

A Challenge to Churches

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A few months ago, I participated in an ad hoc prayer meeting in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia. I was part of a home-based care group (a doctor, two nurses, and me) from the Kale Heywet Church, doing its Saturday rounds. We had just walked into a little one-room dwelling in the slums of the inner city. We joined a prayer meeting that was about to begin. In the room were two teenaged girls, both orphans, a widow, and a defrocked Pentecostal pastor. They were all HIV positive.

One of the girls was in bed, too weak to stand. The other girl, whose name was “Jerusalem,” sat on the end of the bed. Both were covered with skin lesions, one of the classic signs of the onset of full-blown AIDS. The widow, a woman of about 30 years of age, stood by the bed. She was smartly dressed, and could have passed for any healthy Ethiopian. Her HIV had yet to reach full-blown AIDS status, but her face betrayed a battle with something that predated her HIV infection. Since having a baby when she was 16 years of age, she had suffered from one of the worst of female afflictions—a fistula. The Pentecostal preacher was in his early 30s. He was a clean-cut, pleasant-looking man, who had been defrocked when his HIV status was revealed. Now, without a fixed dwelling or fixed income, he spent his days ministering to victims of HIV/AIDS in the rabbit warren of mud brick dwellings that had become his parish. They were very happy to see us.

It took about an hour for the medical team to examine the group one by one, and to update the medical log. When they had finished, we were invited to join them in prayer. As a preacher’s kid, pastor, and missionary, I’ve participated in thousands of prayer meetings. Please understand me when I say: this was the *first* prayer meeting I’ve ever attended.

As they lifted their hands and shining faces to heaven I found myself wanting to either grovel on the dirt floor or get out of there. I felt like Isaiah when, in the presence of the Holy One, he cried, “Woe is me! For I am undone! For I am a man of unclean lips.” They didn’t ask for themselves. Instead, with their feet in the grave, and their hearts in heaven, they exalted the Lord, declared his majesty, praised his name, and spoke of the day when they would meet him face to face. Then, turning to me, they prayed for me and for the ministry of Visionledd. I’ve never been so humbled. I’ve never felt so genuinely blessed by someone’s prayer. It was clear to me that they were the saints and I was the sinner. But it was also clear that all of us in that humble little room were “under the shadow of the Almighty.”

And I knew that I was in the presence of the Church. Visionledd has a vision concerning the HIV/AIDS pandemic—“Every church, a Mother Teresa.” If that little

Albanian nun could impact the whole world by ministering to the dying in the streets of Calcutta, what could the Church do with the death culture that HIV/AIDS is imposing on our world? After incorporating Visionledd as a federal charity in 1999, we set out to “lift up our voice like a trumpet” and call the Church to be proactive in the war against HIV/AIDS.

The role of the Church in southern Africa

The place to begin was in the region where HIV/AIDS has current critical mass—southern Africa. Here the Church has a more powerful and extensive infrastructure than any other entity, including secular government. Africa is the most aggressively christianized continent in the world. There are tens of thousands of churches and they all have property, buildings, permits, permissions, men's groups, women's groups, youth groups, Sunday schools, and real stature in the communities they serve. Pastors are looked up to. Church leadership is respected. The Church has clout.

UNICEF published this statement about the Church:

“Religion plays a central, integrating role in social and cultural life in most developing countries... there are more religious leaders than health workers. They are in closer and more regular contact with all age groups in society and their voice is highly respected. In traditional communities, religious leaders are often more influential than local government officials or secular community leaders” (Religious Leaders as Health Communicators. New York, NY: UNICEF, 1995).

Without question the African local churches provide an unparalleled delivery mechanism for a proactive HIV/AIDS strategy.

Visionledd has challenged the African churches to adopt a simple and straightforward strategy. The four strategic pillars of our “plan for proactivity” include:

1. Awareness
2. Comprehensive education (especially for the “AIDS-free generation”—children 12 years of age and under)
3. A care and housing infrastructure for Children Orphaned by AIDS (COBA)
4. Home-based care.

We've called the local churches in Africa to tell the story of HIV/AIDS, teach key leaders, youth, and children how to prevent the spread of HIV/AIDS, provide housing for the orphans and widows who have been left homeless by HIV/AIDS, and then to care for those who are dying.

In order to implement this strategy in a sustainable way, Visionledd has focused on recruiting, training, and empowering HIV/AIDS task forces comprised of hand-picked African pastors. These pastors are the true “gatekeepers” to the church communities in their respective nations; they carry the four-pillared strategy to their churches. Currently

we have trained and equipped task forces in South Africa, Zambia, Zimbabwe, and Malawi. They are both denominational and inter-denominational. Overall, they represent nearly 20,000 congregations. Only a small percentage of these congregations are actively committed, but the numbers are increasing every week as delegations from the task forces challenge them from the pulpit to get involved.

Another way Visionledd is implementing the four pillars is through strategic partnerships. We identify “best practices” and link up. An example is our partnership with “Hands at Work,” a non-governmental organization (NGO) working in South Africa, Zambia, Mozambique and Malawi. Hands at Work has received “best practice” status with USAID and is undoubtedly one of the finest faith-based NGOs in Africa today. Currently we work with them in South Africa and Zambia.

In South Africa we provide short-term teams of young adults from North American churches who assist in the home-based care of more than 1,000 orphans and widows in Masoyi. We also help fund the building of humble community-based homes and the drilling of wells for irrigating orphan-run vegetable gardens. One of those gardens is doing so well that the 70 orphans who care for it not only grow their own food but sell the surplus to purchase school uniforms and books.

In Zambia, Visionledd and Hands at Work have come alongside a combined effort of 35 churches in Kabwe to provide a ministry centre for orphans and widows. The centre, ably run by over 70 church-based volunteers, is already caring for hundreds. We have sent teams of young Canadians over to help in the construction of facilities and to provide encouragement and support. The Kabwe model is a vision come true in terms of the local African Church responding to the HIV/AIDS pandemic. And because it is community and church-based it has an integrity, authenticity, and sustainability that will help it stand the test of time. History has shown there is nothing more sustainable than the local church.

This is why I believe the “Church Universal” needs to be involved in the battle against the greatest threat to mankind in history. The “Big Guns” must face each other—the Body of Christ on one side, the destroyer on the other: the Church vs. HIV/AIDS. The battle will be long and deadly; already some world health experts are predicting there will be 1 billion HIV positive people on earth by the year 2050, if current infection rates continue. The Church must be on the cutting edge of this war.

The role of the Church in North America

The “Church Universal” includes our churches here in North America. HIV/AIDS is not an urgent local issue yet, but in a few decades it will be. Meanwhile we can have a major impact in southern Africa by serving the local churches there. A well-prepared, culturally-sensitive, “basin and towel” approach can and will work wonders. It’s happening in a small way now.

First, a growing number of North American churches are making HIV/AIDS a major focus of their established missions mechanism. They have had to be innovators considering most missions paradigms have not included HIV/AIDS since its emergence 25 years ago. But there is significant progress today.

Secondly, the trend among young adult Christians in our churches is toward ministry activism. They understand and embrace “servant leadership.” They are also affluent and well-educated. They don’t want to merely give money. They want to give their time, and their talent, thus the swelling numbers of young adults who are looking to the Church to provide hands-on, relational ministry in the HIV/AIDS-stricken regions of our world.

Visionledd receives e-mail queries every day about volunteering in our work in Africa. Several churches have committed to short-term missions work in 2005/2006. Some are planning for 2007. One keen church has even asked us if we can facilitate a team every month! These young adults understand that working alongside the local African church is both community-transforming and nation-building. They believe in practising what they preach. They’ve responded to our call to pursue righteousness and justice, which leads us to the “theology” of the Church’s response.

The theological framework for the Church’s response to the HIV/AIDS pandemic is built on righteousness and justice. “Righteousness and justice are the foundation of thy throne, O God,” the Scripture says (Psalms 89:14; 97:2). Indeed, the Lord tells us that sustainability is predicated on righteousness and justice: “I will make justice the measuring line, righteousness the plumb line” (Isaiah 28:17). Nothing built without these two key ingredients will last. In the Old Testament, righteousness generally refers to the fulfillment of the demands of relationship with God; justice, the fulfillment of the demands of relationship with our neighbour. Both vertical and horizontal relationships must be functioning. This is the genius of Jesus’ response to the young lawyer when asked what God expects of us: “Hear O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is One. And you shall love the Lord thy God with all your heart, soul, mind and strength. And you shall love your neighbour as yourself” (Mark 12:28-31; Matthew 22:34-40; Luke 10:25-27). “Fulfill the vertical and horizontal relationships,” says Jesus, “and you fulfill the law.”

Interestingly, in the Hebrew language both “righteousness” and “justice” come from the same word: “zedek” or “zadkah.” Thus, they are often used interchangeably. But there’s one thing for sure—you can’t have one without the other.

For the past several decades, Evangelicals have been strong on righteousness and weak on justice, as if you can have one without the other. From a biblical perspective, there is no “either/or” proposition. It’s got to be “both/and.” James, Jesus’ half-brother, puts it this way: “In the same way, faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead. But someone will say, ‘You have faith, I have deeds.’ Show me your faith without deeds, and I will show you my faith by what I do... faith without deeds is useless” (James 2:17-20). He might just as well have said: “Righteousness without justice is useless.”

So where does justice begin? Surely it begins with the lowest common denominator. Long before the apostle John described God in heaven as seated on a throne surrounded by elders casting their crowns before him, and myriad of angels crying: “Holy! Holy! Holy!” King David wrote, “A father to the fatherless, a defender of widows, is God in his holy habitation” (Psalm 68:5). If “God so loved the world...,” and he does, his love is directed first to the most vulnerable, the weakest link, the most easily-preyed upon—the orphan and the widow. That is where the Church’s love for the world must begin as well.

The Church's mandate to pursue an aggressive strategy concerning HIV/AIDS is therefore essentially a biblical call to care for orphans and widows. HIV/AIDS is the greatest orphan- and widow-maker in history. There is no entity on earth with a mission like that of the Church when it comes to rising to the defense of these vulnerable victims. If we don't do so, we will be guilty of the sin of omission.

Fortunately, scores of North American churches are responding with vision and commitment to the victims of HIV/AIDS. This may be the finest hour the Church will ever see.

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