

WHY THE CHURCHES ARE SLOW IN THEIR RESPONSES TO THE HIV/AIDS PANDEMIC?

Julian Müller

Professor of Practical Theology

University of Pretoria

Several reasons for the reluctance of churches to get involved could have been listed. In the light of limited time, I would like you to consider only two:

1. The overwhelming statistics

The statistical story about HIV/AIDS is so negative and overwhelming that churches, like the larger part of society, are just paralyzed by it. We don't know how to react to devastating statistics, saying that 4.7 million people are living with HIV/AIDS in South Africa today. It seems as if the research done up to now, which produced all the necessary data about the pandemic, didn't bring about the longed for changes in society. A need has developed for an alternative approach, a more narrative approach. **Therefore, we have started a research project at the Faculty of Theology, University of Pretoria, with a different approach, a narrative approach. We call the project: The unheard stories of people infected and affected by HIV/AIDS and their experiences of care and the lack of care.**

Marion Bunch, a remarkable women from the USA, who have visited South Africa recently has said that she came to the same conclusion. After her second eldest son was diagnosed with the virus and died four years later, she became a crusader and addressed more than 50000 youngsters in her country. She recalls how she had visited a school in Georgia. The children said to her that Aids was no big deal. They said that by the time they contracted the disease, a cure would have been found (The Star, August 8, 2001).

Bunch said that she soon realized that they were not getting through to the children and needed a strategic change. And they made precisely the change that we are advocating. They changed to a narrative approach and according to the article in the Star (August 8,

2001) she said: “We then made use of young people who were HIV-positive. And I’ll tell you, that really got their attention.”

So we need another approach. We need to reposition ourselves. Without ignoring the vastness of the problem, we should start to concentrate on small-scale research and to listen to the stories of ordinary people in our communities. Practical theology can help us in this regard. Pattison, S and Woodward, J (1994) said:

Pastoral theology (*practical theology* – JM) at its best, like cultural anthropology, is probably a small-scale enterprise, which pays minute attention to particular situations and is more remarkable ‘for the delicacy of its distinctions not the sweep of its abstractions’ (Geertz 1991, p.25). It needs to pay minute attention to seeing and understanding a particular phenomenon and to listen before moving into carefully chosen words. Contextually and situationally sensitive pastoral theologies will be modest in their claims and assertions. This is a welcome feature amidst the past grandiosity of many theological enterprises which have sought to control and order the world rather than to understand it and to set particular individuals and communities free. (Willows, D. and Swinton, J. (edd) 2000:42)

2. The ethical stumbling block

Where the link between people’s suffering and their own sinful behavior is obvious, as is mostly the case with HIV/AIDS, the church seems to find it difficult to show compassion. It is as if the church, in these cases, feels obliged to preach the ethical issues firstly. Then after the warnings and judgments, by way of an epilogue, the church tries to give comfort. For those in need and suffering these words of comfort then have a bitter, after-taste.

Instead of showing honest empathy, the churches are often more concerned with the ethical issues at hand. They are so busy pursuing a fundamentally good theology, that they lose sight of the people that suffer.

In a moving story, *Sin, Grace, and the Basement Door*, Charles Campbell (2000:1-4) tells about his own experiences with homeless people in Atlanta. He says: “I had always assumed that discipleship *followed* the confession of sin and acceptance of forgiveness. The basement door, however, like the text from Micah (6:8), has taught me that this process is actually reversed: we do not fully know the depths of our sin and the reality of God’s grace until we seek to follow the way of Jesus.”

Most of the mainline protestant churches would agree to the outline of the Heidelberg Catechism in it's three-fold structure: The knowledge of your sins; the knowledge of how to be saved from that sins; and a grateful life. This very structured and logical way of understanding the gospel, has perhaps mislead us to use the same sequence in our dealing with people suffering because of sins. We want to establish knowledge of sin in the first place, and then later, we would consider the deeds of gratefulness.

That is precisely the same sequence, which the Pharisees have expected from Jesus in his handling of the woman caught in adultery (John 8:1-11). They wanted Him to make an ethical statement and condemn the woman. He refused and started to write on the ground. When all had left without condemning her, Jesus said: "...neither do I condemn you.... Go now and leave your life of sin."

Campbell (see earlier quotation) also refers to the text in Micah 6:8

And what does the Lord require of you?

To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God.

He says: "The order of these three demands, I realized, is important: justice, kindness, humility. In the process of seeking to do justice and love kindness, we are led to humility before God." (2000:2).

The church will have to learn to be compassionate, in the likeness of our Lord.

Bibliography

.Pattison, S. with Woodward, J. 2000. A vision of pastoral theology: In search of words that resurrect the dead (1994). Willows, D. & Swinton, J. (edd), 2000. *Spiritual Dimensions of Pastoral Care. Practical Theology in a multidisciplinary Context*. London: Jessica Kingsley Publishers.

Saunders, S.P. & Campbell, C.L. 2000. *The Word on the Street. Performing the Scriptures in the Urban Context*. Grand Rapids, Mi.: Eerdmans.

Willows, D. & Swinton, J. (edd), 2000. *Spiritual Dimensions of Pastoral Care. Practical Theology in a multidisciplinary Context*. London: Jessica Kingsley Publishers