

I WAS BLIND BUT NOW I SEE



This is both a true story and a generic story. It recounts the experience and courage of many African women. It is a tribute to the daily acts of compassion by countless women who despite their poverty meet the needs of people infected and affected by HIV/Aids.

MAMA THEMBI'S STORY

MamaThembi, an unmarried domestic worker with five children, worked long hours and earned little. Life was a daily struggle to survive, but MamaThembi was driven by a vision to ensure that her children received education, found good jobs and built strong families. Her resilience came from her faith in God and through her local church.

MamaThembi's hard work paid off. Her eldest daughter, Phiwe, completed her studies, qualified as a nurse, married a teacher and was blessed to conceive twins. Two months before Phiwe's delivery date, MamaThembi was called to the hospital where Phiwe had been admitted to the emergency ward. Waiting for the doctors, MamaThembi saw posters about HIV/Aids. She had heard about HIV/Aids on the radio, and knew from her church that it was a shameful disease – a punishment from God for sexual immorality.

The doctor broke the news – both twins and Phiwe were HIV-positive. The words struck terror in MamaThembi's heart. She was afraid, confused and filled with shame. Phiwe felt the same. All she could do was ask her mother what she had done to deserve this punishment from God. They both felt condemned and forsaken. MamaThembi's pastor tried to comfort her but it was difficult; he had taught her that HIV/Aids was a punishment from God.

During the year the twins and Phiwe died. The care they required used all of MamaThembi's savings. Life became even more of a daily struggle.

Time passed and late one evening, there was a knock at the door. There stood two young children – orphans begging for food. MamaThembi shared with them the little she had. Over the next few days she became aware of the high number of destitute children in her community orphaned by HIV/Aids.

In the end MamaThembi understood that she was not forsaken by God but was being called to serve her community. Her experience opened her eyes to the work that God was calling her to do. She had lost a much-loved daughter, but she had a new vision!

JESUS AND THE BLIND MAN (JOHN 9.1-12)

The story in John 9 is similar to other healing stories in the gospel, especially those that stirred up heated arguments between religious leaders. Yet this story is unique in that it starts with a theological question, then describes Jesus' response and ends with the experience of the blind man.

“Who sinned?” is the question presented in the text (v.2). It reveals the disciples' assumption that some diseases are linked to sin. The questions we ask in the face of such suffering reveal what we believe. What questions do we ask when confronted by disease and suffering – whether our own or others'?

Jesus rejects the belief that suffering from disease is linked to the sin of the person who is ill. Neither the man nor his parents sinned. Jesus does not say they were sinless, but stressed that the man's blindness was not caused by a specific sin.

Jesus shifts the attention from cause to purpose. Suffering provides an opportunity for God to act. Therefore we should not ask, “Who sinned?”, but “What is God's purpose in this situation?”

Jesus responds to disease and suffering through action. Concretely, he removes the cause of



suffering in partnership with the person who is suffering – an example of empowerment.

The encounter with Jesus moves the blind man from passive acceptance of his fate to active involvement in his own healing, and ultimately to a courageous proclamation of faith. It is faith in his experience of Jesus that enables him to face the attacks of the religious leaders. How do we react to others' experience of God when it differs from our own?

QUESTIONS

1. HIV/AIDS AND YOUR COMMUNITY.

WHAT DOES YOUR CHURCH BELIEVE ABOUT HIV/AIDS – ABOUT PEOPLE LIVING WITH HIV/AIDS? IS IT A PUNISHMENT FROM GOD? IS IT LINKED TO SEXUAL IMMORALITY? OR IS THIS TOO SIMPLE?

2. HIV/AIDS AND POVERTY.

WHAT IS THE LINK BETWEEN POVERTY AND HIV/AIDS? WHAT IS THE LINK BETWEEN HIV/AIDS AND JUSTICE?

3. HIV/AIDS AND FAITH.

WHAT CHALLENGES DOES THE HIV/AIDS PANDEMIC POSE TO THE CHURCH, TO FAITH AND TO THEOLOGY? HOW HAS IT CHANGED THE WAY WE ADDRESS SEXUALITY; GENDER, ESPECIALLY THE EXPERIENCE OF WOMEN; AND THE FRAGILE INTERCONNECTEDNESS OF HUMAN LIFE?

4. HIV/AIDS AND THE GOSPEL.

WHAT IS THE GOSPEL MESSAGE IN THE CONTEXT OF HIV/AIDS TODAY?

5. OTHER COMMUNITY HEALTH ISSUES.

WHAT OTHER HEALTH ISSUES OR DISEASES ARE A CONCERN IN YOUR COMMUNITY?

HOW IS THE MINISTRY AND MISSION OF YOUR CHURCH REACHING OUT TO THOSE AFFECTED? HOW DOES THE CHURCH BEAR WITNESS TO FULLNESS OF LIFE IN THE MIDST OF SUCH SUFFERING?

PRAYER

Lord, we confess that we have not always asked the right questions in the midst of the great suffering brought by HIV/AIDS.

We have asked, "Who sinned?"

We have blamed, condemned and stigmatised.

We have done this in your name.

Forgive us, Lord, for our presumption, and give us the courage to repent openly.

Bless us with your Spirit and wisdom.

Open our eyes to the new ways in which you are revealing yourself through the experiences of those we have marginalized, such as women, children, people of different sexual orientations, commercial sex workers and the poor.

Thank you for calling us back to human solidarity, to the sacredness of human sexuality and to global justice.

Amen.

AUTHOR

Nontando M Hadebe is from South Africa. She is past director of the Institute for Contextual Theology. Presently, she is preparing for doctoral studies on the intersection between religion, gender and the Aids pandemic, as well as assisting churches in the development HIV/AIDS ministries.

In 2001 there were 40 million people living with HIV/AIDS worldwide. Sub-Saharan Africa accounts for 10% of the world population, but 70% of the global HIV infections (28.1 million). More than half of those infected are women and a staggering 2.4 million children are infected. In 2001 an estimated 2.3 million sub-Saharan Africans, including 500,000 children, died from HIV/AIDS.

But the epidemic does not stop there. Millions of children have been orphaned by the crisis. By 2010 sub-Saharan Africa expects to have 44 million orphans.

(Source: UNAIDS)