

Building a Human Rights Culture
South African and
Swedish Perspectives

Karin Sporre &
H Russel Botman [eds.]

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WOMEN IN THE CHURCH

SOLIDARITY IN SUFFERING IN THE CONTEXT OF HIV/AIDS?

BY MIRANDA PILLAY

In South Africa the Christian churches are an important factor in society. The church therefore can act as a influential agent of change, which was true for a number of churches in South Africa during the struggle against apartheid.¹ I write as a woman theologian within a Christian tradition and my views are influenced by my experiences as a South African woman of colour for whom the idea of human rights means being pulled between excitement and anxiety. I am excited about the empowering challenges and opportunities made possible by the legal and structural changes since the demise of apartheid² but anxious that those who find themselves in leadership positions within these structures are missing the opportunity to challenge entrenched perceptions and practices that are contrary to a human rights culture based on the dignity of all human beings.

In this article I argue that the rediscovery of possible transformative and liberating principles of the early Christian tradition, within a framework of feminist theology, could contribute toward addressing the complex challenges facing South Africans in the context of the HIV/AIDS pandemic. To develop this argument I will first give a brief background of some basic thoughts in feminist theology and then move on to a discussion of HIV/AIDS in a South African context with particular reference to challenges facing women in the church. First, a few words of introduction describing the experiences of many women in some South African churches.

Women across the world are becoming increasingly aware of discrimination in all forms and guises. In 1989 the Circle of Concerned African Women

- 1 Some churches justified a theology of segregation and a doctrine of purity, believing that God has divided all people into collective units and permanently separated them from each other (Bosch 1991:5). On the other hand, in a book published on request by the Anglican Provincial Board of Missions, the author is adamant that, "We must declare that South Africa's racial structures of society are incompatible with Christian values. But pronouncements are not enough; the social order must be changed". (Prozesky 1990:89).
- 2 This was marked by the first democratic election in South Africa on 27 April 1994.

Theologians was founded, an African women's theological community offering a safe space in which African women can "dare to speak and write about many subjects considered to be taboo" (Kanyoro 2001:169).

Historically, struggles for national liberation have taken precedence over struggles against gender oppression. However, throughout the ages, many women in different parts of the world have challenged society and the church to move away from patterns of sexist thought, behaviour and structures (Masenya 1994:66).³

In the church environment that I was exposed to as a child and teenager, women were (and still are) silent and are not allowed access to the hierarchical structures of "office bearers".⁴ I remember women speculating excitedly about whose husbands were to be promoted to a higher office, an annual event that is a highlight on the church's calendar. If a brother's work towards "the salvation of his soul" is satisfactory, he becomes an under-deacon in charge of a number of brothers and their families. Thereafter, success in climbing the "clerical ladder" results in becoming a priest, then an elder, and then an overseer. To hold the highest-ranking office of apostle is to have the ultimate authority in the church.

Women in this church are extensions of their husbands – priest-sister, elder-sister etc. that of course creates a hierarchy amongst women themselves. All office-bearing men preach in church, but never in the presence of a man who holds a higher office. Women are not allowed to preach, but they are encouraged to prophesy. The prophecies are interpreted by the highest office-bearing man present.

I regarded the subordination of women in the church as "the natural order of things" and to some extent also enjoyed my father's success in the church. However, the distinct separation of "spiritual things" and "worldly things" affected me directly. I was not allowed to go on certain school outings because they were "worldly". To me, it seemed unfair – not so much because the school was "in the world" and because being part of the school also meant being part of the world, but because my friends, who were also Christians, got to go. The explanation? I was a true Christian because I received an anointing from the hands of the holy apostle, the only one with authority from God "to seal" the elect with the Holy Spirit.

3 In the 1890s Elizabeth Cady Stanton, together with a committee of 29 women, wrote commentaries for interpreting passages in the Bible which referred to women (Zikmund 1985:23).

4 I was raised in the tradition of the Old Apostolic Church of Africa, where respect for authority (the church and the government) was paramount, if not reverent.

It is the dynamic tension between subordination and domination, between inferiority and superiority operative in hierarchical relationships and amongst those who experience subjugation and discrimination themselves, that has prompted me to raise and explore the following questions: What influence does the notion of an engendered God have on gender power-relations? What were the challenges of early Christianity as an alternative to the established culture of patriarchal structures? I also explore how feminist theology and particularly the focus on embodiment could contribute towards a re-discovering of our common humanity as we seek an appropriate response to the sexual, economic and cultural vulnerability of women in the context of the HIV/AIDS pandemic. I start this journey by reflecting on how sexism sets the stage for dualism in which relationships of domination, control and oppression are sustained.

Sexism in the church: a brief overview

Sexism, according to South African feminist theologian Denise Ackermann (1988:22), is the exclusive ordering of life through gender power-relations.⁵ North American feminist theologian, Rosemary Ruether (1993:178) explains that sexism, understood to be both violence and violation to women's bodily integrity, humanity, and capacity for full selfhood and as such, also is the distortion of male humanity. Traditional gender roles and power relations in churches have contributed to sexist social constructs within which the subordination of women flourishes in the family, the church and society.

The origins of sexism in the Christian tradition are related to the platonico-apocalyptic dualistic worldview, which identifies God with the positive (that which is perfect) and "the world" with the negative (that which is imperfect). In this scenario, human beings stand between God and the world, spirit and nature. Ackermann continues:

The stage is set for models of domination and superiority, for the oppression of women by identifying them with nature, earth and the body in its despised and rejected form (1988:22).

Within this dualistic worldview then, man is seen as representing the rational and spiritual part of the self, while woman is seen as having a "greater aptness for sin" and also being less spiritual (Ruether 1993:94). Thus, observes Ruether:

5 The recognition of sexism as wrong and sinful brings about the total collapse of the myths of female evil, says Ruether (1993:173–183).

Within history, woman's subjugation is both the reflection of her inferior nature and the punishment for her responsibility for sin (1993:95).⁶

Ruether, referring to the theologies of Augustine, Aquinas, Luther and Barth, further argues that the "pattern of patriarchal anthropology can be illustrated in the entire line of classical Christian theology from ancient to modern times" (1993:96).

In criticism against Nietzsche's views on gender construction, Croatian theologian, Miroslav Volf (1996:189) quotes Nietzsche as saying, "[...] only he who is sufficiently man will redeem the woman in woman; for the woman, the world is perfect only when she obeys with all her love". Nietzsche thus contends that man is creator, he is redeemer, and he is commander, while woman is the chaos that cries for the imposition of order. This argument reiterates the notion that woman is sinful and awaits redemption; that she is irrationality that must receive command. Volf (1996:190) argues that such a construction of gender goes in one direction – from the positive of man's fullness towards the negativity of woman's lack. Volf suggests that the doctrine of the trinity offers an alternative for Nietzsche-like misogyny.

Some theologians have made the point that the "gender of God" language questions gender equality. Fulkerson (1994:42) argues that male gender constructions dominate the Christian faith and where there are female gender constructions, they include many notions of female subordination. Johnson (1994:42–55) criticizes Ruether's use of the word "God/ess" because it proves unpronounceable and thus not usable for worship. She (Johnson) agrees that speaking of God in the image of male and female has the advantage of making clear that women do enjoy the dignity of "being made in the image of God".

Volf (1996:170) says that it is generally agreed that God is beyond sexual distinction. He further states that because God is "personal" we speak of God using masculine or/and feminine metaphors, since there is no other way to speak of persons except in a gendered way. He (Volf) continues his arguments saying that notions about God regarding masculinity or femininity are there because we, who are gendered, have placed them there. Volf maintains that "Gender distinctions are unrelated to the image of God". Volf (1996:172) is convinced that whether we use masculine or feminine metaphors for God, God

6 It is generally agreed, specifically amongst feminist theologians, that this particular image of God within the Christian tradition has contributed toward the subjugation of women.

models our common humanity, not our gender specificity. To be adamant about a gender specific deity in order to make male or female gods the horizons for development of specific gender identities is unacceptable if one is committed to the one God of the Christian tradition, continues Volf.

I agree with much of Volf's argument, but then, how is one to ignore the fact that God incarnate, in Jesus of Nazareth, was male? Volf (1996:175–180), by presenting the trinity as a non-hierarchical relationship between separate persons, introduces the notion of mutual giving of the self, while not losing the self, as the pivotal point to be considered in gender power-relations. While this may be a powerful illustration and inspiration to transform domination within relationships, this image does not erase the reality of the maleness of the one God – Father, Son and Holy Spirit operative within the Trinitarian relationship. So while I agree with Volf that referring to God in gender specific language is a human construct, I question my own conviction in this regard because Jesus, who is God (to me and other Christians), is also male.

Referring to the trinity to illustrate gender equality may not be quite appropriate, but it is effective in illustrating mutuality and reciprocity, which are essential if relationships are to be life enhancing and not oppressive. I add my voice to those who believe that it is not important to find the maleness or femaleness of God so that we (Christians), who are either female or male, can align ourselves with God and thereby affirm our superior nature, but that we find our common humanity, our equal human dignity in God incarnate through the birth, life, teaching, death and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth.

At that time, God Immanuel had to be in a male because the world back then would only have paid attention if the prophet, rabbi, teacher or leader were a man. Jesus used this platform to challenge the oppression, subjugation and exclusion based on race, class, gender and age. He risked his comfort zone of rabbi, teacher and leader when challenging racism, sexism, classism, ageism and exclusivism. He restored the human dignity of women and children; of the poor, the unclean, the outcast and all those who were marginalized as the “other”. Jesus created the space for women to claim their credibility as witnesses and dignity as human beings.⁷

Unfortunately this space was invaded by men who were in control, and for them to retain positions of power women had to remain subordinate. This is

7 Schüssler Fiorenza (1990:20) who argues that the reality of women's commitment and leadership “precedes the patriarchal injunctions of the New Testament texts” affirms this.

evident in Paul's letters where he continuously addresses questions regarding supposedly appropriate behaviour of women in the church. Slowly, but surely Paul's well articulated advice and guidance for that time and place became ammunition for church fathers thereafter to undo what God had intended.⁸ Schüssler Fiorenza (1990:20) argues that, although only remnants of a non-patriarchal Christian ethos are preserved in the bible, "these remnants indicate that such a 'patriarchalization' process was not inherent in [the early] Christian community, but progressed slowly". Thus, she claims that any new liberation praxis in the community of believers' calls for concrete social action based upon "reflecting on the meaning of biblical texts".

Given the fact that equality is the seedbed of human rights and that most democratic states have constitutionalized human rights, women, cannot by law, be discriminated against just because they are not men. Women's basic human rights within political, cultural, economic, social, and family life have received international attention since the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) was adopted by the United Nations in December 1979 (CEDAW-website: 4 April 2003). As this Internet source reveals:

Often called an international "Bill of Rights" for women, the Treaty for the Rights of Women is the culmination of more than 30 years of work by the United Nations Commission on the Status of Women. [...] The creation of this Treaty [CEDAW] was the first critical step in developing a standard for basic human rights for women. These standards address abuses [physical, sexual, economic, and political] of women and promote women's equality of rights and well-being.

Article 2 of the Treaty mandates countries⁹ who have ratified the Treaty to "condemn discrimination in all its forms and to ensure a legal framework, including all laws, policies, and practices that provide protection against discrimination and embody the principle of equality" (CEDAW-website:4 April 2003).

Structures in civil society have changed to give women a voice in the public sphere. If this had been the case when (the Christian) God had decided to take on human form, God might have done so in a female gendered body.

8 I am aware that no one can, with any accuracy, infer what God's intention had been, but I am also aware that Christians, as a people of faith, believe that "in Christ" God relinquished power and domination so that humanity – men and women, slave and free, Jew and Gentile, young and old rich and poor, sick and healthy – may be empowered to live in life-enhancing relationships.

9 As of November 2002, 170 nations, including South Africa have adopted the Treaty for the Rights of Women (CEDAW-website 4 April 2003).

It is essential not to ignore either the irreducible duality, rooted in our sexed bodies or the dynamic construction of gender identities, which is culturally constructed, while keeping in mind the fundamental equality of being human, whether male or female.¹⁰ Keeping in mind that equality does not mean sameness, we must continue to affirm gender equality and seek to change attitudes and practices which embody the subjugation and inferiority of women.

Although sexist oppression is usually seen as “gender privilege of males over females” (Ackermann 1993:22), it often involves oppression of women by women (Kretzschmar 1991:109). This phenomenon has recently become evident in instances where in some church denominations ordained women clergy are simply not “called” to serve in congregations. While it is true that many church leadership structures are still male dominated, I would argue that many women who are now part of churches’ leadership structures do not challenge the status quo because they accept the “natural order of things”. Thus it is imperative that women who seek to make sense of the life of faith and who envisage radical transformation, reflect critically and systematically on structures and practices within the church and society that continue to uphold patriarchal symbols and hierarchical relationships. This, according to Ackermann (1992b:66) is the notion out of which feminist liberation theology is born. It is not my intention to elaborate on the theoretical framework of liberation theology or how feminist theology operates within this framework. For an overview in this regard see Ackermann (1992a; 1993c). Suffice to quote Ackermann (1993:22):

[Feminist theology] has as its goal an emancipatory ecclesia; and theological praxis. Hence feminists today no longer demand only admission and marginal integration into the traditionally male-dominated hierarchical institutions of the churches and theology, they demand radical change of these institutions and structures.

Unfortunately the above quote reflects much of what has remained an academic curriculum. Thus we are continuously challenged to, in creative ways, seek to explore “emancipatory ecclesial and theological praxis” at grassroots level.

10 One has to keep in mind that general tendency to polarize gender identities as either male or female might lead to oversimplifying the complexities of sexual identity.

Early Christianity: Liberation movement at grassroots?

Jesus and His first followers, who were women and men, were Jews and therefore, Christian origins cannot be separated from its Jewish roots. Jesus and His movement should be understood as an inner Jewish renewal movement that presented an alternative option to the dominant patriarchal structures, and not as an oppositional formation rejecting the values and praxis of Judaism (Schüssler Fiorenza 1983:106–107). The fact that women leaders such as Prisca and Junia in the early church were Jewish women, who challenged the subjugation of women in a patriarchal society, should not be ignored. Thus Schüssler Fiorenza (1983:108) contends that feminists should maintain a hermeneutic of suspicion when re-interpreting texts that speak about women because the historical experience of these women are only available through Jewish or Christian “male texts” where the focus is on male writers and their attitudes towards woman, while ignoring the reality of women’s experiences.

Schüssler Fiorenza points out that because of a serious lack of sources, especially for the pre-70s period, the historical-theological reconstruction of the Jesus movement as an emerging inner-Jewish renewal movement faces difficult hermeneutical problems. Since our general picture of pre-70 Judaism is blurred, and that of early Christianity is equally vague, it is even more difficult to construct a picture of the position and function in the emerging renewal movement at the beginning of the common era. It is however, important that women continue to re-read Biblical texts and also read between the lines, gaining new insights into the praxis of early Christianity and thus empower and inspire women to re-discover transformative and liberating principles.¹¹

Because of the struggles between the emerging transformative view of the Christian movement and that of the dominant patriarchal ethos of the Greco-Roman world, the leadership roles assumed by women were ignored, submerged and pushed aside.

Women in the early Christianity

The people of Israel understood the Roman occupation to be the greatest offence to God’s rule and they believed that God would intervene. Thus, according to Schüssler Fiorenza (1983:111) the establishment of God’s Kingdom (*basileia*)

11 Mouton (1994:21) reminds us that the bible does not supply direct, simple answers to moral questions, but that we [Christians] have the obligation to involve ourselves in the creative tension of the liminal space between the dynamics of the biblical texts and the needs of contemporary society.

was central to all Jewish movements, including the Jesus movement. The various groups may have had different lifestyles which reflected their theology, but they were united in their concern for a political existence and holiness of the elected people of Israel. Jesus however, refused to define the holiness of God's elect in cultic terms. Instead, he re-interpreted it as "the wholeness intended by creation" (Schüssler Fiorenza 1983:112).

The basileia vision of Jesus as the praxis of inclusive wholeness

Jesus did not observe the ritual purity of the "holy table" like the Pharisees; instead he shared table fellowship with the marginalized. Jesus reveals a God of graciousness and goodness who accepts everyone; a God who brings about justice and well-being for everyone; a God who wills wholeness and dignity for all human beings and therefore enables the Jesus movement to be a discipleship of equals (Schüssler Fiorenza 1983:135). He called Jews and Gentiles; women, men and children; sick and healthy; sinners and righteous to be part of God's Kingdom. Jesus even suggested that the women of the poor and the unclean classes – Samaritan women, slave women, prostitutes – will come into the Kingdom of God ahead of Scribes and Pharisees (Ruether 1993:6).

Women were the first non-Jews to become members of the Jesus movement, continues Schüssler Fiorenza (1983:135). She states that women, who had experienced the gracious goodness of God through Jesus, were instrumental in spreading the Jesus movement in Galilee. The discipleship of equals was safeguarded by women who challenged the Jesus movement to extend its table fellowship and the power of the basileia to gentiles. Not only were Galilean women responsible for extending the Jesus movement to include "others" but they were also prominent in continuing the movement after Jesus' arrest and execution. The women disciples did not flee after Jesus' arrest and they were also eyewitnesses of his execution. Women were also the first to witness the powerful goodness of God, who raised Jesus from the dead, and it was a woman who took this good news to the men.

Ruether (1993:195) aptly describes the Jesus movement as an alternative to the established culture of dominant patriarchal structures:

This alternative Christianity could have suggested a very different construction of Christian theology; women as equal with men in the divine mandate of creation, restored to this equality in Christ; the gifts of the Spirit poured out on men and women alike; the church as the messianic society, not over against creation but over against the systems of domination.

Jesus movement: Liberation from patriarchal structures?

The Jesus movement gave women a voice in the public sphere and as such challenged the dominant patriarchal ethos through the praxis of equal discipleship. Schüssler Fiorenza (1983:141) asserts that patriarchal structures and poverty are two sides to the same coin and that the majority of poor and starving during the first century were women. This phenomenon has not changed much, since. It is important to note that poverty alone is not a sufficient descriptor of being marginalized in the first century but womanhood added a significant further dimension to the marginalization of women who were specifically also poor. Thus Schüssler Fiorenza (1983:141) argues against a direction of Christian theology which has allowed women to identify with general male categories and groups – the poor, brothers – because it does not allow women to identify themselves as women, in solidarity with other women.

While Jesus' stance against the marginalization and subjugation of the poor and of women is noticeable, no strategy for structural change is articulated. The gradual patriarchalization of the early church was unavoidable, observes Schüssler Fiorenza (1983:84), because as the Christian movement became institutionalized, women were excluded from church office or their positions were reduced to subordinate marginal ones.

Women in ministry today

Female subordination and the general theology of male headship have been the basis of arguments for women's exclusion from ministry. But women realized that they are uniquely capable of ministering. During the ordination service for Antoinette Brown, the first woman ordained to the Congregational ministry in 1853, the preacher affirmed that, "since the gifts of prophecy are given to women as well as men in the New Testament, there has never been any excuse for excluding women from the ordained ministry" (Ruether 1993:198–199).

Almost one hundred and fifty years hence and many church denominations still refuse to accept that women too are empowered by the Holy Spirit. While some church denominations have accepted the inclusion of women to offices of ministry, it is expected of them to continue within established patriarchal structures. Generally women are included in ministry through the concept of justice and equal opportunity.¹² This perspective ignores the fact that the shape

12 "Antoinette Brown's ordination was part of the first wave of liberal feminism, which is manifest in the Seneca Falls Convention of 1848" (Ruether 1993:199).

and form of patriarchal ministry resulting in the subordination of women, is problematic and while women win inclusion in this same ministry they do not ask whether ministry itself needs to be redefined. As Ruether (1993:200) points out:

Women are allowed in token numbers to integrate themselves into this male-defined role. They adopt the same garb, the same titles [Reverend, if not Father], and the same clerical modes of functioning in a hierarchical structured church.

Ruether continues her argument referring to the Swedish Lutheran Church, “in which male priests and theologians dragged out all the old arguments linking maleness and priesthood, including pollution taboos, to argue for the illegitimacy of women’s ordination”¹³ and warns that winning the legal right to ordination is not secure. Women in ministry, continues Ruether (1993:201), like all women in public roles under male rules, “are allowed success only by being better than men at the games of masculinity [...] In such a system it is not possible for women to be equal, but only to survive in a token and marginal way at tremendous physical and psychological cost”.¹⁴ Where women do find themselves occupying the same space as men in leadership positions in the church they should not allow themselves to blend into the natural order of things, but challenge any perceptions, practices and structures that give rise to, or perpetuate relationships of dominion or subjugation. Responding to the realities of the HIV/AIDS pandemic could be an opportunity for South African women to, irrespective of race or church denomination, develop skills amongst themselves that will lead to transformation in local churches and society. My conviction is that South African women who hold leadership positions in churches should claim this space to, within the framework of feminist theology, identify, rediscover and develop body-affirming theologies. I will now turn to this subject.

13 Here Ruether refers to Janarv, GB, Lingqvist, K et al 1979. *Halva Himlen är Var*. Stockholm: Gummessons.

14 Katie Cannnon, an African-American Feminist theologian reiterates this notion when she argues that, “when strong, positive, God-centred women confront their male counterparts, they are usually afforded a subtle, institutionalised option to conform to whatever those in power have defined as normative.”

Sexuality, HIV/AIDS and the Church

One cannot respond to the HIV/AIDS pandemic without addressing the realities of human sexuality. Weeks (1995:15) says, “To speak of sexuality and the body and not also speak of AIDS, would be, well, obscene”. Nelson (1979:14) reminds us that “the church is also very much a human community composed of sexual human beings”.

Nelson (1979:17) explains that while sexuality includes sex, which relates to biological organ systems, it goes beyond the biologically-based need which is oriented toward procreation and pleasure. Sexuality is a very basic dimension of our personhood and a way of being called to communication and communion. There has however, been a deafening silence within the church as its focus remains on things “spiritual”, resulting in body alienation. The church has ignored the reality that human beings are also sexual beings. Because sex and sexuality remind us of our bodiliness, it reminds us¹⁵ that we are not God. In the struggle to be powerful and in control, like God, we strive to be spiritual and deny our bodiliness. By doing this, we ignore the reality of Christianity, “And the word became flesh and dwelt among us, full of grace and truth [...]” (John 1:14).¹⁶ Thus, if we alienate our body-selves, we alienate ourselves from God and we continue to be blind to what it means to be fully human. The church carries with it the historical baggage of viewing and teaching about sexuality in a negative way, giving the impression that sexual sins, especially premarital sex, matter more than most other sins (Nicolson 1995:20).

Feminist theology identifies sexism – the distortion of gender into structures of unjust domination and subordination – and not sex, as sin (Ruether 1993:37). It is sexism, supported by structures of patriarchy that results in the cultural, sexual and economic vulnerability of women.

In my opinion, feminist theology, operating within a paradigm of Christianity as a theology of liberation, offer a framework for women in the church to respond to the realities of the HIV/AIDS pandemic. The reality of AIDS has made us aware, not only of our vulnerability as human beings, but also our vulnerability as sexual beings.

15 As a member of the Christian community of faith, I am part of the Christian story/history with all its facets and as such cannot express myself apart from it.

16 Referring to John (1:14) Nelson (1979:8) says that “Christian faith ought to take embodiment seriously”.

The reality of HIV/AIDS

[...] the global HIV/AIDS epidemic, through its devastating scale and impact, constitutes a global emergency and one of the most formidable challenges to human life and dignity, [...] it undermines social and economic development throughout the world and affects all levels of society – national, community, family and individual. [...] Africa, in particular sub-Saharan Africa, is currently the worst affected region (UN General Assembly Special Session on HIV/AIDS June 2001).

This quotation aptly reflects the disaster facing all of humanity, and in particular Sub-Saharan Africa which is not only the most affected by HIV and AIDS, but also the least prepared and able to deal with the effects the disease has on the lives of individuals, families and communities.¹⁷ Dealing with the impact and challenges of HIV and AIDS on a medical and a social level proves to be a daunting, if not near impossible task particularly in South Africa's rural areas.¹⁸ It is estimated that around 4,7 million South Africans are currently HIV positive and this number is growing by 1 800 new infections every day. Approximately 200 000 South Africans already have AIDS. While statistics lay bare in a rather dramatic way the urgency with which the disease needs to be curbed, I want to echo the words of Ndungane, Anglican Archbishop of Cape Town in his call to:

[...] measure HIV/AIDS in human terms rather than only in statistics. [...] until and unless we begin to measure the pandemic in terms of broken hearts, orphans, fear, loneliness, pain and grief, we will not adequately respond to a disease which is impacting on all humanity.²⁰

Women, AIDS and poverty

HIV/AIDS does impact on all of humanity. However, while HIV/AIDS may be described as an “equal opportunity” disease, the socio-cultural, economic and sexual vulnerability of many women are the main reasons for the increase

17 While some countries in this region have launched comprehensive and collaborative responses to the pandemic, the South African government directed its resources and energies in debating the proverbial “causes of the fire while Rome is burning”.

18 Added to the fact that many rural people are economically disempowered, limited or no access to resources such as medical treatment and care, transport, running water and sanitation worsens their plight.

19 I will not be dealing with characteristics of the HI-virus and the pathogenesis of AIDS in this paper. See Chapter 2 of WCC Study Document *Facing AIDS: The Churches' Response*. See also Nicolson (1995:9–17) and Snidle (1997:9–16) for an overview in this regard.

20 59th Session of the Diocesan Synod of the Diocese of Cape Town during August 2000.

in infections amongst women.²¹ While the social and economic impact of this disease are felt by thousands of South African living with AIDS, millions of South Africans who are infected, and all South Africans who may or may not acknowledge that they are affected,²² the pandemic is fuelled by the cultural, sexual and economic subordination of women.

As infections rise in women, so do infections in the infants born to them. Mother to child transmissions is the primary source of HIV infection in children under the age of fifteen (van Houton 2002:18). If a woman is poor, then long-term health risks may seem irrelevant to her own or her family's survival. This may explain why prevention strategies that are limited to "knowing the facts" and "becoming aware of the risk" have not succeeded. The link between HIV/AIDS and poverty has often been highlighted and the link between HIV/AIDS and economic benefits has already been established.²³ As HIV/AIDS begin to affect the day-to-day quality of life of HIV-positive individuals and their families, it leads to increased absenteeism from work, also on the side of spouses and other members of the family. In many instances economic and social circumstances force children to leave school in order to look after a sick parent/adult. This phenomenon perpetuates the poverty cycle, as there is a correlation between levels of education and standard of living. HIV/AIDS does not only threaten lives but also the sustainability of livelihoods of the poor and economically vulnerable.

While poverty does not cause HIV/AIDS, the poor and destitute, who in most instances are also women, are more prone to contracting the disease and in that sense poverty exacerbates the pandemic. Often the need to still one's hunger pangs, or provide food for those who depend on one, is more urgent, real and sometimes life-threatening than the knowledge of possible dangers of a sexually transmitted disease. Poverty impacts on nutrition. The extremely poor often find it difficult to meet basic caloric requirements, let alone the particular mix of proteins and calories necessary to benefit optimally from Anti-Retroviral

21 Female anatomy also makes women 2–4 times more likely to be infected by an HIV-positive sexual partner, than the other way round (van Houten 2002:10).

22 As reported in the media during 2002, some (South African politicians) are of the opinion that the "attention" given to HIV/AIDS is causing unnecessary alarm and that it is in the interest of all if ignored. Conspiracy theories have also entered the debate, suggesting that the focus on Africa is a racist slur and that pharmaceutical companies are out to enrich themselves while "poisoning" people with toxic drugs. These views as expressed by (the late) Peter Mokaba, ANC MP (among others) have resulted in intense debates among politicians and the citizenry of South Africa.

23 See Saayman & Kriel (1991:160) ; Nicolson (1995:39) WCC Study Document (1997:66).

Therapy that is if they have access to these drugs.²⁴ As access to treatment is further restricted by availability of adequate health care infrastructure, rural and urban poor populations suffer disproportionately. Their lack of advantage makes their lives no less valuable and no less deserving of protection. Denial of treatment means suffering and death.

Seidel (1993:178) reflects:

[...] in situations of deepening economic crisis which disproportionately affect women as provider, no AIDS prevention programme can afford to ignore the socio-economic aspects of sexual behaviour or operate in isolation of the need for action on poverty and gender inequality.

The above quote is also echoed by Tallis (2000:59) who asserts that gender inequality could be regarded as the main problem area hindering HIV/AIDS prevention. Tallis further argues that “traditional human rights approaches are based on male norms and women’s rights are not always seen as human rights”. This is particularly so in the African context where the incidence of HIV-infections are more prevalent amongst younger women between the ages of 15 and 24, indicating the “strong patriarchal character of traditional African society in which young unmarried women have little defence against sexual advances from older, more powerful men” (Saayman 1992:51). In some areas, men seek out younger women because they believe that younger women are less likely to have AIDS. This is often how the HI-virus is passed on to young women by older men who may not even know that they are carrying the virus (van Houton 2002:10). Kanyoro comments:

In many ways, African women bear the brunt of AIDS. They are economically marginal. Those who develop AIDS are scapegoated and often thrown out of their family structures (2000:25).

Elsewhere Kanyoro (2001:160) writes that one of the major tasks facing African women theologians is to “gain confidence to face the dilemmas and contradictions that are part of our history and present”. Her appeal continues:

24 Since 1996, People who are HIV positive have been treated with a combination of anti-retroviral drugs, known as Highly Active Anti-retroviral Therapy (HAART). This treatment stops HIV from multiplying and reduces the volume of HIV in the blood, slowing down the process that leads to AIDS. This, together with proper treatment for opportunistic infections such as oral thrush, shingles and TB, allow HIV-positive people to lead normal, productive lives for up to 10 years (AIDS Law Project 2001:25).

When we advocate that women be included in the ordained ministries of the churches in Africa, we are hoping that these women pastors will be strong pillars for establishing relationships of trust and mutuality with women in the congregations. We are hoping that women pastors will be willing to talk about the reality of women's experiences in their sermons, and therefore be able to make connections between church, home and society (2001:161).

In some cultures and communities issues such as legal rights, domestic violence, and women's non-control over their bodies are perceived as part of the natural order which cannot be challenged unless women exchange knowledge with other women who know it is possible to change the perceived natural order of things. Women in the church, and particularly those who now occupy leadership positions, are thus encouraged and challenged to explore avenues that might have transformatory and redistributive effects, inspiring all women and men to challenge unequal gender power relations in the church and society.

Community and Solidarity

Churches are grounded in communities. Herein lies their strength and credibility to act effectively in response to the impact and challenges presented by the HIV and AIDS pandemic. It is within the space of the local church where people gather voluntarily that the spirit of community must be rediscovered, reclaimed and nurtured. It is within the community that life must be sustained and experienced to the full. I maintain that the challenges with which we are faced in our response to HIV and AIDS present us with an opportunity to be the community we ought to be. The HIV/AIDS pandemic presents the church with the challenge to create opportunities where people are inspired to "have life abundantly"; where people are encouraged to develop skills to make responsible, life-sustaining decisions that are congruent with their sense of Christian identity, and where collective responsibility is fostered, offering an embracing spirit of community.

The church is in a unique situation to use the Christian symbol of community as revealed in the Trinity to bring about a "newness of mind" regarding relationships among its members. The Trinity is first and foremost a community in relationship sustained by mutuality and reciprocity.²⁵ We are aware however, that many relationships within the family, church and society are oppressive and abusive. In its response to the HIV/AIDS pandemic the church as a community

25 See Volf (1996:170–190) who refers to the Trinitarian model of Jurgen Moltman.

should create the place and space where members become aware of mutual responsibility and commitment within relationships.

A community says Weeks (1995:79) offers a "vocabulary of values through which individuals construct their understanding of the social world, and of their sense of identity and belonging". The concept of community also suggests an "embeddedness in a world which seems constantly on the verge of fragmentation", continues Weeks. He further asserts that there is a close connection between "the spirit of community and the ideal of solidarity".

With regards to solidarity, Weeks (1995: 77) writes:

The progress of human solidarity is the ability to see more and more traditional differences as unimportant when compared with similarities with regard to pain and humiliation.

Solidarity continues Weeks (1995:76–77), "is the public equivalent of compassion. It implies care and responsibility for others, a belief in the dignity of the other, an ability to learn about others, and the willingness to support those groups, movements and other collectives which are intent on reducing the level of violence and domination in private relationships as well as public institutions." Weeks states that solidarity also implies a recognition of equality and interdependence and a commitment to solving disputes democratically, through discourse. Weeks reiterates:

Solidarity is created by increasing our sensitivity to the particular details of the pain and humiliation of other, unfamiliar sort of people.

The Christian theologian, Ada Isasi-Diaz (1994:79) argues that solidarity goes beyond being a matter of agreeing with, of being supportive of, of liking, or of being inspired by the cause of a group of people. She says that:

Solidarity moves away from the false notion of disinterest, of doing things for others in an altruistic fashion. Instead it is grounded in common responsibilities and interests which necessarily arouse shared feelings and lead to joint action (1994:79).

Women, in the various Christian communities, who have been separated and kept apart during apartheid, now have a unique opportunity to explore the space for solidarity created by the AIDS pandemic.²⁶

26 Ada Isasi-Diaz (1994:78) suggests that "solidarity must replace charity as the appropriate Christian ethical behaviour". I would suggest that this shift be explored amongst the white women and women of colour in South Africa as we seek ways of responding adequately to the challenges of HIV/AIDS.

An integral part of addressing the HIV/AIDS pandemic is to address the fear of death that has resulted in a numbness and reluctance to acknowledge and celebrate the gift of life. Moreover a “theology of life and death” has to include an urgent review of the historical understanding of sin and death. The perception that sexual indiscretion, infidelity and promiscuity are wrong insofar as the sin is visible – now, as a manifestation of AIDS and previously as pregnancy out of wedlock – has to be challenged. The irony is, in the case of AIDS, “sin” results in death to the body while in the case of pregnancy it brings forth life. The issues involving sex, and sin, and life, and death become more and more complex as the term “born to die” takes on new meaning, with the threat of mother-to-child HIV infection. There is a need to move away from reducing morality merely to sexual conduct.

Stigmatization, alienation and discrimination have in various instances proved to be the biggest “killer” in human history. It now perpetuates the spread of HIV/AIDS as people are reluctant to know their serostatus, let alone reveal it for fear of being rejected and ostracised by partners, family members, fellow workers, and communities – including some churches. We are reminded by Yeoman (1997:34) that, theology is a science and because theologies are human constructs, they reflect the origins and biases and interests of those who formulate them. Like all sciences, theology must change and develop with changing knowledge and experience. The church is challenged to develop a theology that reflects the life enhancing principles evident in the essence of Christianity.

How do we respond in a situation where the elderly are burying young mothers? HIV/AIDS has enormous emotional, psychological, economic and social consequences, not only for the person who is HIV-positive or has AIDS, but for the whole family. Shock, bewilderment, anger, disbelief, social isolation and despair are normal ways of responding to any life-threatening disease, but it seems to have generated a different nuance with the way the HIV/AIDS pandemic has been responded to (Snidle 1997:86).

Over the centuries humans have prided themselves in having “power” to negotiate and find solutions to problems in their lives and the world. The quest to control economies, territories, individuals, groups and nations has proved successful for some with grave consequences of disempowerment, alienation and vulnerability for others. Now humanity is faced with the realities of HIV and AIDS for which there is no cure or effective vaccine, despite relentless efforts in biomedical research.

The need for ongoing medical research for a cure for AIDS and vaccine against the HI-virus; the need for medical treatment and care; the need to address the underlying reasons why people find it difficult and sometime impossible to access medical treatment and care; the need for continuous education on issues around the social and clinical dimensions of the epidemiology of HIV/AIDS; the need to challenge oppressive economic and social structures especially those that perpetuate poverty and gender inequality; the need to change popularly held perceptions of sex, sexuality and sexual relationships which lead to stigmatization as well as the spread of HIV/AIDS; the need to live life positively and celebrate it as a gift from God; the need to make responsible decisions about how we engage in sexual relationships; the need to see the lives of others as a gift from the same God who continues to love us as body-selves. These are all challenges that face all of humanity, on every level of society.

Clearly the church as a whole needs to be involved on every level, engaging with government, NGOs, other faith communities and other church denominations in a collaborative effort to respond to HIV/AIDS, employing appropriate moral discourses which challenges oppressive patriarchal structures. The need for a collaborative effort is aptly described by Nicolson when he quotes a correspondent answering a query about AIDS work in his (the correspondent's) denomination:

My impression is that several ad hoc projects are running in South Africa and that an overall lack of co-ordination could be our biggest problem (1995:6).

Over the past five years there has been a burgeoning of donor-driven HIV/AIDS programmes and the competition for funding by NGOs including church-based organizations are continuing. This often results in the duplication and concentration of services and programmes in some areas, while other communities, especially those in rural areas are not reached.

The social and economic impact of HIV and AIDS on individuals, families and communities and the possible future threat that it holds for all of humanity are dramatic challenges which need a collaborative, co-ordinated response from all levels of society. The paradox presented by the threat that the HIV/AIDS pandemic holds to human life, as well as the opportunity it offers to reflect anew on "who we ought to be", results in a creative tension within which the church in general, women in particular have to respond. Drawing on their experiences of suffering, women have the opportunity to make a valuable contribution by responding to the realities of the HIV/AIDS pandemic.

Concluding remarks

HIV/AIDS has been described as a behavioural disease and is perpetuated by social behavioural patterns, which are maintained by social, economic, cultural and spiritual factors (Saayman 1991:160). I would thus argue that the power to stop the spread of HIV/AIDS in its disastrous tracks hinges strongly on making responsible decisions and choices. Primarily, but not simply, every individual is challenged to make responsible choices about his or her sexual relationships. Here I haste to add that in some cultures women are not at liberty to negotiate sexual practices, and for many women the notion of choice is a luxury not available to them.

However, it is my contention that women who hold leadership positions in churches can contribute towards an adequate response to the HIV/AIDS pandemic by challenging sexism which continues to impact negatively on the lives of women under the guise of “the natural order of things”. I agree with Saayman (1991:27) who insists that the emphasis should be on “helping people develop a sense of collective responsibility for dealing with AIDS, as well as inculcating the conviction that something can be done about this life-threatening disease”. It is my belief that Christians have both the “conviction of life” and a “spirit of community” to embody a vision and the will to respond in a way that will enable us to move from a situation of hopelessness and despair, to hope and joyful living.

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