

Weightier Matters: Mission Challenges in the HIV, AIDS and Global Economic Era¹

Musa W. Dube, Univ. of Botswana

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Since the first clinical evidence of AIDS was reported two decades ago, HIV/AIDS has spread to every corner of the world. Still rapidly growing, the epidemic is reversing development gains, robbing millions of their lives, widening the gap between the rich and poor, and undermining social and economic security, (UNDP & UNAIDS 2001: 1).

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I would insist that contemporary Christian mission must concern itself with all that desacralizes life on earth. It must rally against all structural forces and institutions that militate against peace, equity and self-sufficiency of individuals and nations of every culture. The Christian mission must identify those forces that hinder the blossoming of God's creation as a whole. Christian salvation can no longer concern itself with the denunciation of God's diverse cultures of the world. Rather, Christian salvation must be regarded as creating environments in which the whole of God's creation is given a chance for its maximum fulfillment (Dube Shomanah 1997: 449).

Introduction: Mission in the HIV&AIDS & Globalization Era

According to Michael Amalados, "... mission is prophecy that challenges people to conversion and transformation so that God's kingdom may come..." He holds that "the goal of mission,... is the promotion of the kingdom of God," and that "our Mission is the mission of Jesus" (2000: 145). If we agree with Amalados that "our mission is the mission of Jesus" (2000:145) the question is does the mission of Jesus offer us a life and people centered mission in the HIV&AIDS and globalization era? This, of course, raises other questions such as: Is the HIV&AIDS and the global economic era a people and earth-centered era? Is it an era that is life affirming and human-friendly? On the latter questions, I believe there is no need for a special pleading, for research and documentation overwhelmingly indicates that HIV&AIDS negates life-- bringing suffering of individuals, families, communities and countries (UNDP & UNAIDS 2001). Its incurability and its link to sexual transmission breeds fear, trauma, denial, HIV related stigma, which is the isolation and the dehumanization of People Living with HIV and AIDS (henceforth, PLWHA) and the affected. HIV&AIDS produces poverty as the sick cannot work, as relatives have to stay home and nurse the sick and as more money is needed for appropriate diet and endless medical services. AIDS kills millions and grieves

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billions. AIDS leaves behind many powerless and poor widows and orphans, who are at the mercy of property grabbing relatives. HIV&AIDS attacks the poor and the powerless, those who have no economic power to say no to sex or to negotiate for safer sex. Its link with sexuality has caused silence, shame and denial in the church and society in general.

Globalization, on the other hand, is noted for benefiting a few individuals, while its policies and impact exclude and exploit the majority and sacrifices the environment at the altar of profit-making (de Santa Ana 1998; Dube 2002:31-37). Globalization is graphically described by EATWOT, Asian Theological Conference, as an age in which;

Money with a capital M was promoted as the storehouse of value, rather than a medium for exchange...Every relationship in which people were involved and stayed outside the purview of the markets, such as education, health care and religious practices were also brought into the reality of market. Market now has control over the social, economic, political and cultural relationships of the people. All other social forces, including the state, which regulated people's needs, have ceased to operate...therefore, people are turned into labor or prostitutes, nature as land or raw materials or golf parks and culture as souvenirs...in tourist market. Moreover, the organizing philosophy of the market ecclesia... is social exclusion: Those who have no commoditable money or commoditable commodities (including skills) were excluded from the market and left as expendables (2000: 218-219).

This description has indeed been highlighted by several other publications (Fall 2000; Lind 1995). Clearly, both globalization and HIV&AIDS are forces which are largely anti-social and anti-life. In fact, globalization as an anti-social force worsens poverty, escalates mobility, promotes girl trafficking and commercial sex (Garba & Garba 2000:24-27) thereby, creating fertile grounds for the spread of HIV&AIDS. This context, challenges the Christian church to recapture and practice "a life and people centered mission." The latter places the sacredness of the all creation and life at the center, thereby creating a context and a social standard that supports the flourishing of all individuals, communities and their surrounding environments.

A Life and People Centered Mission of Jesus

To return to an earlier question, gladly, the earthly ministry of Jesus offers us a life and people centered mission. This is best captured in Matthew 25:31-45, when Jesus spoke of judgment day in the following terms:

When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, then he will sit on the throne of his glory. *All the nations will be gathered* before him... Then the king will say to those on his right hand, "Come, you that are blessed by my Father, inherit the Kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world:
For I was hungry and you gave me food
I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink
I was a stranger and you welcomed me

I was naked and you gave me clothing
I was sick and you took care of me
I was in prison and you visited me
Then the righteous will answer him
“Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry and gave you food, or thirsty and gave you something to drink? And when was it that we saw you a stranger and welcomed you, or naked and gave you clothing? And when was it that we saw you sick or in prison and visited you? And the king will answer them, *“Truly, I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me.”*”

Similarly, the text continues to tell us that those who will be judged negatively, will be rejected on the grounds that they did not do anything for the hungry, the thirsty, the naked, the sick, the imprisoned and the strangers. They will be equally surprised, asking, “Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or naked or sick or in prison, and did not take care of you?” v.44. And Jesus will answer, “Truly, I tell you, just as you did not do it to the least of these, you did not do it to me,” v.45.

A number of issues are notable in this passage, as we seek to practice a life and people centered mission in the HIV&AIDS and globalization era. First, long before there was globalization and HIV&AIDS, Jesus underlined with no uncertain terms that at the core of our mission to the world is care for all life. In the passage, Jesus underlined that our work will be evaluated on the basis of whether it was life-centered or not. In other words, it is not optional for the Christian church to carry out a life and people centered mission to the world. It is a must. Second, while a great deal of the Christian mission activities have concerned itself with conversion; it is notable that in this passage that Jesus does not say any person will be praised and welcomed, because you saw me as Muslim, heathen, Hindu, Jew and you converted me into a Christian. Rather, it is about what we did for the hungry, the thirsty, the naked, the homeless strangers, the sick and the imprisoned of all nations. The latter places the sacredness of all life at the center, thereby creating a context that supports the flourishing of all members of our communities, guaranteed by our responsibility to one another and the duty to serve compassion to all.

Third, Matt 25: 31-45 underlines the absolute need for compassion in the Christian mission. Not only do we need compassion to meet the needs of those among us who are infected and affected by HIV&AIDS, we need it to carry out an effective mission in the globalization era, for the latter is characterized competition, domination and indifference in its quest for profit (Lind 1995: 41). The global economy is characterized by disregard for both people and the environment in its quest to maximize profit (Fall 2000). Fourth, it is notable that Jesus identifies himself with the less privileged and the needy, insisting that he is personified in the lives of these, thereby underlining that any discrimination is totally unacceptable, for it is tantamount to excluding Jesus himself. As Warren Carter correctly notes, “the identification of Jesus with the least of these...is central to the scene,” (2000: 496). This notion is vital for us in the HIV&AIDS era, which has experienced another epidemic: the HIV&AIDS related stigma. It is, therefore, instructive

to note that HIV&AIDS related stigma has been rightfully declared an unacceptable sin (WCC, 2001; UNAIDS, 2003). Fifth, the fact that the passage speaks of judgment in these terms, it underlines “these are the acts of the righteous, those who welcome Jesus and continue to live the will of God as revealed to them in relation to Jesus... They continue in faithful mission (10:41) and are vindicated in the judgment” (Carter 2000:496). To restate these words in the expression of Alamedos: “our mission is the mission of Jesus” (2000:145).

Some of you may say but Matthew 25 seems charity oriented, and charity does not change the unjust structures, for it creates dependence than independence. The passage certainly does not exclude charity, but in my view we do injustice to the passage if we limit it to charity, for if the Christian mission involves intolerance towards poverty and suffering, it follows that our mission includes challenging those structures that breed these evils. Indeed, in Luke 4:16-20, when Jesus first outlined the agenda of his mission by saying ‘the Spirit of the Lord is upon me, for he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor, He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of Lord’s favor, the Jubilee,’ it is clear that his mission inevitably includes challenging structural sin that relegates people to poverty, captivity, ill-health and oppression. Proclaiming the “Year of Lord as Leviticus 25 tells us, is the Jubilee, the call to overhaul social structures that lock people into poverty and slavery. The call for the Jubilee underlines that the mission of Jesus cares about people, about social justice and about the earth justice. If our mission is the mission of Jesus, then it is not optional for us to practice a life and people centered mission.

A Life and People-Centered Mission in the HIV&AIDS Era

Those of us who live in the HIV&AIDS era, coupled with globalization, we need to try and hear how the Matt 25:31-45 judgment will be delivered to us. When I try to apply it to the context of our era, I can hear Jesus saying to us:

I was sick with AIDS and you did not visit me, you did not wash my wounds, nor did you give me medicine to manage my opportunistic infections. I was denied ARVs and you did not prophecy to the global market economy. You did not undertake advocacy for my sake. I was stigmatized, isolated and rejected because of HIV&AIDS and you did not welcome me. You did not fight for my human rights. I was hungry, thirsty and naked, completely dispossessed by HIV&AIDS and globalization in my house and family and you did not give me food, water or any clothing. You did not give me your compassion. I was a powerless woman exposed to the high risk of infection and carrying a huge burden of care on the basis on my gender and you did not challenge patriarchy and global economy that authorize my oppression. You did not challenge the structures of oppression. I was a dispossessed widow and an orphan and you did not lobby the law makers to protect me. You did not prophesy.

We the church of this era will ask, “When Lord did we see you sick with AIDS, stigmatized, isolated and rejected, and did not visit or welcome you in our homes? When Lord, did we see you hungry, naked and thirsty and we did not feed you, clothe you and

give you water? When were you a powerless woman, a widow and an orphan and we did not come to your rescue? The Lord will say to us, “Truly, I tell you, as long as you did not do it to one of the least of these members of my family, you did not do it to me,”

Undoubtedly, HIV&AIDS raises theological questions. We cannot avoid asking: “Is it possible to proclaim a gracious God, a gospel of life in fullness, in the midst of a dying society and exploitative global economy? What does it mean for those who are dying?...Those who have no hope for life?” HIV&AIDS makes people who are suffering to ask, “Where is God? Is there a God who hears, sees, feels and knows our pains?” The good news are indeed that it is possible for the Christian Church to proclaim the gospel of life. It is possible for the dying to die with hope and love and dignity—if we take up the challenge to embody and represent Christ by our deeds of caring for the sick, the naked, the thirsty, the strangers, the imprisoned, the widowed and the orphaned. It is possible for PLWHA to live productive and healthy lives through accessible, affordable and sustainable ARVs. God of life is manifested to all who are suffering and the hopeless, when the Christian Church takes up the challenge of being in solidarity with the poor and oppressed, in this case, the PLWHA and the affected. Further, God is also manifested to the Christian Church if such a church sees God in the face of the sick, the suffering and the poor. God is manifested among us when the church undertakes advocacy for a sustainable supply of ARVs to those among us who need them, for as long as they need them. Our love and knowledge for God and his son Jesus is manifested through our solidarity with the marginalized-- the poor, the women, powerless and suffering. It is on these grounds that I fully agree with Kwok Pui Lan when she holds that,

Mission is carrying out God’s work among people who are struggling to live with dignity and wholeness... Mission is to proclaim the good news that God affirms life over death and that God acts among the poor, the majority whom are women, who are victimized in the globalization of the market economy and left out in decision making processes. Mission is forming partnership... to struggle for life and work for justice for all people (1996: 185-186).

The Church has HIV&AIDS: In some Christian denominations, it has been declared that the “church has AIDS,” (The Catholic Synod of Southern Africa) for, indeed, if one member of the body of Christ suffers, we all suffer (1Corinthians12:12-27). Although this statement has been made and it is theologically legitimate, many church members still believe that HIV&AIDS is a problem of sinners outside the church, some churches in regions where HIV&AIDS is less severe, think that HIV&AIDS is an African or Two-Thirds World problem. But as long as some members of our Christian body are infected and affected by HIV&AIDS we are all infected and affected by HIV&AIDS (1 Corinthians 12:26). There is no us and them: we are all one in Christ (Gal 3: 28). Owning up is a much needed theological challenge for the church of this era. We as the body of Christ, the church, we have AIDS.

You Saw me Sick With AIDS: If we agree, with the theological statement that says, “The church has AIDS,” there is a subsequent theological truth that follows from it. That is, the fact that “the Church has AIDS,” for many of our members are infected, sick, dead, dying

or living positively with HIV&AIDS and because if one of us has HIV we all have it, it means that Jesus Christ himself has AIDS, for the church is the body of Christ (1Cor. 12:27). It is my contention therefore, that we do not have to wait until the judgment day to hear Jesus saying, “You saw me sick with AIDS.” Today Jesus Christ stands amongst us saying, “Look at me, I have AIDS!” Do we love him any less? Are we holier than him? In this HIV&AIDS era, our greatest christological challenge is to grasp that Jesus is the face of every individual who is living with HIV&AIDS and who is affected by this epidemic. Whenever and whoever and wherever a person is stigmatized, isolated and rejected because of their HIV&AIDS status, the church needs to grasp that Jesus himself is discriminated and rejected. All those women, whose gender status makes it impossible to protect themselves, the helpless widows and millions of orphans represent Jesus crucified in our midst.

This is a major theological challenge and one that should energize us and our current efforts, for it calls into question our acts of worship, confronting us with the question of: do you really love Jesus? Do you worship him? Is the mission of the church the mission of Jesus? If we answer yes, then, it follows that our mission as a Christian church should be manifested in our commitment to fight against the spread of HIV&AIDS, by breaking the silence surrounding the issues of sexuality in the church and by denouncing in word and deed all the manifestations of stigma—for they hinder both prevention and care. Above all, we have to eliminate any form of stigma because if Christ can say, “You saw me with AIDS,” that is, if he adopts a position of radical solidarity, we cannot justify the maintenance of the “us and them” perspective. Our commitment to care for those of us who are infected and affected should be demonstrated not by continuing to leave the burden of care to women, but by also encouraging our men to go and to put their hands on the sick people, who need to be touched, lifted, washed, changed, fed and prayed for (Luke 10:25-37). Jesus again demonstrated his care for the sick even if he was a man, he did not hesitate to serve with his hands (Mark 5: 21-43; John 13: 1-20). No Christian man is above Christ to serve and care for the sick. A theology of men as caregivers is well attested in the gospels. Our commitment should be manifested in our efforts to keep the window of hope clear and clean of AIDS as well as by ensuring that all orphaned children grow up as normal and skilled members of the society. We need, therefore, to recapture that Jesus said the kingdom of God belongs to children and that whoever welcomes them, **welcomes him... (Mk 10:13-16//Matt 19:13-15)**. Our commitment should cut across and reach out to all—regardless of whether they are Christians or not.

Our Mission is the Mission of Jesus

Within this framework of understanding our mission as the mission of and for Jesus, I would like to outline, some of the theological challenges that confront the Christian church in the HIV&AIDS (and globalization) era under the following topic sentences:

- ❑ Emptying ourselves from our glory
- ❑ Preaching to the converted
- ❑ Re-interpreting the scriptures
- ❑ Preaching God’s kingdom
- ❑ *proclaiming life

- ❑ *proclaiming healing
- ❑ Reviving our Commitment to Ecumenism
- ❑ Assuming our prophetic role/Advocacy

1. *Emptying Ourselves Just as Jesus Emptied himself.* In his book *Mission and Dialogue*, Michael Nazir-Ali writes that while the theological idea of incarnation is fully recognized; namely, that Jesus came and dwelt/tabernacled amongst us, it tends to be easier for us to emphasize the presence than the “self-emptying” (1995: 26-27). We need, however, to also recognize that when the word became flesh and dwelt amongst us, *he left his glory*. Matt 20; 28 tells us, “the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life for many.” As a Christian church, our mission in the world, is to imitate Christ, it is to serve not to be served.

Yet in this HIV&AIDS era it is sometimes doubtful if we are true to the theological challenge of emptying ourselves, of serving and not being served. While I cannot generalize, it sometimes seems we are more concerned with maintaining our reputation, our glory, than taking on the challenge of saving and serving lives, especially today where life is plundered by HIV&AIDS and the accompanying social evils that groom it. This is attested, for example, by our approach to the prevention of HIV&AIDS. As the church we tend to insist that the prevention of HIV&AIDS for us can only be through sexual abstinence before marriage and faithfulness in marriage. These are, indeed, the values of our faith, as they are values of many other religions and cultures. Yet our reluctance or refusal to consider their limitations and to add on other options clearly indicates that as the Christian church we are holding on to our glory, we are refusing to empty ourselves. We insist on these, even when it is clear that these values do not work efficiently, because of inequality of power between women and men; between wives and husbands (UNDP & UNAIDS 2001:21-22). These golden values of our faith and many other cultures and religions do not work efficiently, because of violence against women at home, at work, and on the streets, where many women are raped (UNICEF 2001:21) and many have to live with unfaithfulness of their spouses because gender inequalities of some cultures allow it. The global economy with its profit-driven march has created job-insecurities and facilitated massive movements, hence separating families over a long time, a fact that also promotes unfaithfulness. Because too many women are too poor to choose to opt out of unhappy marriages or even to disengage from commercial sex and because globalization increases mobility, separating families over a long time, increasing poverty and promoting girl-trafficking--therefore, the values of abstinence and faithfulness though very good, they are often ineffective. The values of abstinence do not protect our young people, not because parents and the church do not guide them, but because they live under peer and media pressure, which glorifies sex regardless of marriage. The highly profit-driven world puts school going young people under amazing pressure to own mobile cellphones and to buy units, while they are not working—hence making them vulnerable to the sugar daddies snares. Many young girls and women in war zones are subject to random and reckless rape. The displaced and uprooted populations face the same. These are some of the many conditions that make abstinence an ineffective strategy for HIV&AIDS. Should we doom our youth to death, ignoring the larger forces at work? The church should weigh between promoting their values and

promoting life. Are the church values above life or should they be subject to serving life? The assumption is that our values are there to promote life, but clearly in the HIV&AIDS context it has become apparent that Christian values are placed above life. Lives are now servants of Christian values. It is now do or die. The hearts of church leaders have been hardened. Further, the challenge confronting the church and its mission in the HIV&AIDS era is the need to address structural sin—for members of the society/church may very well know and believe in the Christian values of abstinence and faithfulness, but social injustice does not allow them to practice them. Strategies of confronting structural sin are therefore vital, for HIV&AIDS is not just about individual lack of morality, but also individual's lack of social justice in the structures surrounding their lives. Evidently, HIV&AIDS and the exploitative global economy are pointing the church away from cheap mission towards a new direction of doing mission.

Cheap church mission closes its eyes from sighting structural evil and its impact on people's choices and values, by insisting on behavior change, when behavior change is hindered by oppressive structures of injustice that govern people's lives. Cheap mission points fingers to individuals, blaming them for immorality, and fails to acknowledge the immorality of social structures of our world. Cheap mission calls individuals to repent and change, but does not ask oppressive and exploitative structures to repent and change from their evil. The struggle against HIV&AIDS in the global economic era, however, is forcefully pointing the church to a new direction of doing mission—the call to convert the sinful economic, political, social structures from their exploitation. The new direction of carrying out mission should call the structures of injustice to repentance from destruction of life towards being born again-- by becoming structures of justice, healing and creators of environments and communities that supports the flourishing of life. The new direction of doing mission should regard the individual, their communities and the structures that surround their lives as inseparable. Such a mission does not only make behavior change message effective, it allows the church to be partners with God in keeping God's earth good, just as the Creator intended it (Genesis 1).

Moreover, when we insist that the prevention of HIV&AIDS is through abstaining before marriage and faithfulness in marriage, we assume or impose our Christian values and worth to non-Christians, who may not necessary subscribe to these. Be that as it may, my contention is that the mission of the church is not limited to those whose values and faith/s is identical to Christians. The mission of the church is to all and to preserve all life regardless of their faith or lack of it. In Matthew 25, for example, where Jesus elaborates on the criteria that shall be used to judge those who have carried an acceptable mission to all nations, the criteria is that our mission should be “people and life centered:” serving the hungry, the naked, the sick, the thirsty, the strangers, the imprisoned—the most marginalized members of humanity. It does not say, we will be credited for serving only our fellow Christians or those who subscribe to our values.

What if we understood that our mission in the world as to serve life, to serve the poor, the suffering, the powerless, the hopeless, the vulnerable youth and women than to hold on to our glory? What if we empty ourselves, give up our magnificent reputation, church traditions, policies and theology in the interest of serving and saving lives? What if we

begin to take seriously the need to denounce structural sin? What if we understand that our mission is to create and promote communities and environments of justice, where the well being of all can blossom? I believe such a theological stance can inform our approach to HIV&AIDS differently and improve our impact on the various projects that we are running at the moment. I also believe that such a mission perspective would have a prophetic voice to the global economic economy. Above all, I believe such a perspective can create environments that are conducive for salvation to occur and to be experienced by individuals, communities and our earth.

2. *Preaching to the Converted just as Jesus Preached to his nation and Fellow Jews.* In this HIV&AIDS and globalization era, I believe, that another theological challenge confronting the Christian Church is the need to reclaim our mission to the converted. For far too long, many Christian churches have understood mission in terms of the Matthean great commission, where Jesus said, “Go unto the World and make disciples.” The tendency has been to understand mission as sending people out to the heathens, to exotic areas or to the unconverted sinners within the vicinity of our local church. Yes, indeed, the great commission was given to the disciples, but we must not overlook that Jesus himself preached to his fellow Jews, who were believers in God (Dube 2001a: 39-40). Jesus preached in the synagogues, to his fellow teachers: the Pharisees, scribes and Priests—who many times were tempted to preserve the traditions and laws of their faith above life. Jesus preached within the villages and cities of his country to Jewish crowds. This was a dangerous and difficult mission, for a prophet has no honor in his/her home, and because it put him face to face with his synagogue and temple leaders. We note that Jesus did not spare them, when he found their acts of faith wanting (Dube 2001a 46-47; Matt 23). This was of course, a high risk mission and Jesus was accordingly crucified within a year of his mission.

It would seem to me that in this HIV&AIDS and globalization era, we need to recapture the mission to the converted, be they churches or nations,² for the converted can become corrupt and lose vision of God’s will, when they insist on practicing religiosity that does not enhance life and save people (Dube 1997: 449-50; Dube 2001:38-49). Let us return to an earlier case; namely, that the church insists that abstinence from sex before marriage and faithfulness in marriage are key to HIV&AIDS prevention, even when it is clear that gender inequalities, poverty and exploitative national and international structures render these strategies ineffective. Further, and even research from all over the world indicates that gender inequality between men and women, be it in marriage or outside, render many abstaining women and girls, many faithful women and wives vulnerable to HIV&AIDS (UNDP & UNAIDS 2001: 21-22). HIV&AIDS research and documentation also indicates that in the global economic era many poor women and people are driven by deepening poverty to engage in high risk sex while others are sold into commercial sex (Garba & Garba 2000:26-27).

² See Dube Shomanah, “Praying the Lord’s Prayer in the Global Economic Era,” pp.49-50. In *The Ecumenical Review* 49/4 1997, where argue that, “In the context of globalization, the Christian mission must therefore concern itself with such issues as identifying the faces behind the giant multi-national companies and monetary bodies that are colonizing God’s creation again.”

Two questions can be asked regarding the stance of the church: First, who is served when the church insists on its values, while people are dying? Who is served when the church ignores the sinful structures that do not allow people to live according to the desired Christian values? Second, can the Christian church claim that it is not party to encouraging unequal gender relations? Many churches have made great progress in the area of gender justice, but many more still see patriarchal relations in church, family and society as divinely sanctioned. A substantial amount of HIV&AIDS research and documentation, however, indicates that no amount of abstaining, being faithful and condomising will eradicate HIV&AIDS as long as we do not address the social evils that aid the spread of HIV&AIDS such as poverty, gender inequality, racism and homophobia (APRODEV 2000; UNDP & UNAIDS 2001: 21-22). In short, there is overwhelming evidence that people's behavior is linked to the structures that govern their lives. Sinful structures breed sinful individual and communities. Since the church is part of the problem, it is notably weak in the area of prevention and much stronger in the area of care. But as I have argued elsewhere, "care-giving is good but not good enough." This is because if it is not accompanied by equal commitment to prevention, "it seriously puts doubts in our theology of respect for life.... If we really respect all life as sacred, if we really regard every human being, Christian or non-Christian as made of God's image—shouldn't we demonstrate this theological stance by designing programmes that make us effective instruments in the prevention of HIV&AIDS as well (2001:45)?

In as much as the church is a significant partner in the global struggle against HIV&AIDS and, in as much as we wish to preach to the world, I believe, the HIV&AIDS and globalization era underlines that we need to send apostles and prophets to preach to the Christian churches and call them to repentance. The church needs to repent for maintaining structures of sin such as gender inequalities. The church needs to repent for comfortably co-existing with exploitative national and international economic structures that have rubbished millions to dehumanizing levels of poverty. To those whose lives have been denied human dignity, the values of abstinence and faithfulness are a mockery flung on their face by those who are comfortable. Those who laugh and stigmatize communities, countries and continents devastated by HIV&AIDS, such as Africa, holding that we are lacking in our sexual morals, are occupying positions of power, possibly sitting on the seats of exploiters. Preaching to the converted is a model that we need to embrace, for the church to effectively carry its mission as the mission of Jesus. Part of the need to preach to the converted may simply be a need to re-educate or for an in depth sensitization of the church: about HIV& AIDS; about the ethics and impact of global economy; about structural injustice and how it desecralizes life and hinders ethical communities and individuals. Indeed, the need to educate the church concerning HIV&AIDS—its leadership, members and workers—has already been recognized (See Ecumenical Action Plan 2001). But more needs to be done to preach to the converted. We need to undertake a mission to the converted to highlight their participation in structural sin; their partnership through silence, denial and tolerance of structures of injustice that destroys life.

3. *Re-interpreting the Holy Scriptures to Affirm Life and Counteract Injustice Just as Jesus Did.* Many God-fearing Christians' efforts to minister to the affected and infected

in the HIV&AIDS era have been based on scriptures, but painfully used to condemn the sick. Many scriptures have been found that hold that illness and plagues are sent by God to the sinful and disobedient (Gen. 20; Exod 3-12; Num 12, 14 & 21:4-9; Deut. 7:12-16 & 28; 2Sam. 24). Many Christian churches also advocate gender inequality, fully convinced by some scriptures that God authorized the subjugation of women to men in the church and society (Gen 2-4; 1Tim 2: 8-12). On the latter, many women and gender activists have done a wonderful job in the need to re-read the Bible in the light of gender justice (Newson & Ringe 1992; Schussler Fiorenza 1995; Dube 2001). They have given us many strategies of reading for gender justice, such as re-interpretation, highlighting verses that promotes gender justice such as Galatians 3:28 (Anderson 1995:103-134) as well as re-writing Christians origins to give an inclusive history (Schussler Fiorenza 1983). African women scholars have provided models for interpreting the Bible in the HIV&AIDS context (Dube and Kanyoro 2004). The strategies proposed to read for gender justice, most of them operate from the acknowledgement that the Bible was written in a patriarchal culture and it communicates the word of God through such a medium—which sanctions the subjugation of females. The churches of the 21st century will do well to listen to the voices of women biblical interpreters since, it is clear that the church is patriarchal. The church must also listen to women since they are the majority in church membership, who have been oppressed and marginalized by a few men who attend church. The church is, in other words, a woman's space that should pay heed to their voices and needs. The church should also heed the biblical interpretations proposed by women as part of its repentance, given that most churches have been party to the oppression, suppression and exploitation of women.

Further, it is evident that the HIV&AIDS era calls us to re-read scriptures such that they affirm life and counteract death. We need to highlight those scriptures such as Job and John 9 that counteract the notion of associating illness with God's punishment or the sinfulness of the concerned individuals. Further, underlining and highlighting healing as central to the ministry of Jesus should also form a central part of articulating a theology that underlines that HIV&AIDS violates life, hence violates God's will and cannot be sent by God (Dube 2001a:38-49). Jesus healing ministry should move the church to advocate for affordable and sustainable supply of ARVs to all who need them. But our re-interpretations shall need to begin by acknowledging that biblical literature emerged from a culture that sometimes associated illness with punishment for one's sins. We need to expose, confront and re-interpret verses that easily lead to a theology of curses, denial of affordable ARVs, death and HIV&AIDS stigma (WCC 2001:13-14), and to struggle with finding ways of rendering these scriptures to affirm life and to uproot injustice (See Nadar 2007 & Dube 2007).

Jesus himself was a great re-interpreter of scriptures (Matt 5-7). Whenever the scriptures were used to enforce death and oppression, rather than life, Jesus did not hesitate to say that the following of such scriptures was unnecessary. Many examples on how Jesus dealt with the Sabbath, when his fellow teachers gave it priority over the lives and health of people, testifies to his re-interpretation of the biblical scriptures in a life and people centered perspective. In front of synagogue leaders who closely guarded the Sabbath, Jesus asked, "I ask, is it lawful to do good or to do harm on the Sabbath, to save life or to

destroy it” (Luke 6: 10, See also **Luke 13:10-17 & 14:1-6**). Indeed, the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew 5:1-7:1-48 gives us an elaborate example on how Jesus insisted on re-interpreting the scriptures, when he was convinced that they supported oppression than life and justice. The various confrontation and debates that Jesus had with his fellow teachers, the Pharisees, can be read as their differences towards the role of scriptures: are scriptures there to enhance life and justice in God’s creation or are the scriptures above the preservation of life and people? When Jesus found his fellow teachers, the Pharisees insisting on the superiority of scriptures above the preservation of life he said to them, “woe to you hypocrites, for you have neglected the weightier matters of the law: justice, mercy and faith (Matt 23:23). He did not hesitate to say to them “The Sabbath was made for people and not people for the Sabbath.” I am convinced that those churches which have not only closed their eyes from sighting structural sins that shape the lives of the oppressed, but have also closed their mouth from denouncing the structures of injustice, by insisting that the answer to HIV prevention is solely in individual morality (abstinence and faithfulness) have neglected the weightier matters of law; namely, justice, mercy and faith. Such churches and their preachers find it easier to see and denounce the immorality of individuals, holding them responsible for their HIV positive status, but to evil structures they serve sanctifying silence. Such an approach that neglects justice, mercy and faith, Jesus has an explicit name for it—hypocrisy.

For the purposes of proclaiming the fullness of life in the HIV&AIDS era, the call to re-interpret the scripture is a call to be a learning church and a call to be prophetic within our institutions. HIV&AIDS has debunked many known truths and exposed the limitations of many scientific, economic and cultural truths/knowledge. Subsequently, HIV&AIDS has called for intense research, re-examination and re-organization of all aspects of our lives. Theological education in the church and its institutions are not exceptions. We need to revisit many of our theological articles, our biblical interpretations, our church traditions, policies and structures in the light of HIV&AIDS. We need to re-write our liturgy, lectionaries and Sunday school Bible studies. We need to retrain our pastors, counselors and all church leaders and workers in the light of HIV&AIDS. We need to integrate HIV&AIDS in the curriculum of our theological institutions, in order for us to re-interpret scriptures to counteract the spread of HIV&AIDS, to care and to minimize its impact. We need to research, document and monitor the attitude of our church members towards HIV&AIDS, in order to design appropriate projects for them. Sometimes I am distressed that research and documentation on HIV&AIDS seems to be carried out in many other social fields but in the church we do not have such practices that monitor the understanding and growth of believers in this area and design evidence based programs and projects.

The call to re-interpret the scriptures in the light of HIV&AIDS is also a theological call to be prophetic. This is because re-interpretation will, of necessity, challenge the status quo and the accepted interpretations and structures. Re-interpretation will be prophetic because it will challenge leaders and their institutions, calling them to see HIV&AIDS and the context of global economy in a wider perspective. Consequently, prophesy will be costly and can be deadly as was in the case of Jesus. It is nonetheless a crucial aspect in the mission of the church to the converted and to the world. Jesus himself began his

public ministry by identifying himself with prophets and outlining the agenda of his mission prophetically in Luke 4: 16-20.

4. *Reviving and Strengthening our Ecumenical Relations:* The impact and work engendered by HIV&AIDS and globalization are too overwhelming to be tackled individually. The challenges cannot be effectively tackled by individual countries or churches. Both forces have highlighted that we are interconnected and we need each other. To carry out an effective mission in serving and saving life, the church within and without countries need to work together and to share their available resources. It is, therefore, gratifying to see that in the three decades of HIV&AIDS history ecumenical bonding at national and international levels has increased, as networking, collaboration and sharing of resources became an essential part of the struggle against HIV&AIDS. In Botswana, for example, the Evangelical Fellowship of Churches runs HIV&AIDS capacity building and prevention program for Pentecostal churches. The Botswana Christian AIDS Intervention Program (BOCAIP) on the other hand, is a larger, more inclusive and older umbrella organization that was formed to motivate, mobilize and strengthen the churches response to HIV&AIDS. At a continent and international level, the Ecumenical HIV&AIDS Initiative in Africa (EHAIA) was formed with collaboration of African Churches of all regions, WCC and its members to coordinate and strengthen the African church's response to HIV&AIDS. Its activities around the continent have been vital in bringing churches and church-related organizations of various backgrounds for capacity building in the HIV&AIDS response. Many other ecumenical church bodies such as CWM, UEM, LWF and Cevaa have played a major part in strengthening their own member churches for a better HIV&AIDS response. Moreover, the HIV&AIDS context has increasingly challenged churches to widen the circle of collaboration to include networking with governments, development agencies, NGOs and other community based organizations. The need to continue in this spirit of working together in the HIV&AIDS and globalization era cannot be overemphasized.

5. *Proclaiming the Kingdom of God in the HIV/AIDS Era.* Scholars of the gospels are agreed that the main theme of the message of Jesus in his earthly ministry was the kingdom of God (Powell 1998:50-52). He taught that the kingdom of God is here and it is coming. Jesus even taught us to pray saying, "may your kingdom come, may your will be done on earth as it is in heaven" (Matt6:10). The phrase kingdom of God is interpreted to mean, the reign or rule of God (51). Accordingly, when Jesus proclaimed the kingdom, it was an "announcement that God's reign has drawn near as good news, because God's rule in their lives will operate to defeat what is evil and to bring about what is good" (52). Jesus' proclamation of the kingdom was attested by his presence and solidarity with the poor and marginalized (Matt 5:1-12).

But one of the significant attestation of the kingdom of God, was that Jesus ministry involved the healing of the sick, casting out demons and feeding the hungry, cleansing lepers and restoring back to society. For example, when John the Baptist heard about the deeds of Jesus, he sent his disciples to inquire if he is the expected Messiah, that is, is he a messenger sent by God to redeem Israel from its political oppression, that renders the

colonized sick due their oppression (Mk 5:1-20). Jesus' answer was, 'Go and tell John what you hear and you see: the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the poor have good news brought to them' (Matt 11:4-5). In short, the presence of God's reign on earth is attested by healing, by affirmation of life and solidarity with the marginalized, that is, the well being and liberation of the oppressed.

As Stuart Bates points out, "the church has no mission of its own, but the continuation of the mission of Christ," in Matthew 10, Jesus mandates the disciples to continue his own work: cast out unclean spirits, heal every disease, preach the kingdom of heaven is close, raise the dead cleanse the lepers and cast out demons" (2001:42). Our mission as the Christian church is the HIV&AIDS era, remains the mission of Jesus; the mission to proclaim the kingdom of God on earth. Since the outbreak of HIV&AIDS the kingdom of God has been under severe attack. The physical body is invaded by endless opportunistic infections; the social, the psyche and the economic bodies have had their share of plunder as poverty, stigma, rape, fear, grief, and death intensifies. While Jesus came so that we may have life and have it in fullness, HIV&AIDS and globalization of poverty have made death the daily bread of many communities and families.

Therefore *it is now more than ever* that the call to proclaim kingdom of God, the good news, the fullness of life, is more pressing than ever. It is now, more than ever, that the church needs to proclaim liberty throughout the land, to announce freedom to slaves, the poor, to women, to orphans; to insist on the redistribution of wealth to and for all. It is now that total healing-- economically, physically, socially, psychologically and genderly-- needs to become the mission of the church to the world. It is now that the churches need to denounce accommodation of oppression within their own structures of their nations. This will be the practice of a life and people-centered mission, which Jesus insists, it is central to the mission of his followers, the church (Matt 25:31-45). When this is done, Jesus will be manifested to us, by us and among us as we serve the sick, the hungry, the naked, the foreigners (the socially dislocated) and the imprisoned. This need to carry out the deeds of the kingdom of heaven on earth as it is in heaven is a theological challenge that the Christian church should not forget, for Jesus dwells with and is amongst the infected and affected, awaiting our love to be practically displayed by our struggle against the spread of HIV&AIDS, its stigma, its attack on women, children and other marginalized groups, as well as to take up our prophetic role, by breaking the silence that surrounds the glamorization of the exploitative global economy and the reduction of HIV&AIDS to individual morality. I believe that God's will will abide on earth as it is in heaven when the church carries out a life and people centered mission of Jesus.

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