

A Christian response to HIV and AIDS

Donors are increasingly interested in HIV and AIDS work carried out by local churches and Christian grassroots organisations. There are a number of reasons for this:

- Local churches are close to the community.
- In many places local churches have a prominent position within the community. The church is often well-respected.
- People listen to religious leaders. If leaders have a good understanding of HIV and AIDS, their response can set an example to church members and the rest of the community.
- Serving marginalised people fits in well with the Christian faith.
- Some churches have experience of social action within their communities.
- Some churches are already effectively addressing HIV and AIDS in their communities.

Yet some churches are unwilling to become involved in work with those affected by HIV and AIDS. Usually this is because HIV is wrongly viewed as punishment from God on individual people who engage in ungodly behaviour. In some places, people who are known to be living with HIV are not welcome in churches.

For many years, HIV and AIDS were seen as the problem of people outside the church. However, churches are now having to accept that HIV and AIDS are present among church members. As more and more people are dying from AIDS, it is becoming a subject that communities are talking about more openly. This may make it easier for church members to be open about their HIV status.

REFLECTION

- What proportion of churches in our community are involved in work on HIV and AIDS?
- For what reasons are some churches in our community not involved in work on HIV and AIDS?
- What could be done to encourage more church leaders to see the need to work on HIV and AIDS in our community?

CASE STUDY
Links with the church in Cambodia

Tearfund partner Servants to Asia's Urban Poor have actively tried to work alongside local churches. It has been difficult to meet regularly with church leaders and develop a common vision of holistic ministry. There are other difficulties:

- Most church members are materially poor.
- Some churches are struggling to manage their own internal issues.
- The local churches have diverse theological backgrounds.

REFLECTION

- What could be done to improve links with, and mobilise, churches in this situation?

3.1 A Christian perspective on HIV and AIDS

While the Bible does not mention HIV and AIDS specifically, we can draw on a number of biblical principles that help us to identify our role as Christians in working with people with HIV and AIDS.

PRINCIPLE 1 **HIV IS A CONSEQUENCE OF UNIVERSAL SIN, NOT GOD'S PUNISHMENT ON INDIVIDUALS**

One of the biggest barriers to churches working with people with HIV and AIDS is the incorrect belief that HIV is a punishment from God for the way they live their lives. When HIV started to spread in the 1980s, it spread mainly among certain groups of people who include men who have sexual intercourse with men, commercial sex workers and people who inject drugs. This has often led to the view that HIV is a punishment from God on individuals.

However, HIV affects us all in some way and to some extent we are all at risk from contracting HIV.

In Genesis 3, Adam and Eve decided they wanted to live their lives their own way and turned their backs on God. This meant that humans' relationships with God, self, others and creation were damaged. The consequences of sin include suffering, disease, poverty and exploitation.

We are all vulnerable to HIV infection because we live in a fallen society. For example, poverty may push people into practices that put them at greater risk of infection. Conflict may increase the likelihood of contracting HIV through rape or blood transfusions. Women's low status in some societies may lead them to being sexually exploited.

BIBLE STUDY
by Tim Oakley**HIV and AIDS and the glory of God**

By the time of Jesus, many of the teachings of the Old Testament had been over-simplified, resulting in beliefs such as 'If you are suffering, it must be because you have sinned.'

■ Read John 9:1-7

- Consider Jesus' answer when the disciples asked about whose sin was responsible for the man's blindness. What did he mean? What does this mean for us?

Our attitude to AIDS should not be 'Whose fault?' but rather, 'God's opportunity to do what?'

- What do people in our community say about people living with HIV and AIDS?
- How can we be practical in our love?
- How can we support those living with HIV and AIDS and those who care for them?

PRINCIPLE 2 **GOD HAS SET BOUNDARIES TO HELP PROTECT US AND ENABLE US TO LIVE LIVES HONOURING TO HIM ...**

Much HIV transmission in the world occurs as a result of sexual intercourse that is outside God's plan. While some people might know that sexual intercourse outside of marriage is against God's values, there are others who are not aware of God's framework for sexual behaviour. Often sex is a taboo subject within churches. Church leaders have a role in teaching God's plan for sex.

BIBLE STUDY**God's plan for sexual intercourse**

The Bible teaches that sex is a good thing within the right context.

■ Read Genesis 2:24

- What is the significance of 'one flesh'?
- Is sex a good or a bad thing?

■ Read 1 Corinthians 7:1-5

- What is the right context for sexual intercourse?
- What does this mean for people who enter into casual sexual relationships?

■ Song of Songs is a celebration of love. Read Song of Songs 4:9-16.

- How does the man describe his bride in verses 10 and 11?
- What do we understand by verse 12?
- Discussing with young people the benefits of waiting to enjoy sexual intercourse until they marry can often seem difficult to them. How do the words of verses 12-15 help?

■ Read Romans 1:18-27, 1 Corinthians 6:12-20 and Hebrews 13:4

- What does sexual immorality involve?
- What is it a consequence of?
- What should our attitude be towards our bodies? What does this mean in terms of sex?

BIBLE STUDY

Wisdom in sexual behaviour

■ Read Genesis 39:5-20

The story of Joseph shows us a young man who feared God and decided to live in obedience to God's laws.

- *What shows us that this was true? (verses 8, 9, 12)*
- *How did Joseph resist temptation?*

■ If we consider Joseph's position as a slave in Potiphar's house at this time, we can only admire him for his courage.

- *Why did Potiphar's wife react as she did?*
- *How did Joseph suffer for his beliefs?*

■ Joseph chose to live in sexual purity because he knew this was God's teaching. It made life very difficult for him and he suffered a long time.

- *How is this story an encouragement to us?*

PRINCIPLE 3 ... BUT HE CALLS US TO SHOW COMPASSION TO ALL

Jesus showed compassion to all he met and we should do the same.

BIBLE STUDY
by Isabel Carter

Attitudes towards disease

■ Read Luke 8:42b-48

Since Old Testament times, women were believed to be unclean at the time of their monthly bleeding. As a result they stayed away from the temple during this time. According to the law of Moses (Leviticus 15), if Jesus was touched by a woman with bleeding it would make him unclean.

- *Why did Jesus not tell the woman off for touching him?*
- *This woman would have felt unclean for 12 years. How did Jesus respond to her?*
- *Do we sometimes make people living with HIV feel 'unclean' or rejected? Why? How can we change this?*
- *Why did Jesus make the woman come forward and admit she had touched him? What can we learn from this?*

BIBLE STUDY

Amazing love

While on earth, Jesus demonstrated his love in the most challenging way possible. He was filled with compassion as he looked at the people around him.

- Read Matthew 9:35-38
 - *How did Jesus show his love to those he met?*
 - *How can we show love to those around us?*
- Read Luke 15:1-7. Jesus often annoyed the religious authorities by spending much of his time with, and showing love to, people they thought were unacceptable.
 - *Why did Jesus choose to spend so much time with rejected people?*
 - *How does Jesus deal with the criticism of the Pharisees and teachers of the law?*
 - *How can we show love to those who are rejected by our society?*

When we know people who have HIV because of sinful practices, such as adultery, it can be tempting to withhold love from them. If they infect their faithful partners with HIV, it is easy to blame them and treat them badly in order to punish them. However, Jesus came to save sinners – like us. We must show grace, love and compassion to all people with the hope that they will become open to being transformed by Jesus.

BIBLE STUDY
by Graham Gordon

Jesus' response to sin

- Read John 8:1-11

The teachers of the law brought a woman to Jesus who had been caught committing adultery. The accusers wanted to humiliate the woman and to trap Jesus. The man, who had also committed adultery, was not brought to be judged (usually it was seen as the fault of the woman). They brought the woman out in public, ready to be stoned.

 - *How did Jesus respond to their accusations?*
 - *How did he judge the woman's sin?*
 - *What can we learn from this passage about our attitude to others when they sin?*
- Notice that Jesus did not defend the woman's actions because he told her to leave her life of sin. His actions were motivated by love and the desire for reconciliation. He taught forgiveness, rather than condemnation.
 - *How can we encourage others to live godly lives while at the same time show compassion?*

BIBLE STUDY

Mercy and judgment

- Read James 2:8-13
 - *What does it mean to 'love your neighbour as yourself'?*
 - *Why should we be merciful?*
 - *Should our practical response to those who contracted HIV through their sinful behaviour be any different to those who contracted HIV through no 'fault' of their own?*
 - *How does this passage help us to come to that conclusion?*
- Read Luke 6:41-42
 - *Compare the difference between a speck of sawdust and a plank.*
 - *What do the speck and plank represent?*
 - *Summarise this passage in one sentence.*
- Read Galatians 6:1
 - *How does this verse affect the way we might respond to Christians who are committing sexual sin?*

PRINCIPLE 4 **WE ARE CALLED TO PROTECT THE VULNERABLE AND CHALLENGE INJUSTICE**

An aspect of the fallen society in which we live is negative attitudes towards women. For example, a woman might become a commercial sex worker because she has no other choice. This may be because she is discriminated against in the employment sector because she is a woman or because she did not receive the same level of education as men. While her lifestyle is not what God wants for her, this example shows that society as a whole has a part to play in encouraging the spread of HIV. Empowerment of women may take time, but could be an effective way of reducing the spread of HIV in the long-term.

BIBLE STUDY

God's view of women

- What does Genesis 1:27 tell us about the way God views women?
 - *Do people view women this way in our culture?*
 - *In what ways are women devalued?*
- In Jesus' time, women were of low status, as they still are in many countries today.
 - *Why then are John 4:4-26; Mark 5:25-34 and John 8:2-11 so remarkable?*
 - *What implications does this have for us as we carry out God's work?*
- Galatians 3:26-29 points out that women and men are given equal inheritance rights to God's kingdom.
 - *Do we always recognise this in our churches?*
 - *In what practical ways can we show that women have equal value to men and equal access to God's kingdom?*

We also have a role in caring for widows and orphans, who are often left behind to fend for themselves when husbands or parents die because of AIDS.

BIBLE STUDY
by Dewi Hughes

Caring for widows and orphans

- Read Deuteronomy 10:12-22

Verses 12–13 echo the great commandment of Deuteronomy 6:5 that Israel should love the Lord their God with all their heart, soul and strength. In verses 14–19 this passage continues to remind Israel about who God is, what he does and what he wants those who believe in him to do. This is repeated twice – each time in a beautifully balanced series of three verses. Verses 14 and 17 remind us who God is, verses 15 and 18 tell us what God does and verses 16–19 tell us what he wants us to do.

- *What does verse 17 say about how great God is? What does it mean to say that God ‘is God of gods and Lord of lords, the great, the mighty and the awesome God’?*
- *What does verse 18 tell us about what this great God does?*
- *Why is God so interested in seeing justice done for orphans, widows and immigrants?*
- *God’s concern for widows and orphans is also evident in the New Testament. Read James 1:27. How can we look after orphans and widows in our community?*

3.2 How churches can respond to HIV and AIDS

In many places, churches have been mobilised and make a positive contribution to action against the AIDS epidemic. However, churches that want to reach out to people affected by HIV and AIDS in their communities may find that their capacity to do so is being reduced because so many of their own members are becoming sick. This is particularly the case in Sub-Saharan Africa. At the same time, they may find that needs in their communities are increasing as HIV spreads. However, doing something is better than doing nothing. Churches should be doing something positive to respond to HIV and AIDS in the light of Jesus’ commandment to ‘Love your neighbour as yourself’ (Luke 10:27).

Good church leadership is essential. What church leaders say and do can have an important impact on those who attend their churches and on people in the local community. It is beneficial to involve church leaders because:

- leaders are recognised by the community
- leaders can give encouragement to members of the church
- they often have links to other churches, organisations and people in positions of responsibility in the community, and links to networks at the national level
- since they are responsible for preaching sermons on Sundays, they have an important role in teaching about issues related to HIV and AIDS.

BIBLE STUDY

Good leadership

- Read 1 Timothy 3:1-13 and 1 Peter 5:1-4
 - List all the characteristics of good leaders mentioned in these passages.
 - Why are these important characteristics for leaders to have?
 - What do being 'eager to serve' and 'examples to the flock' mean practically when responding to HIV and AIDS?

However, it can be the church leaders who are least willing to admit that HIV is a problem in their communities. They may be fearful that talking about HIV and AIDS may harm their reputation due to stigma. They may not believe that their church should be reaching out to their community in practical ways. Members who are convinced that their church should be taking action in their communities, should first talk to the church leadership. It might be necessary for them to raise awareness and educate the church leaders about HIV and AIDS issues so that they can make an informed decision about whether to mobilise the church. If the leaders then show no interest, their blessing should be sought for the work, even if they do not want to actively participate.

CASE STUDY
Getting church
leadership involved
in India

The town of Imphal has a very high incidence of HIV. Tearfund partner El Shaddai Resource Centre (ESRC) felt that the church is in a good position to address the issues which cause HIV to spread. It began to raise awareness and motivate church leaders.

The challenges ESRC faced were rigid rules and a desire to maintain the status quo, ignorance about HIV, the view that HIV was due to God's punishment on individuals, and casual sexual behaviour among church members. By bringing about a change in attitude of the church leaders towards drugs users and people living with HIV and AIDS, ESRC hoped that stigma and discrimination both within and outside the church would decrease. They hoped that openness would lead to churches caring for those with HIV and AIDS.

ESRC met with leaders and visited the churches on Sundays to create awareness among church members. After creating general awareness, the church leaders were given training to help them to think through the role that their church could play in preventing the spread of HIV and treating those involved in drug abuse. Basic needs assessment and participatory brainstorming were used. Training on prevention and care were provided for church leaders, women, youth, church elders and Sunday school teachers. Ex-drug users and people living with HIV and AIDS shared their testimonies to challenge the participants and encourage them to help in the effort to reduce stigma. The participants were taken for visits to treatment and hospice centres.

Church leaders now speak openly about issues such as drugs, sex and HIV. These topics are integrated into their sermons.



Church leaders receive training about HIV and AIDS.

Photo: Rev Banner Mekan

There are many ways in which churches can reach out to their communities:

- Educate people about HIV – about its existence, how it spreads, how to reduce risk of infection, how to care for people with HIV and AIDS and the affected community
- Offer hope in Jesus for those living with HIV and AIDS
- Offer support and love to those living with, or affected by, HIV and AIDS
- Offer practical help to households which have sick members
- Promote reconciliation among community and family members who struggle to ask for, or provide, forgiveness for ungodly behaviour which has led to infection with HIV
- Ensure that those living with HIV and AIDS are welcome to attend church and community activities
- Ensure that orphans are cared for
- Take steps to reduce stigma and discrimination
- Advocate for the rights of people living with HIV and AIDS
- Challenge cultural norms that are harmful to the status of women
- Provide training on building strong and loving relationships.

CASE STUDY
Churches working
together in
Democratic
Republic of Congo

In 2001, eight people from different churches in Goma joined together with a common vision to see their own local church involved in the fight against AIDS. They began action in three main areas – training for pastoral counselling of people affected by AIDS, raising awareness among young people and their parents about HIV and AIDS, and training women's groups to look after sick family members at home.

After twelve months, every church in Goma had held AIDS awareness meetings. Every denomination has appointed its own resource person for AIDS, trained by the programme. Within the network of Choisir la Vie (Choose Life), the churches call on the resource people of other churches for assistance. For example, one church may have an expert in theatre presentations, while another may have a resource person who can provide advice about home-based care. Individual churches have developed their own programmes, by adapting the models, strategies and tools offered by Choisir la Vie for the needs identified by their own congregations.

The strength of Choisir la Vie is local ownership. The Choisir la Vie team has no intention of creating a permanent organisation. It will stop when its objective is achieved – when every church has its own AIDS action programme.

3.3 How Christian development organisations can respond to HIV and AIDS

There are many different responses that Christian organisations can make. These responses might have to be made directly. However, if possible, ways should be found to enable churches to respond. By working together and co-ordinating activities, churches and Christian organisations can have greater impact in the fight against AIDS:

- There are some types of action that are done best, and most cost-effectively, by members of local churches. For example, churches may be able to provide volunteers to care for people living with HIV and AIDS in their homes. This can be far more beneficial than caring for people in hospital.
- On the other hand, there are some types of action that are best done by Christian organisations, which local churches can refer people to. For example, organisations could provide health care or professional counselling and HIV testing services.

Christian organisations should consider how to mainstream HIV and AIDS into all their development work. They should consider how they will help staff who are affected by HIV and AIDS. These issues are discussed in SECTION 6.

CASE STUDY Mobilising churches in Zimbabwe

Tearfund partner Family AIDS Caring Trust (FACT) trains church volunteers to train family members to care for sick relatives. One-to-one meetings were first held with church leaders to win their support. Once the pastors had been envisioned they invited FACT staff to speak at church services, fellowship group meetings and introduce activities on HIV and AIDS in church youth group meetings. Once awareness had been raised, invitations were sent to churches to recruit volunteers for training. Within one year 125 volunteers had received training. The home care project, which used to reach 5 percent of those who needed home care support, now reaches 24 percent.

CASE STUDY Working with churches in Uganda

Community-based AIDS Programme (COBAP) works in a slum area of Kampala, the capital of Uganda. One of its activities is to provide support for those with HIV and AIDS in their homes. It approached a local Anglican church to take the lead in developing its spiritual strategies. As a result, COBAP gives the church a list of people with HIV and AIDS in the community who need help. Members of the church then visit them in their homes. Church members encourage them, pray with them and help them with practical issues. By passing over this responsibility, it is hoped that the spiritual aspect of COBAP's work will continue once the programme has been handed over to the community.

REFLECTION

- What can our organisation offer which churches cannot?
- What activities can churches carry out more effectively than organisations and why?
- How can our organisation support the work that churches are already carrying out in our communities?
- What areas of our work could be handed over to local churches?
- How can our organisation and local churches better co-ordinate our work?

3.4 **Making a response in countries with low prevalence of HIV and AIDS**

Where there are high levels of HIV infection, and particularly where people are dying due to AIDS, it is easier to mobilise a response. It is often only when people see that there is a problem that they decide to do something about it. It is possible that the high number of deaths due to AIDS in some countries may lead to a decrease in the number of new infections because when people witness the impact of AIDS they seek to protect themselves from HIV.

If measures had been taken earlier to stop the spread of HIV, those countries would not be in such difficulty now. There are lessons for countries that currently have a low prevalence of HIV. There are a number of reasons for lack of action to respond to HIV in low prevalence countries. Many of these reasons are also given for lack of action in countries with high prevalence:

Based on
Effective prevention strategies in low HIV prevalence settings
(2001) Family Health International

- HIV is hidden because people with HIV look healthy. It silently works through communities.
- HIV is given a low priority because there are many other immediate concerns.
- Denial that HIV exists in the country, particularly where there are cultural and religious barriers.
- Leaders do not know how to begin to respond.
- The perception that 'our country is not at risk'.

REFLECTION

- Can we think of any other reasons why there may be lack of action in low prevalence countries?
- If our organisation is in a low prevalence country, how can we make a response to HIV?
- What can we do to encourage others, such as churches, to respond to HIV?
- Do we have particular knowledge or skills to assist others in making a response?