

# HIV/AIDS AND ROLE OF THE CHURCH

~ Moasenla Aier

Acquired Immunodeficiency syndrome, AIDS is the leading cause of death among many countries especially in a majority of developing and under developed countries. First discovered in the US in 1981, there is no cure for the disease. Over all as estimated 33.2 million people in the world – one in every 200 are living with HIV, and daily 6800 people are infected with HIV and 750 people die of AIDS- related illness (UNAIDS and WHO Report 2007 AIDS epidemic update). Further more, AIDS is still considered the leading cause of death in Sub-Saharan Africa. Close to Africa is India. Approximately 2.5 million people are reportedly living with HIV&AIDS. 2 of the six high HIV prevalent states in India are Manipur and Nagaland of the North East. According to NSACS February 2008 report the prevalent rate of Nagaland is 1.27 with the number of reported HIV cases reaching 5509. The figures do not intend to create a fear psychosis but rather ring a wake up call. HIV/AIDS is no longer related to only the high risks groups but research reveal that it has spread to the general population. Here in North East India this group largely belongs to Christian Community. The church cannot sideline its involvement in this matter any longer. The church response in the 1980's and the 1990's was lukewarm. Today the demand for involvement arises, it is no longer a choice. AIDS cannot be ignored owing to opposing positions on theological issues, beliefs and practice. The Church's response should go beyond giving NGO's only a platform for HIV&AIDS awareness campaign. The needs of the hour are identifying some strategic plans and goals and implementing them that can transform the community and the church as a whole.

## **Humanitarian response over the world- a model for North East India**

Today, many churches all over the world especially in Africa and America have removed its cloak of prejudices and moralism over the call to respond urgently to the HIV&AIDS pandemic. Many success stories are reportedly due to participation and concerted action and collaboration from the church. Christian humanitarian and development groups as World Vision, Church World service, Compassion and Food for the hungry have taken a lead step in the fight against HIV&AIDS. They have realised a long time ago that in a Christian majority state, complacency was not going to help in combating HIV&AIDS.

Although the churches in North East India are now much more involved in the open discussion and implementation of preventive methods they have not really assessed the gravity of the situation. Apathy still exists in most Churches. Involvement has not gone beyond acknowledging the problem and its relatedness to youth issues or a lifestyle problem with moralistic connotation.

If North East wants a success story it needs to adopt certain strategic programs of afflicted countries but making it relevant to our North East context. If we act now and act together, we could prevent millions of HIV infection

### **Why the Church should take up responsibility : realizing its role.**

There are many reasons where the church can realize its importance in combating this pandemic. World Bank statistics show that the 15-49 years age group is the worst affected by the HIV&AIDS and the 15-24 years age group is reportedly the most vulnerable. This is the age group that qualifies to be called the prime of the nation. The community and even the church. Do we need to mention here that the main driver of the HIV/AIDS infection is high risk sexual behaviour among young people? As AIDS continues its alarming growth rate it is clear that it will soon if not already impact every family and every church community. The call of the church is an outreach activity to all who are in need. Just as Jesus touched the afflicted of his day, the church's response towards HIV&AIDS should be guided by compassion. Jesus never punished people with sickness, Jesus healed. If sinful behaviour is connected with the disease, the church should extend the same forgiveness that Jesus offers to all who repent.

### **Identifying Church's capacity : realizing is potential**

1. One basic facts about HIV/AIDS patients is that they constantly need home- based care. As such it will need a lot of physical and emotional care and support from the family, the community and the church. Local congregations are known to be the only caring organization found to be in almost community. Their role in Home based care is giving counselling medical care and support, nutrition, social rehabilitation and also social security is very crucial. Moreover it is more economically convenient and feasible for rendering Home based care to AIDS patients
2. Another aspect of the church is that it has the largest volunteer labour force. The Church can mobilize them through trainings to teach prevention, administer treatment and offer care and support. There is enough manpower sitting unused in the pews
3. When the church attends to HIV&AIDS patients their psychology is changed positively. Remember the HIV/AIDS patients are the most dejected, stigmatised, discriminated, alienated and vulnerable. You name it! Above all they feel rejected by God. When church embrace the infected they experience faith, love, hope, forgiveness and grace-spiritual support that no other organization or their projects can offer.
4. Another important aspect of HIV/AIDS is "confidentiality". The Churches are the most trusted organization known. Trust is built here so people may be more willing to be tested and counselled. Therefore the church can play an important role in handling testing and counselling.

5. Combating HIV/AIDS has proved to be difficult in villages because of the unavailability and inaccessibility of medical treatment. Some positive cases in Nagaland have to come all the way from villages to avail ART at Naga Hospital at Kohima. In North East, thousands of villages have a church, but nothing else. If we want treatment to be accessible a church supported treatment model needs to be encouraged. One positive aspect about the church is its permanent community fixtures. Members can be trained to distribute HIV/AIDS medication and nutrition besides other support
6. Although HIV/AIDS is incurable yet it is preventable. One major role the church can play is applying preventive methods. Church has the moral authority to promote healthy behaviour and to offer moral imperatives for the family and teach the moral motivation for abstinence and faithfulness. The Church can talk about HIV/AIDS, relationships, sex and sexuality from the pulpit and other forums.

### **Undertaking Harm Reduction programs**

North East India has the dual problem of drug addiction and HIV&AIDS. The Church therefore while inculcating HIV/AIDS program should also involve drug prevention strategies. One area is through Harm Reduction Program (HR) primarily refers to strategies and approaches for reducing the physical and social harms associated with risk taking behaviours. HR prevents the adverse consequences of drug use especially HIV. HR does help in prevention of HIV/AIDS.

High risk behaviours from IDU's make them more vulnerable to HIV/AIDS, Hep-B and C infection besides other health consequences like abscesses, heart infection and mal-nutrition. Therefore HR aims not only to keep the drug users alive, well and productive until treatment works but also to protect the community from the transmission of HIV/AIDS. It is with such aim that the church can play an intrinsic role. The church can adopt certain approach within the means for initiating HR programs.

The Church can utilize its counselling centres for counselling and testing for HIV among IDU's. it can conduct programs to inform IDU'S of risk and to educate them on safer practice of injecting, like sterilization, safe disposals of syringes etc. One major controversy regarding HR is the 'condom promotion'. Many Churches find it antagonizing to the Christian views, teachings and practice. However most churches have now taken into account the medical health aspects in prevention of HIV/AIDS in sexual transmission. There were acceptable conditions where condom could be used. For example HIV&AIDS person can use it to reduce the degree of HIV infectivity and bulletins, magazines and IEC materials. Such medium can be used to disseminate HIV&AIDS and drug related information.

### **Some strategic plan of action church can adopt.**

Besides the above broad perspective of the role of church here are some plan of action the church can further implement to positively influence the knowledge, attitudes, like perceptions and practices of church members and the community to HIV/AIDS

1. Church can incorporate HIV/AIDS training into the curriculum of the Vocational Bible School(VBS) and Bible Colleges,
2. The Church website, magazines can be used as a medium of outreach
3. Encourage voluntary counselling and testing center ( VCTC) as part of the church marriage counselling process
4. Theologians can be trained as HIV/AIDS counsellors and outreach workers and therefore receive employment
5. Link up with the local NGO's and humanitarian agencies that work for the prevention of HIV/AIDS for collaborative efforts. NGO's need the support of church and in return the church will need the experts help from NGO's
6. Establish and maintain an effective support program for People Living with HIV/AIDS (PLWHA's) and People Affected by AIDS (PABA's) like orphans and widows
7. Networking and referral services must be made available
8. Seek support from youth- focussed organizations
9. Employ PLWHA's with income generating skills. One successful program which NGO's have implemented is the Self-Help- Groups ( SHG's which the Church can adopt)
10. Talking and preparing the mind of the congregation for the common call o demonstrate Christ love. Stigma and discrimination should be wiped away with the right sensitization educational approach
11. The churches need to respond by finding effective ways of communicating with young people. Youths look to the church for an honest morality in the face of HIV/AIDS, a response that no longer hammer on the moralistic and judgemental positions. The Church is responsible as a role model for the youths. Any action or approaches that contradicts its values and calling will be questioned.
12. conducting lifeskills Education for youths. Incorporating it in the youth camps and in youth centered programs of the church
13. Listen to young people to learn what their real experience is.
14. The Church can participate in the national campaigns and efforts with which churches feel able to identify in extending national efforts into local communities. Celebrate World AIDS Day on 1<sup>st</sup> December

15. The Church should also recognize the importance of the role of church leadership in this fight. As such Christian missionaries, leaders and workers need equipping with the latest update of HIV/AIDS and drug trends. Attending workshops, seminars and training programs will help with better facilitation of church initiatives.
16. The church should also encourage parents to become more involved in their children's lives. Parenting skills should be conducted regularly

Finally a faithful response to HIV/AIDS must be a group response as well as the individual one. It is the responsibility of all people of faith to educate themselves on the facts of HIV/AIDS. Many people have fears about the risk of contracting HIV/AIDS because of lack of right information. The fear can be overcome with facts Jesus said himself ' the truth shall set you free'( John 8:32). Following the example of Jesus, people of faith are called to eat with people with HIV/AIDS and to share their home with them. Mathew25:6 to touch people with HIV/AIDS and give them intimacy (Mathew8:2-4) and to heal people with HIV (Luke 17:11-19) HIV/AIDS is a tragedy. Even when the injustice of tragedy invades our lives, Gods passionate love can bring good in the form of healing and growth. This tragedy is now giving people of faith an opportunity to be faithful witnesses to God's love and healing grace, even in the face of suffering, pain grief and death.

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