The diaconal and liberation role of the Church in the fight against HIV/AIDS in Botswana

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It is evidently clear that more than two decades since HIV/AIDS was scientifically discovered, the disease has shown devastating effects in all aspects of human lives. Botswana, a country of just over 1,7 million people has been badly hit by the disease. The church being a community of compassion, care, and healing is expected to provide support, hope, and healing, to the infected and the affected. Yet, it is also clear that the scourge has found the church unprepared to minister effectively to the suffering and the needy members of our societies. Such unpreparedness has been demonstrated by a theology of illness, fear, loss of hope, and helplessness. It has also added to the stigma associated with HIV/AIDS.

In my view the church is therefore more challenged than ever before to develop a theology, which is life, based. The development of such a theology would allow the church not only to preach and minister the Word of God to the suffering effectively, but also provide practical service to those who are directly infected and affected by HIV/AIDS.

The church is also challenged to act decisively, because beside, the fact that HIV/AIDS is a matter of life and death, it has raised questions, which are always anguishing and in most cases difficult to answer. Questions include:

• If God is the indeed the creator and all saving, why does he allow the HIV/AIDS to devastate His own creation?
• How can we as a Christian nation locate God in the midst of the suffering created by HIV/AIDS?
• How can we as Christian theologians theologize the living face of suffering caused by HIV/AIDS?

In an attempt to answer the above questions, I would like to make some proposals of the things that I think the church should do in the fight against HIV/AIDS in Botswana.

Broad strokes for a diaconal theology of liberation in the context of HIV/AIDS

First, I propose (Ruele 2002: 11) that, in dealing with HIV/AIDS the church must adopt a liberatory and holistic approach, which could liberate the people thinking about God in the era of HIV/AIDS and at the same time empower the infected and affected both physically and emotionally (spiritually). The church must therefore do so by engaging a liberation and diaconal theology of AIDS. Such a theology should be based on the people of Botswana's inter-connected struggles to fight all the things which denies them the precious gift of life they got at Creation. (Gen 1:26).

Again in order to do a diaconal theology of liberation the church must adopt a liberatory approach, by reflecting upon it self, its methods of operation, and its mission work when dealing with the present situation of life in Botswana. In other words, the church must engage in a historical praxis of liberation. To make this possible, the church must do theology from the social, and existential circumstances of Botswana as its point of departure.

A liberation approach is also important for the church as it would its allow its followers to appreciate God's participation and intervention in the history of Botswana, something which is as relevant today as it was in biblical times when He heard, and knew the suffering of the Hebrews,
and created a united nation of Israel, from a ragtag band of slaves who were no people. (Rasmussen 1995:113).

Second, Christians should make a critical reading, of the Bible in order to find how similar diseases such as leprosy were dealt with during biblical times. A critical reflection, on the Bible would also show how themes of sexuality, suffering, pain, disease, and death were treated during those times. Such a critical reading would also show why God should be regarded not only as the Creator, but also as the Liberator, who cares about the liberation of his own creation (Genesis 1, 2, Romans 1).

I believe that a critical reading of the scriptures will show God as having created sex as something inherently good, and not sinful. In other words this would make the church in Botswana appreciate God’s gracious gift of sex for procreation. I would like to go further and say that such a biblical reading would in fact “liberate the Gospels” from the Patristic doctrines which have greatly influenced the teachings of the Church in ways that have condemned sexual pleasure as sinful. To give as an example, Origen—an early Christian theological thinker—was so convinced that sex was evil that he castrated himself in order to stay pure. Bishop Augustine of Hippo also thought that sexual desire was sin and that celibacy was the best way. Their ideas and those similar to them influenced Christian thought, which the church taught for many generations. Unfortunately, their misconception were supported by the fact that influential Christian figures, such as John the Baptist, Jesus Christ, and Paul never indulged in sex or even got married. (Byamugisha 2000:19).

The most unfortunate thing with such teachings particularly in the era of HIV/AIDS is that they impact negatively on Christian thinking, particularly on the issue of talking openly about sex. This in many ways contributes to the conspiracy of silence on sexual matters, which is also a common problem in the Church in Botswana.

Third, a proper reflection of the Bible would lay a foundation for the basis of a diaconal liberation theology for HIV/AIDS. The theme of liberation of any kind is a strong one in the Bible as shown throughout the Judaist religion that God is not only the Creator, but also as a Liberator whose gracious grandeur of creation, has made a world infused with justice, liberation, care and compassion—all necessary aspects of human life. (Rasmussen 1995: 114) This importance of life and creation, which HIV/AIDS negates, would be amplified through a proper reading of the Bible.

A good example of the themes of creation, liberation and the good life is also amplified in the scriptures, whereby “Israel” is redeemed from Egypt. In this act of liberation, Egypt is portrayed as the historical embodiment of the forces of chaos, as opposed to Israel, which embodies creation as a happy community that enjoys life. For this paper, whether God is the one who created “Egypt” in the past would be equally immaterial as to whether God today is the one who created suffering, sin, and HIV/AIDS. However, what is important is the lesson we learn from the Bible regarding the paradigm of liberation which began with Moses and the first recorded slave rebellion as a transformation for the realization of a new way of life. Such a paradigm of liberation is equally important for modern Christian communities in Botswana as they wrestle against the anti-creational forces that degrade and destroy their lives.

Fourth, in addition to the above, I think theology should become an agent of change that can advance peoples liberation, and life-based responses to HIV/AIDS by transforming all the structures that are threatening the peoples lives. The core for change/conversion is shown in the teaching of Jesus throughout His ministry and mission work where Christ has always shown concrete models for pastoral work in discipleship (Mark 1:14f). Such changes can be in our personal lives our teachings and our approach to religion and in our attitudes to those who are HIV positive, (Luke 19: 1-9).

As already mentioned the Church should also change its theological approach, and reflect anew on the threat posed by HIV/AIDS. Particularly in the context of vulnerability that Botswana and Africa as whole faces.

In my view, the Church on the African continent is more vulnerable than it is in other continents, because of the socio-economic and cultural trends of globalization, which continue to place it at
the receiving end of the latest scientific knowledge, and information regarding latest strategies used in fighting HIV/AIDS. To be vulnerable in the context of HIV/AIDS means having limited skills, or no control over ones risk of acquiring HIV infection, or for those already infected with HIV, having little or no access to appropriate care, and support (WCC 1999:11) For example lack of accessibility to anti-retro viral drugs due to poverty and ignorance. Responding to vulnerability means acting and obeying the Bible’s call of discipleship through practical actions and deeds.

The Bible clearly shows on many occasions how Jesus intervened against vulnerability to restore life. As such, the reality of HIV/AIDS challenges the Church in Botswana to recognize and respond to the vulnerability by addressing socio-economic and cultural issues that impact negatively on its people. As a Christian community of believers the Church is called to address these issues and act in light of the inclusive nature of the Gospel.

The Church must change, and accept that it is not only the infected that are vulnerable to HIV/AIDS, but that all Christians who belong to the Church of Christ, are equally vulnerable to HIV/AIDS. As an agent of change the Church should recognize AIDS as a crisis for the Church as a whole, and as such should regard the Church as being HIV positive. (WCC 1999:11).

Fifth and lastly, as an agent of change, the Church can break the silence on HIV/AIDS and through liberative theological and biblical reflection help other religious institutions such as seminaries, mosques, monasteries and missions, talk openly about sexual matters in their communities. In the words of Byamugisha such a move will also help the Church enter into a process of self discovery, meditation, and serious reflection about its responsibility and begin to defeat the silence, the shyness, and the indifference surrounding HIV/AIDS (Byamugisha 2000:6). This can be done by acknowledging that there is much more sexual activity and promiscuity happening in our churches than we are often prepared to accept and that most Christians do not use condoms, possibly, because, they do not expect their fellow Christians to be positive or infected with the HIV virus.

A study by Byamugisha (2000:10) showed that there is unfaithfulness even among Christians. This may due to a number of issues, which are cultural, such as a brother having sex with an impotent mans’ wife to get him children or widow inheritance. What is unfortunate is that such sexual activities takes place even among people who do not know their HIV status, or who are powerless to say no to unwanted/unsafe/unlawful sex. Byamugisha (2000:14) has also observed that churches should accept that not all lawful and acceptable sexual unions in homes and communities are safe and those include those of Christians. Therefore there is a need to break the silence, and speak about sexual matters to Christians because sexually active Christian are at risk of HIV infection.

A relevant diaconal theology of liberation in the context of HIV/AIDS in Botswana

In order for the church in Botswana to make a meaningful and positive role in the fight against HIV/AIDS, it must engage in a liberation theology of diaconia. The word diaconia literally translates to mean service, ministry, being a servant and to minister from a certain context. It is about the pastoral and prophetic work that the Church does during times of crises and moments of need. (Collins & Farrugia 1991:55) A biblical example of diaconal work of the Church is outlined in the books of Acts (1:17,25;21:19) and Romans 11:13 and 1 Timothy: 12 when the Church transformed itself to be in line with the needs of Christian who were persecuted.

The diaconal work of the churches is always relevant, when the needs of the society at a particular time in history are considered, because this forms the practical basis of its diaconal work. It also helps in engage the resources of the church in transforming human lives and delivering meaningful service. A relevant church of diaconia will be encouraging and inspiring, instead of being a preaching, singing and dancing church, whose members will always be murmuring, whispering, gossiping, and talking about social problems instead of solving them.

It might be true that even as I write this paper some members of the Church in Botswana are
murmuring, and whispering about issues related to HIV/AIDS, stigmatization, and shunning those who are infected by the disease. I believe that there are some people among us and in our churches who are still murmuring with frustration about the failure of the Church in carrying out its diaconal responsibilities. There are those Christians in Botswana who still shun, and disassociate themselves from those who are HIV positive.

The murmuring, and whispering goes on, and will continue to go on in our homes, in our work places, buses, and in our churches, so long as the Church is not a listening/hearing, liberating diaconal place where people can seek help. The Church of God in Botswana must be a liberative diaconal institution, which must always be able to listen to the voices from the margin. It must speak for the voiceless. It must hear the cries of the orphans of HIV/AIDS, the screaming voices of women who experience rape and domestic violence.

Otherwise, if the HIV/AIDS sufferers are neglected and if the weakest members of our society are not listened, to by the Church as they cry, and despair, then the Church would be an irrelevant institution in their struggle against HIV/AIDS.

Diaconia, liberation and service are the greatest challenges for the Church in Botswana today. And Christians must learn from the Bible how the early church transformed itself into a new liberating organization and how Himself led it into a serving organization. Jesus the Deacon was the servant of God, who was always out to serve God's people. Even His Kingdom (Diaconal Community) was meant for service. (Mark 10: 13) That is why Jesus associated himself with the lepers (AIDS sufferers of his time). For example in verse 45, Jesus the Deacon told His disciples that He came to work for the people and not for the people to work for Him. The challenge for the Christian church in Botswana is that it works for the people, not the people to work for it. The Botswana church should realize that in the Kingdom of God, service is primary, and that the Kingdom of God comes as a result of diaconal work. Mark 10: 42 outlines clearly the relationship between the diaconal expectations of God. In showing how diaconia relates authority to service, Jesus used His authority to heal, and empower, to include, and not exclude. The challenge for us today as a church in Botswana and as theologians, is to respond to the social realities of our time. We are challenged as a Church to fight HIV/AIDS by being an all-inclusive, listening, speaking, and above all a serving Church that must always be ready to go and find out how some people are neglected on the basis of poverty, gender ethnicity, race, and their HIV/AIDS positive status.

We must, as a church of God assume a prophetic role, and diaconal responsibility by reflecting on the teachings, work, and the authority of Jesus by transforming the church into a new organization with new leadership. We must inject new ideas, which can challenge the devastation that HIV/AIDS is doing to God's beautiful works of creation. We must hear as a Church, the cries of God's children in the wilderness of hopelessness and despair if we are to be a diaconal church. Otherwise if the church leadership cannot hear the people cries, then it certainly needs "new ears" to hear the call. And, indeed if the Church cannot see then it certainly needs new "eyes" in order to read the HIV/AIDS situation in Botswana correctly.

The church in Botswana is also challenged that as a church, it must practically engage, contextualise, and actualize its faith for the benefit of those who are in need. And, this it can only achieve by being a listening Church. A good example how the Church listened, heard, spoke and served was during the apartheid regime in South Africa, when the Church was transformed into a diaconal institution that actively got involved in the people's struggle for freedom. The Church of Botswana is similarly challenged to play such a crucial role in the struggle against HIV/AIDS today. Only then will the Church in Botswana be a relevant and a liberation diaconal institution in the struggle to fight HIV/AIDS.

References


