

World AIDS Day 2009: Learning from Families Affected and Infected

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Every year we hear and read messages sent out by various organisations involved in the ministry of HIV/AIDS. Organisations stage their achievements as well as their challenges in the field of HIV/AIDS prevention, care, and control. World AIDS Day is an opportune time to take account of where we stand as a people as far as HIV/AIDS is concerned.

2009 AIDS epidemic update report

In his message Fr. Fratern Masawe, S.J., the Moderator of Jesuits Superiors of Africa and Madagascar (JESAM) invites all the Jesuits to learn to face AIDS as a family. He says that facing AIDS as family requires everybody within and outside the Society of Jesus, and the Church to react to those around just in the same manner in which Jesus attended to the needs of those who were suffering and disadvantaged during his time. We need to realise the cosmic and shared humanity that we all have as one-family united by He who is the author of life. Rise from our own socially constructed enclaves that directly or indirectly condemn, reject, and cast out “as good as dead” our own brothers and sisters whose human dignity has been consumed by AIDS.

United as a people who are part of this family, he adds will consolidate the efforts towards fighting HIV/AIDS, which could make a significant difference in preventing and controlling the epidemic - a difference affirmed by the 2009 AIDS Epidemic update report launched on 24th November 2009.

The report by the United Nations Program on HIV/AIDS (UNAIDS) and the World Health Organisation (WHO) shows how various efforts invested in epidemic prevention programmes are making a substantive difference. According to the report new HIV infections have been reduced by 17 percent over the last eight years, with most progress seen in the Sub-Saharan Africa. The report states that since 2001 the number of new HIV infections in sub-Saharan Africa has slowly declined. In 2008 the numbers of new infections were approximately 25 percent lower than in 1995 when the epidemic was at its peak in the region. The report also shows that the number of people living with HIV in sub-Saharan Africa slightly increased in 2008; partly due to increased longevity stemming from improved access to HIV treatment. Adult (15–49) HIV prevalence declined from 5.8 percent in 2001 to 5.2 percent in 2008.

Sub-Saharan Africa remains the region most heavily affected by HIV. In 2008, sub-Saharan Africa accounted for 67% of HIV infections worldwide, 68% of new HIV infections among adults and 91% of new HIV infections among children. The region also accounted for 72% of the world's AIDS-related deaths in 2008. The epidemic continues to have an enormous impact on households, communities, businesses, public services and national economies in the region.

Questions and Lessons

With the light at the tunnel as far as the new infections are concerned what is our role as human family today in the fight against HIV/AIDS? What are you doing to prevent and control

HIV/AIDS spread? What are you doing to the affected or infected in your area? What are you intending to do as a contribution to the fight against HIV/AIDS? With about 22.4 million people living with HIV in Sub-Saharan Africa, and an estimated 1.4 million AIDS-related cases occurring, what lesson can we learn as an African family infected and affected? In my view, a holistic approach needs to be employed in our efforts to fight HIV/AIDS. But this approach should take into account the following moral, social, economic, and spiritual aspects.

1. *Ethics of compassion/love/care*: The approach should be inspired by an ethic of compassion brewed in the understanding that we are dealing with a disease that denies human beings their rights, freedom, dignity, happiness and the capacity to be agents of change. Such approach will build hope and determination among the infected and affected as opposed to an inhuman approach that promotes discrimination, stigmatisation and rejection. The Church, the State, and other non-governmental organizations need to understand that practical hope, mutual solidarity, accompaniment and compassionate care are the enduring challenges and imperatives that the HIV/AIDS crisis continues to present to society.

2. *Solidarity emerging from the fact that we are living in a global world*: Solidarity means being aware that “my life affect your life, and yours affects mine, and similarly, our lives affect their lives, and theirs affect ours.” (Opongo, and Orobator, 2007). Thus to be in solidarity at this time of AIDS is to be part of each other’s life. It means to assist those who are already infected and those affected to meet their basic needs. It also implies prevention of the spread of HIV/AIDS. The Jesuits of Africa and Madagascar discovered this reality in 2002 or even before that and hence the establishment of African Jesuits AIDS Network (AJAN). AJAN’s mission is to help Jesuits in Sub-Saharan Africa – their works and communities, individually and with their colleagues – to respond to HIV/AIDS in an effective, coordinated and evangelical manner, culturally sensitive and spiritually grounded. Its mission is to link Jesuits together with colleagues in mutual encouragement and support.

3. *Integral Development and justice*: To understand HIV/AIDS one should also try understand the context. As it is here in Africa, and elsewhere, many political leaders and church leaders acknowledge the connection between HIV/AIDS, and societal existing forms of injustices related to the inter-related socio-economic, and political problems facing Africa. Fr. Masawe in his World AIDS Day message affirms this claim when he says: “Thousands of people [Africa], for example, are infected because of poverty, hunger, war and forced displacement, domestic violence and the sex trade.” This implies, therefore, the war against HIV/AIDS would bear much fruit if we stress and apply a holistic approach that does not treat HIV/AIDS as merely a medical-pharmaceutical problem but as a consequence also of other unjust structural problems within the whole national and international structure. In other words, more reduction and prevention of HIV can only be witnessed even next year around this time if HIV/AIDS is not treated as an isolated disease but one that emerges from unjust structures that characterize our nations.

4. *Paradigm Shift in matters concerning Sexuality*: There is no doubt that a paradigm shift needs to be taken in terms of how sexuality is exercised and perceived today. I think time has come when people need to change their mentality and realise how unreflected action today in one’s life can lead to death and suffering. This is the time to emphasise on sexuality that values life more than glorification of pleasure. It is time that the youth who are often attracted to discovering their sexuality, married couples, and singles, should ask themselves the following questions:

- (a) Do I exercise my sexuality selfishly without respecting everybody equally?
- (b) Does my sexuality promote human dignity that we share as a human family?

- (c) Do I through my sexuality serve the needs of all? Or can my understanding and exercising of sexuality be universalized?
- (d) Finally does my way of exercising my sexuality conform to God's vision or dream for me and the entire world?

5. *Critical Education*: To live in today's world with all kinds of information or confusion requires one to have a critical capacity to judge what is morally good and what is morally bad. Leaving the world to teach, the youth in particular, is not an option. Marcel Uwineza affirms this observation in an excerpt from his poem, entitled, *Confusion*. He laments rhetorically the confusion that the young are subjected into by today's world in terms of making wise and well reflected decision pertaining even to their own sexuality:

*My father sends me to my mother,...
 My mother to the housemaid
 She gives me books to read
 The books do not have it all,
 Mother, I am confused!
 She turns on television
 You see, that is interesting, that is where you should go!
 Television, many programs
 Which one to follow?
 Which one to go to?
 Confusion*

*Where do I go?
 To whom shall I go?
 Whom to trust?
 My uncle wants sexual advances
 I turn to my grandfather who
 Looks for his own sexual healing
 Confused, he rapes me
 Should I tell my mother or my father?
 Television or reading that is where I go...
 Confusion....*

Thus my claim that a good moral formation is necessary today to provide good moral formation and information – a formation that would enable the youth to:

- (a) Perceive HIV/AIDS as a reality that is threatening humanity in this century.
- (b) See the bigger picture of HIV/AIDS and its destructive nature if it is not addressed collectively and individually.
- (c) Realise the kind of attitude required in the present circumstance characterized by AIDS.
- (d) Re-evaluate their source of morality and then consider their attitude to human relationships and their sexuality within this context.
- (e) Reflect the consequences of actions devoid from respect for human life.
- (f) Ask themselves what future they may need to embrace.

A world free from HIV/AIDS is possible. Ours is first of all to hope for such a world, and then try to be that which we desire. Since we all desire a world free from HIV/AIDS, we must then work hard to prevent ourselves from any circumstance within our limitations that can expose us to

HIV/AIDS. We must embrace the lessons listed above in the preceding discussion openly and truthfully if we want to create a true family where we all co-exist peacefully, and humanely.

Notes

1. United Nations Program on HIV/AIDS (UNAIDS), and World Health Organization (WHO). *2009 AIDS Epidemic Update*. http://data.unaids.org/pub/Report/2009/2009_epidemic_update_en.pdf. Accessed: 25th November 2009.
2. Opongo Elias Omondi, and Orobator E. Agbonkhianmeghe. *Faith Doing Justice: A Manual for Social Analysis, Catholic Social Teaching and Social Justice*. Nairobi: Paulines Publications, 2007.
3. Masawe, Fratern. *World AIDS Day: Learning to Face AIDS as a Family*. AJANEWS 86.
4. *African Women, HIV/AIDS and Faith Communities*. Eds. Isabel Apawo Phiri, Beverley Haddad, and Madipoane Masenya. Pietermaritzburg: Cluster Publications, 2003.
5. *Women, Religion and HIV/AIDS in Africa: Responding to Ethical and Theological Challenges*. Eds. T. M Hinga. A. N. Kubai, P. Mwaura, and H. Ayanga. Pietermaritzburg: Cluster Publications, 2008.
6. A World Council of Churches Study Document. *Facing AIDS: The Challenge, the Churches' Response*. Geneva: WCC Publications, 2002.
7. Bennet Michael. *Faith and Social Justice*. Nairobi: Paulines Publications, 2006.
8. Uwineza Marcel. *Confusion*, dedicated in memory of all kids left confused by this rapidly changing world, *Hekima Review* 41 (December 2009), 189-90.