Do? HIV/AIDS Ministry and Messages of Gideon," Byamugisha, FB Productions.

way of HIV protection within marriage and even without by the Church.

The silent message that Church members send to anyone coming to church and are known to be HIV+ is judgmental and hands off attitude. The HIV + Christian are likely to feel that they do not belong and in their quest for love move into more extramarital affairs hence increase the virus spread. The cycle of HIV and AIDs ends up being perpetuated by the church.

In most of the communities in Africa and other parts of the world in the past, sexuality was not discussed openly. The topic has been controversial not only in the Church but also at home. Many parents, religious and community leaders fear that if information on sex is exposed to the youth that will encourage promiscuity among them. This ignorance on HIV prevention has aggravated stigma and discrimination as PLWHAs are viewed as sexual deviants who got what they deserved on account of their immorality.

All these responses by the Church to those living with HIV is contrary to Christian theology on the grace provided to us through the cross. The Christian appears to lack the capacity to shun off negative attitude thoughts concerning the PLWHA and recall that in John 3:16 God demonstrated his love to mankind unreservedly; to all mankind. No sin was separated from God's grace. His redemption plan is to all no matter their previous lifestyle prior to meeting Christ, while with Christ or even if they abandon Christ in the course of the journey, his Grace is forever availed.

E. Current Theological Reflection on Those Living with HIV

In an international conference held in African International University (June 2012), Nairobi, the theologians in attendance came up with a resolve to increase emphasis on more awareness on the grace and peace from God and the Lord Jesus Christ in addressing HIV and AIDs globally. They emphasized the need for the Church to show compassion and acceptance not condemnation.

It was noted that stigma, discrimination and judgment are symptoms of deficiency of grace in the Church communal life. Currently, judgment and condemnation finds its way in most Churches because members lack the awareness of human's sinful nature and the immensity of God's saving grace. The theologians urged the Church to start the journey from judgment to grace

deliberately by extending the grace she has received to the infected, the affected and to one another²¹.

The conference further labored on the need for the Church to have the attitude of Christ to sinners when dealing with those infected and affected with HIV and particularly those who have received the redemption grace of Jesus Christ like he did to the tax collector (Matt 11:19). Christian education in family set up focusing on sex education, mentorship and love were also highlighted as helpful in enabling the children to avoid traps leading to promiscuous lifestyle likely to open doors to the virus. Mature adults in Church would also come to understand that through the work of the Holy Spirit in the believer's Christ performs the internal transformation necessary to maintain a graceful personality and bring change to the sinner. The internal transformation in the Church would finally exhibit through repentance, forgiveness and reconciliation.

The theologians noted that HIV and AIDs scenario should be seen as an opportunity rather than a burden for the Church communities to offer refuge to the lonely and hopeless situation witnessed among those living with HIV. It is an opportunity for the Church to display Christ's love and pursue increased conformity to the image of Christ.

F. What Needs Be Done By the Church to Manifest Grace to Those Living With HIV

It is important to labor on the term Church, who is the Church? More often when the term Church is used a Christian may think of the Church as a building, denomination or simply a group of adherents of a particular denomination. The Church is the concerned efforts of lay and ordained members working with God to realize the kingdom of God²². The Church can therefore be viewed as a community of believers with a mission to extend the kingdom of God on earth, it is the whole body of Christ composing of all those regularly participating in Church activities and confess Christ's lordship. Every individual believer is therefore called upon to use his or her energy to

²¹ "Theological Perspective on HIV /AIDS Conference," Nairobi, June 2012, Statement, p. 2.

²² Purry (2010). "Mainstreaming HIV and AIDS into the life and Ministry of the Church," World Council of Churches Ecumenical Initiatives.

accomplish set goals and targets and in all these manifest the grace of God to those with HIV.

The grace of God can be manifested in Church through programmes and projects that include sensitizing congregations towards HIV and AIDs, mobilizing the people to love and care for those who are HIV positive among them, advocacy for access to treatment (ART) challenge the current position of women and children, discriminative laws and practices, stigma and discrimination in the Church, workplace and the media. It is necessary to emphasis the urgency of involving people living with HIV in meetings discussing HIV matters since they have a day to day life experience with the pandemic. In all these, the Church would be demonstrating her role of being an ambassador of Christ. For the faith community to succeed in the foregoing activities the leaders must encourage members to help each other see the projects in God's view of those living with HIV and dream with God's world view.

In these, the Church would have her actions compelled by the love of Christ, where members accept those living with HIV as Christ has accepted them; seek the wisdom of God in challenging situations as they work towards transformation of negative attitude to those with HIV. The Church would bring life and hope through the breaking of silence, discussions on sexuality, stigma and discrimination to those with HIV. By so doing the members would identify with the suffering part of the body of Christ.

The New Testament depicts Jesus as showing sympathy with the marginalized. Jesus took a revolutionary attitude towards those stigmatized and socially rejected. In (Luke 5:12-16, 7:11-19), Jesus touched and heals the leper. Therefore then, the church is duty bound to be in the fore front in fighting stigma and discrimination against PLWHAs. The church, just like Jesus, who moved from the Jewish condemnation of the lepers, should move away from immoral association of PLWHAs with AIDS. Consequently, they should touch lives of the PLWHAs positively.

The church should provide voice for the voiceless through advocacy against stigma on those living with aids .This idea is derived from the saying of Jesus himself when he said to the followers that they will be the salt of the world and light to the world. (Mathew 5:13-14)

Religious leaders have a huge influence on those who come to worship and their message to adherents can work positively in reducing stigma in the Church. The Church works as a kinship community and can offer emotional support, love and care to counteract fear, judgment, self-condemnation, anger and sense of shame and stigmatization experienced by People living with HIV²³.

The inspiration of the Holy Spirit, should enable the church to cooperate with other groups in the fight against HIV and AIDs This is demonstrated by the Church in Uganda collaboration with (TASO) an NGO in appealing to communities especially those from homes with AIDS patients to love and accept them²⁴ The masses were educated on how to handle the infected person who need love, comfort and fellowship. This education went along way in reducing stigma on the PLWHAs.

Worldwide, there is a growing body of tools and research on faith and HIV. Organizations such as The African Health Policy Network (AHPN) formerly known as LEAT London Ecumenical AIDS Trust, Churches, Channels of Hope (CCH) and other faith based organizations have rolled out training tailored towards the manifesting the grace of God to those living with HIV. The initiatives when backed by the Church will help in offering support, care or information on HIV. The challenge lies in making all that is written, discussed and planned become a reality to make the grace of God manifested to HIV +ve people. This is because fighting stigma involves touching, reaching out to PLWHAs. Jesus identified with suffering by giving them hope and joy (John 11:27). Through his teachings he enables the Church to do the same, Christians are therefore called upon to reach out to PLWHA .Loving and caring for them can manifest more grace when prayers are accompanied with laying on of hands on the sick by elders. This ritual act would enable the PLWHAs to appreciate Christ's love shown them by the Church community and this can be powerful catharsis for those who are stigmatized²⁵. Unfortunately, research has shown that 61% of the

²³ Samita ,Z (1999). "Churches and AIDs in Kenya" in Getui, M Obeng, E A Eds. 1999. *Theology of Reconstruction Exploratory Essays* (1999), 177.

²⁴ Tinkasiimire, T. (2005). "Prospects and Challenges for the Catholic Church in Uganda in the 21st Century in *Challenge and Prospects of the Church in Africa*, ch.9 p163.

²⁵ Nicolson, R. (1996). *God in AIDS: A Theological Enquiry*, p. 10.

clergy and lay leaders in Kenya are not responding to the pandemic and this failure is associated with lack of skills. Equipping them requires several approaches such as seminars, video shows and discussions²⁶.

The video “The Spring of Life” which targets church leaders across Africa and demonstrates a positive view point of the church role in addressing stigma is a spirited awareness raising campaign. The educative information on the factual and accurate information about HIV and AIDs through use of drama poetry, role play at community level helps in reducing stigma. Pastoral counseling emphasizing individual and group counseling for the PLWHAs is another tool the Church can use and by so doing emulate Jesus and the Holy spirit who are regarded as counselors and comforters in troubled times (Is. 9:60, 16:33).²⁷ Counseling gives us the aim, encouragement, describes change and fighting stigma on the PLWHAs. It gives hope and confidence for living to those who want to know their status but are not sure and those who were already know they are infected with HIV and AIDs virus. It is one way of showing care to the sick and oppressed in line with James 1:27, an assignment to the Church for all who are suffering, the HIV +ve included.

The Church can reach out to PLWHAS by establishing support groups. It can also include PLWHAs in their programs and meetings. Pastoral agents like pastors, lay preachers should be equipped with contextual information that resonate the dynamics of HIV and AIDs.

Conclusion

HIV and AIDS is a global reality that needs constant redress and the Church must overcome guilt from partially handling the problem at the beginning of AIDS era in the world and move on to demonstrate to the world the Grace of God so efficient to those living with HIV. In view of this year World Aids Day theme which will be the theme for the next 3 years in the fight against AIDS ; “**0 new infection 0 discrimination and 0 AIDs related deaths**” the Church input is so central to this theme and has the capacity to fast track positive success. To succeed in this she has the responsibility of

²⁶ Debbie, D. (1998). “AIDS in Kenya,” *The Church Challenge and The Lessons Learned*, p. 5.

²⁷ Tinkasiimire, T.(2005). “Prospects and Challenges for the Catholic Church in Uganda in the 21st Century,” in *Challenge And Prospects Of The Church in Africa*, ch. 9.

putting concerted effort in opening up discussions on HIV and AIDs, establish new programs in Church. Most important there is need to issue out more and more theological advocacy statement for the sake of those living with HIV to be accepted loved and cared for.

The grace of God to those with HIV and AIDs is open and non discriminative. Because God relates to those with HIV and AIDs the same way he relates to those with cancer, malaria or Diabetes. To God they are sick people needing healing love and care. They may be sinners and God again provides the redemption grace through the sacrifice paid by His son Jesus Christ equally to all sinners and limits non from receiving this grace. The cause of sickness while receiving healing through the grace of God does not obstruct healing, sin does and it must be dealt with among all of us regard less of the sickness. The righteous also fall sick due to various reasons and not necessarily because they have sinned and they equally seek God's power for their healing. Since the sinners penalty has been paid through the death of Jesus on the cross, the sinner upon repentance receive cleansing through the blood of Jesus Christ, it is upon the Church to preach the true Gospel under the Grace so given and receive all to the Kingdom. God will complete the process of reducing stigma once the Church community understands the unity received through the blood of Jesus. In view of the above the Church interpretation and implementation of the grace of God is wanting and theologians and Church leaders needs to awake to the call.

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