

THEOLOGICAL CHALLENGES: PROCLAIMING THE FULLNESS OF LIFE IN THE HIV/AIDS & GLOBAL ECONOMIC ERA

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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.¹

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Traditionally, Jesus' own mission (Luke 4:18-19) and its mandate have been understood primarily in terms of proclaiming the word. What would be the further implications of seeing this mission also as that of spreading fire upon the earth?³

Introduction: Mission in the HIV/AIDS & globalization era

According to Michael Amalados⁴, "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." If Christian believers agree with this last statement of Amalados, the question then is: "Does the mission of Jesus offer the church a model of a people-centred mission in the HIV/AIDS and globalization era?" This, of course, raises other questions such as: "Is the HIV/AIDS and global economic era a people-centred era?" "Is it life affirming and human-friendly?" On these questions, I believe there is little room for debate, for research and documentation indicates that HIV/AIDS negates life and brings suffering to individuals, families, communities and countries⁵. Its incurability and its link to sexual transmission breeds fear among the infected and the affected, and this leads to social stigma, which is the isolation and discrimination of the infected and their families. HIV/AIDS produces poverty, as the sick cannot work, relatives have to stay home and nurse the sick, and more money is needed for endless medical services. AIDS kills millions. AIDS leaves behind many powerless and poor widows and orphans, who are often at the mercy of property grabbing relatives. It attacks the poor and the powerless, and those who have no economic power to say no

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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 profiting a few individuals, while its policies and impact exclude and exploit the majority^{6 7}. Globalization is graphically described by the Ecumenical Association of Third-World Theologians' (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 labour 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 commodifiable money or commodifiable commodities (including skills) were excluded from the market and left as expendables.⁸

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, the trafficking of women and girls, and sex work,⁹ thereby creating fertile grounds for the spread of HIV/AIDS. This context challenges the Christian church to recapture and practice a people-centred mission.

The people-centred mission of Jesus

To return to an earlier question, the earthly ministry of Jesus offers Christian believers a people-centred 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.” (italics added)

The text continues to say 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 or 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 the church seeks to practice a people-centred mission in the HIV/AIDS and globalization era. First, long before there was globalization and HIV/AIDS, Jesus underlined in no uncertain terms that at the core of the Christian’s business is care, i.e. a people-centred mission. In Matthew 25, Jesus underlined that his followers will be evaluated on the basis of whether they carried out a people-centred mission, or not. In other words, it is not optional for the Christian church to carry out a people-centred mission to the world. It is a must.

Second, while a great deal of Christian mission activities have concerned themselves with conversion, it is notable that in this passage Jesus does not say anyone will be praised and welcomed, because “You saw me as a Muslim, heathen, Hindu, Jew and you converted me into a Christian.” Rather, mission proper is about what Christian followers do for the hungry, the thirsty, the naked, the homeless strangers, the sick and the imprisoned, i.e. the less privileged of all nations. This definition of Christian mission shall be the understanding used in this paper. It is an understanding that I believe calls for a re-reading of Matthew 28:18-20, the great commission.

Third, the passage underlines the absolute need for compassion in Christian mission. Not only does the church need compassion to meet the needs of those who are infected and affected by HIV/AIDS, compassion is also needed to carry out an effective mission in the globalization era, for the latter is characterized by competition, domination and indifference in its quest for profit¹⁰.

Fourth, it is notable that Jesus identifies himself with the less privileged and the needy, by insisting that he is personified in the lives of these. He thereby underlines 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.”¹¹ This understanding is vital in the HIV/AIDS era, which has experienced another epidemic: the HIV/AIDS stigma. It is, therefore, instructive to note that the HIV/AIDS stigma has been rightfully declared an unacceptable sin.¹²

Fifth, the fact that the passage speaks of judgment in these terms underlines that, “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 con-

tinue in faithful mission.”(10:41)¹³ To restate these words in the words of Amalados, “Our mission is the mission of Jesus.”¹⁴

Some may say, “But Matthew 25 seems charity oriented, and charity does not change the unjust structures, for it creates dependence rather than independence.” The passage certainly does not exclude charity, but in my view readers do injustice to the passage if they limit it to charity. If the Christian mission involves intolerance towards poverty and suffering, it follows that this includes challenging those structures that breed these evils. Indeed, in Luke 4:16-20, Jesus first outlined the agenda of his mission by saying, “The Spirit of 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 favour, the Jubilee.” From this, it is clear that Jesus’ mission inevitably includes challenging structural sins that relegate 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. If the mission of the church is the mission of Jesus, then it is not optional for Christian believers to practice a people-centred mission that also challenges structural sin with equal commitment.

A people-centred mission in the HIV/AIDS era

As people who live in the HIV/AIDS era, coupled with globalization, we need to try and hear how this 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 stigmatized, isolated and rejected because of HIV/AIDS and you did not welcome me. 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. I was a powerless woman exposed to the high risk of infection and carrying a huge burden of care, and you did not come to my rescue. I was a dispossessed widow and an orphan and you did not meet my needs.

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 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.”

As noted by the preamble of this consultation, HIV/AIDS raises theological questions. One 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, "What does it mean for those who are dying? Those who have no hope for life?" HIV/AIDS makes the infected and affected ask, "Where is God? Is there a God who hears, sees, feels and knows our pains?" The good news is 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 the church takes up the challenge to embody and represent Christ by caring for the sick, the naked, the thirsty, the strangers, the imprisoned, the widowed and the orphaned, and to challenge structural injustice. God and life are manifested to all who are suffering and the hopeless, when the Christian church takes up the challenge of being in solidarity with them. Further, God is also revealed to the Christian church if such a church sees God in the face of the sick, the suffering and the poor. Believers' love and faith in Jesus are manifested through their love for the poor, 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 of 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."¹⁵

The church has HIV/AIDS

Some Christian denominations have declared that "The church has AIDS", for, indeed, if one member of the body of Christ suffers, all members suffer (1 Cor. 12:12-27). Although this statement has been made and it is theologically legitimate, many church members still believe that HIV/AIDS is a problem for 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. However, as long as some members of the Christian body are infected and affected by HIV/AIDS, all Christian believers are infected and affected by HIV/AIDS (1 Cor. 12:26). How does that sound to you? This is theologically legitimate. There is no "us and them", for in as much as we were baptized in Christ, we are all one in Christ (Gal. 3:27-28). More and more, Christian believers and denominations need to be able to declare, "We, as the body of Christ, the church, have AIDS." Owning up is undoubtedly a much-needed theological challenge for the church of this era.

You saw me sick with AIDS

A theological truth follows from this and it is that Jesus Christ himself has AIDS, for the church is the body of Christ (1 Cor. 12:27). The church needs

to realize that today Jesus Christ stands amongst the suffering saying, "Look at me, I have AIDS." In this HIV/AIDS era, the greatest theological challenge for Christian believers is to grasp that Jesus is the face of every individual who is suffering with HIV/AIDS, or who is affected and threatened by this disease. Whenever 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 against and rejected. All those women, whose gender makes it impossible for them to protect themselves, the helpless widows and millions of orphans, represent Jesus crucified in our midst. Most importantly, they underline the call to proclaim resurrection from all the death dealing social shackles that have buried many.

This is a major theological challenge and one that should energize the church in the current struggle against HIV/AIDS, for it calls into question Christian acts of worship, and confronts all believers with the question, "Do you really love Jesus?" If the answer is, "Yes", then, it follows that the mission of Christian believers and the church should be manifested in its commitment to fight against the spread of HIV/AIDS. The church will need to break the silence that surrounds the issues of sexuality in the church and denounce in word and deed all the manifestations of stigma, for they hinder both prevention and care. The commitment of the church to care for those who are infected and affected should be demonstrated not by continuing to leave the burden of care to women, but by also encouraging men to go and put their hands on the sick people, who need to be touched, lifted, washed, changed, fed and prayed for (Mark 5:21-43). The commitment of the church should also be to ensure that all children orphaned as a result of HIV/AIDS grow up as normal and skilled members of the society. The church needs, therefore, to remember that Jesus said the kingdom of God belongs to children and that whoever welcomes them, welcomes him (Mark 10:13-16//Matt. 19:13-15). As indicated by the theology of Matt. 25, the commitment of the church towards the eradication of HIV/AIDS should cut across and reach out to all, regardless of whether they are Christians or not, for all life was created by God and remains sacred. As Nyambura Njoroge argues, we need a spirituality that moves the church to seek and to insist on social transformation and justice¹⁶.

Our mission is the mission of Jesus

Within this framework of understanding, 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 sub-topics:

- 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 of glory (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 the church to emphasize the presence than the “self-emptying”¹⁷. It is important, therefore, to recognize that when the word became flesh and dwelt amongst us, *he left his glory*. Thus Matt. 20:28 holds that, “The Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life for many.” If the Christian mission in the world is to imitate Christ, then the church is called to empty itself: to serve and not to be served.

Yet, in this HIV/AIDS era it is sometimes doubtful if the church is true to the theological challenge of emptying itself, and of serving and not being served. While I cannot generalize, it sometimes seems the church is more concerned with maintaining its glory/reputation/morals, than taking on the challenge of saving and serving lives that are plundered by HIV/AIDS, globalization and many other accompanying social evils that groom the HIV/AIDS pandemic. This is attested to, for example, by the church’s approach to the prevention of HIV/AIDS. Many churches tend to insist that the prevention of HIV/AIDS can only be through sexual abstinence before marriage and faithfulness in marriage. Let me underline that these are, indeed, the values of Christian faith, as they are values of many other religions and cultures. Yet the reluctance or refusal by most churches to consider or confront the limitations of these values and to add on other options, clearly indicates that the Christian church is holding on to its glory/reputation/morals, at the expense of serving life. The Christian church is refusing to empty itself. Ironically, the church loses its Christian identity in the process of holding too closely to its long-term values of abstinence and faithfulness. The church insists on these, even when it is clear that they do not work because of several reasons, such as the inequality of power between women and men, including that between wives and husbands¹⁸. These golden values of many faiths, cultures and religions do not work because of violence against women at home, at work, and in the streets, where many women are raped¹⁹ and where many have to live with the unfaithfulness of their spouses because some cultures allow unfaithfulness. Because too many women are too poor to choose to opt out of abusive and violent marriages, or even to disengage from sex work (many impoverished women have to choose between death by starvation or by HIV/AIDS), the values of abstinence and faithfulness are ineffective. Also, because globalization increases job insecurity and mobility, and separates families for long periods of time, the values of abstinence and faithfulness, though excellent, are often ineffective. An abstaining woman can get infected. A faithful spouse can get infected. In an ideal world, these values would be a complete prevention of HIV/AIDS. Unfortunately, we do not live in an ideal world where the human dignity of all

is respected. We live in a world of inequalities and social injustice. This drastically reduces the effectiveness of these values and the church needs to open its eyes to the social factors that render these less effective. The church also needs to own up and realize that to present these values as if they are 100% effective, when they are not, borders on an irresponsibility that leads many lives to death. Above all, the church needs to grow up, out of its baby shoes, and come to terms with the fact that the good news of Jesus Christ was tough talk, and not a simple/blind reproduction and repetition of certain moral codes. As Teresa Okure maintains, the mission of Jesus was a bomb; Jesus came to cast fire upon the earth²⁰. Okure holds that, "A church-as-mission is a church on fire with God's love...It has a responsibility to help all God's people, no matter their social status and location in life"²¹.

Similarly, although parents and the church guide young people, the values of abstinence do not protect them because they live under peer and media pressure, which glorifies sex regardless of marriage. Many young people live in poverty and are powerless to make decisions that protect themselves from infection. Many other young people are also targeted for rape. Should the church doom young people to death by ignoring the larger forces at work? Clearly, the challenge confronting the church and its mission in the HIV/AIDS and globalization era is the need to address structural sins with an equal commitment with which individual sin is addressed. Members of society/church may very well know and believe in the values of abstinence and faithfulness, but social injustice does not always allow them to live by these values. Theological strategies of confronting structural sin are therefore vital, for HIV/AIDS is not just about individual lack of morality, but also an individual's lack of social justice in their lives.

Moreover, when the church insists that the prevention of HIV/AIDS is to be achieved through abstinence before marriage and faithfulness in marriage, there is an assumption of the values people hold, or some form of imposition of Christian values and worth on non-Christians, who may not necessarily subscribe to them. Be that as it may, my contention is that the mission of the church is not limited to those whose values and faith is identical to Christian faith. In Matthew 25, when Jesus elaborated on the criteria that will be used to judge those who have carried an acceptable mission to all nations, the criteria are that Christian mission should be people-centred, as we showed earlier. The passage does not say the church will be credited for serving exclusively fellow believers. It does not say the church will be credited for serving those whose moral values match Christian values. In this passage, Jesus speaks of only one criterion, that of serving the less privileged.

What would be the consequence if the church understood that its mission in the world is to serve the poor, the suffering, the powerless, the hopeless, the vulnerable youth, women and the stigmatized PLWHA (people living with HIV/AIDS) rather than to hold on to its glory/reputation/morals? What if the church emptied itself, gave up its magnificent reputation, church traditions, policies and theology in the interest of serving and saving lives? What if the church began to take seriously the need to denounce structural sin? What if the

church began to understand that preaching good news means saving lives and serving lives? I believe such a theological stance would inform the Christian approach to HIV/AIDS and improve the impact on the various projects the church is running at the moment. Blessed would be the Christian church and believer who understood and took up the mission of Jesus to serve people and save lives.

2. Preaching to the converted (just as Jesus preached to his nation and fellow Jews)

In this HIV/AIDS and globalization era, another theological challenge that confronts the Christian church is the need to reclaim its mission to the converted. For far too long, many churches have understood Christian mission in terms of the Matthean great commission, where Jesus is presented saying, "Go into the world and make disciples." The tendency has been to understand mission as sending preachers out to the so-called heathens, to exotic areas or to unconverted sinners within the vicinity of one's local church. Yes, indeed, the great commission was given to make disciples of all, but the church must not overlook the fact that the mission of Jesus largely involved preaching to the converted. Jesus preached to his fellow Jews, who were believers in God²². He preached in the synagogues and to his fellow teachers: the Pharisees, scribes and priests. He preached within the villages and cities of his own country. This was a dangerous and difficult mission, for a prophet has no honour in his/her home. We note that Jesus did not spare his leaders and teachers when he found their acts of faith wanting (e.g. Matt. 23). This was, of course, a high risk mission. Jesus was accordingly crucified within a year of beginning his mission.

In this HIV/AIDS and globalization era, the church needs to recapture its mission to the converted, be they churches, individuals or nations,²³ for the converted can and do become corrupt. The converted often lose the vision of God's will and begin to insist on practising a religiosity that does not enhance and save life and people^{24 25}. Let me return to an earlier example, namely, that many churches/Christian believers insist that abstinence from sex before marriage and faithfulness in marriage are key to HIV/AIDS prevention, even when it is clear that gender relations and many other social factors render these strategies less effective. Many churches maintain this view even as research from all over indicates that gender inequality between men and women, be it in marriage or outside, renders many faithful and abstaining women and girls vulnerable to HIV/AIDS²⁶. Research also indicates that many poor women and people are driven by poverty to engage in high risk sex or are sold into the industry of sex work²⁷, yet the church still insists on abstinence and faithfulness as the key to HIV/AIDS prevention. 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?" Second, "Can the Christian church claim that it is not party to encouraging poverty and unequal gender relations?" Undoubtedly, 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 research and documentation, however, indicates that no amount of abstaining, being faithful and using condoms will eradicate HIV/AIDS so long as we do not address the social evils that aid the spread of HIV/AIDS, such as poverty, gender inequality, stigma, racism and homophobia^{28,29}. 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. As I have argued elsewhere, "Care-giving is good, but not enough". This is because, if it is not accompanied by equal commitment to prevention:

...it seriously puts doubt in our theology of respect for life...If we really respect 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?³⁰

In as much as the church is a significant partner in the global struggle against HIV/AIDS, and in as much as the church seeks to preach "to the world", I believe the HIV/AIDS and globalization era underlines that churches need to send missionaries and prophets to preach to and within the Christian churches and call them to repentance. There is a need for a re-visioning and re-commitment to a people-centred mission. Part of the need to preach to converted Christians/churches is the imperative to re-educate, and the need for an in-depth sensitization of the church. Indeed, the need to educate the church – its leadership, members and workers – has already been recognized³¹. The call to conversion is the critical need to bring the church to value life and all human beings as sacred to God.

3. Re-interpreting the scriptures (to affirm life and counteract injustice just as Jesus did)

The efforts of many God-fearing Christians 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; Ex. 3-12; Num. 12, 14 & 21:4-9; Deut. 7:12-16 & 28; 2 Sam. 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; 1 Tim. 2:8-12). On the latter, many women, feminists and gender activists/readers, have done a wonderful job in promoting the need to re-read the Bible in the light of gender justice³². They have given us many strategies of reading for gender justice, such as re-interpretation, and highlighting verses that promote gender justice such as Galatians 3:28³³, as well as re-writing Christian origins to give an inclusive history³⁴. Whatever strategies have been used to read for gender justice, most of them operate from the assumption that the Bible was written in a patriarchal culture and it communicates the word of God through such a limited human medium.

It is my contention that the HIV/AIDS era calls the church and its training/theological institutions to re-read scriptures such that they affirm life and counteract death. The church and its scholars need to highlight 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. Underlining and highlighting healing as central to the ministry of Jesus should also form an important part of articulating a theology which affirms that HIV/AIDS violates life, hence it violates God's will and cannot be sent by God³⁵. Underlining that healing is God's will for all should stimulate advocacy for quality care and making anti-retrovirals available and affordable to all who need them. Yet HIV/AIDS re-interpretations of the Bible will need to begin by acknowledging that biblical literature emerged from a culture, which, like many other ancient cultures, often associated illness with divine punishment for one's sins. The church and its training/theological institutions need to expose, confront and re-interpret those scriptures that easily lead to a theology of curses, death and HIV/AIDS stigma³⁶, and struggle to find ways of rendering these scriptures so that they affirm life and uproot injustice.

Jesus himself was a great re-interpreter of scriptures. 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 and ungodly. Many examples on how he dealt with the sabbath, when his fellow teachers gave it priority over the lives and health of people, testify to his re-interpretation of the biblical scriptures. In front of synagogue leaders who closely guarded the sabbath, Jesus said, "I ask, is it lawful to do good or to do harm on the sabbath, to save life or to destroy it," (Luke 6:9, See also Luke 13:10-17 & 14:1-6). Indeed, the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew 5:21-48 gives the church an elaborate example of how Jesus insisted on re-interpreting the scriptures, when he was convinced that they supported oppression rather than life and justice. In fact, the various confrontations and debates that Jesus had with his fellow teachers, the Pharisees, can be read as their differences towards the role of scriptures. The question under consideration concerned whether the scriptures are there to enhance life and justice in God's creation, or whether the scriptures are above life? When Jesus found his fellow teachers, the Pharisees, insisting on the superiority of scriptures above 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."

For the purposes of proclaiming the fullness of life in the HIV/AIDS and globalization era, the call to re-interpret the scriptures is a call to be a learning church, and a call to be prophetic within our institutions and nations. 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. The church and its institutions need to:

- ❖ revisit many of its theological articles, church traditions, policies and structures in the light of HIV/AIDS;
- ❖ re-write liturgies, lectionaries and Sunday school Bible studies;
- ❖ design programmes on speaking and teaching about human sexuality;
- ❖ re-train ministers, bishops, pastors, counsellors, congregants, and all church leaders and workers in the light of HIV/AIDS;
- ❖ integrate HIV/AIDS in the curriculum of training/theological institutions. To this end, efforts have already been successfully undertaken to design a curriculum on the integration of HIV/AIDS in theological programmes. It is not enough, however, to have an HIV/AIDS theological curriculum. Rather, what is important is that theological/training institutions should take this instrument and put it to good use;
- ❖ re-interpret scriptures in sermons, songs, Bible study lessons and prayers to counteract the spread of HIV/AIDS;
- ❖ familiarize themselves with research findings of their nations, NGOs & UNAIDS;
- ❖ 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 and institutions but hardly ever in Christian organizations. The church and its theological institutions have carried out very little research to monitor the understanding of believers about this pandemic, or how many Christians are affected by it.

The call to re-interpret the scriptures in the light of HIV/AIDS and globalization is also a theological call to be prophetic. This is because re-interpretation will, of necessity, challenge the status quo and the accepted interpretations. Re-interpretation will be prophetic because it will challenge leaders, congregants and their institutions, and call them to see social reality from a different view. Consequently, prophecy will be costly and can be deadly, as it 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. Preaching God's kingdom

Scholars of the gospels are agreed that the main theme of the message of Jesus in his earthly ministry was the kingdom of God³⁷. Jesus taught that the kingdom of God is here, and it is coming. Jesus even taught his followers to pray saying, "May your kingdom come, may your will be done on earth as it is in heaven" (Matt. 6:10). The phrase "kingdom of God" is interpreted to mean, the reign or rule of God³⁸. 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"³⁹. Jesus' proclamation of the kingdom was attested by his presence and solidarity with the poor and marginalized (Matt. 5:1-12).

One significant attestation of the kingdom of God, was that Jesus' ministry involved the healing of the sick, casting out demons, feeding the hungry, and cleansing lepers and restoring them back to society (Mark 1:29-45). For example, when John the Baptist heard about the deeds of Jesus, he sent his disciples to inquire if Jesus was the expected Messiah, that is, was he a messenger sent by God to redeem Israel from its oppression. Jesus answered, "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, life and solidarity with the poor.

As Stuart Bate 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"⁴⁰. The mission of the Christian church in the HIV/AIDS and globalization era remains the mission of Jesus; it is the mission to proclaim the kingdom of God on earth. Since the outbreak of HIV/AIDS and the accompanying global economic era, 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 and death intensify. While Jesus came so that people might have life and have it in fullness, HIV/AIDS and globalization have made poverty, suffering and death the daily bread of many communities and families.

5. Reviving our commitment to ecumenism

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. To carry out an effective mission in serving and saving life, churches and countries need to work together and to share their available resources. It is, therefore, gratifying to see that this missiological consultation is organized and sponsored by different ecumenical bodies, and has brought together many other Christian bodies. The need to continue in this spirit of working together in the HIV/AIDS and globalization era cannot be overemphasized. Yet HIV/AIDS calls the church to a wider ecumenism, which includes and embraces interfaith cooperation in the struggle against HIV/AIDS. The church is also called to recognize and to work with secular non-governmental organizations (NGOs), governments and donor agencies; it is called to recognize fully God's diverse creation and the various gifts creation offers in the struggle against HIV/AIDS.

6. Assuming our prophetic role/advocacy

It is now more pressing than ever to proclaim the kingdom of God, the good news, and the fullness of life. 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; and to insist on the redistribution of wealth to and for all. It is now that total healing – economical, physical, social, psychological and as related to issues of gender – needs to become the mission of the church to the world. This will be the practice of a people-centred mission, which, Jesus insists, is central to the mission of his followers, the church. When this is done, Jesus will be manifested to Christian believers and manifested by them as they serve the sick, the hungry, the naked, the foreigners (the socially dislocated) and the imprisoned. The imperative to carry out a life and people-centred mission is a theological challenge that the Christian church should not forget, for Jesus dwells with and is amongst the infected and affected. There, he waits for the love of his followers to be practically displayed by their struggle against the spread of HIV/AIDS, its stigma and its attack on women, children and other marginalized groups. Jesus also waits for his people to take up their prophetic role by breaking the silence that surrounds this disease. To this end:

I would insist that contemporary Christian mission must concern itself with all that desecralizes 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 fulfilment⁴¹.

NOTES

- ¹ UNDP & UNAIDS, *Fact Sheets: Global Crisis*, New York UN Special Session on HIV/AIDS, 25-27 June 2001, p. 1.
- ² Kwok, Pui Lan, "Mission", in Russell, Letty & Clarkson, Shannon, eds, *Dictionary of Feminist Theologies*, Louisville, Westminster Press, 1996, pp. 185-186.
- ³ Okure, Teresa, *To Cast Fire Upon the Earth: Bible and Mission in Today's Multicultural Global Context*, Pietermaritzburg, Cluster Publications, 2000, p. 5.
- ⁴ Amalados, Michael, "Mission", in Fabella, Virginia & Sugirtharajah, R.S., eds, *Dictionary of Third World Theologies*, New York, Orbis Press, 2000, p. 145.
- ⁵ UNDP & UNAIDS, *Fact Sheets: Global Crisis*, op. cit.
- ⁶ De Santa Ana, Julio, ed., *Sustainability and Globalization*, Geneva, WCC Publications, 1998.
- ⁷ Dube, M.W., "Inhabiting God's Garden: Are We in the Global Village or in God's Garden", in *Ministerial Formation 96* (2002), pp. 31-37.
- ⁸ EATWOT-Asian Theological Conference (ATC), "Thou Shall Not Worship Other Gods: Towards a De-colonizing Theology," in *Voices From the Third World, Vol. XXIII No 2*, (2000), pp. 213-231.
- ⁹ Garba, Abdul-Ganiya, & Garba, Kasey P., "Trade Liberalization, Gender Equality and Adjustment Policies in Sub-Saharan Africa", in Yassine Fall, ed., *Africa: Gender Globalization and Resistance*, New York, AAWord, 2000, pp. 24-27.
- ¹⁰ Lind, Christopher, *Something is Wrong Somewhere: Globalization, Community and the Moral Economy of Farm Crisis*, Halifax, Fernwood Publishing, 1995, p. 41.
- ¹¹ Carter, Warren, *Matthew and The Missions: A Sociopolitical and Religious Reading*, New York, Orbis, 2000, p. 496.

- ¹² See WCC, The Ecumenical HIV/AIDS Initiative, Plan of Action, Nairobi, 2001.
- ¹³ Carter, Warren, *Matthew and The Missions*, *op. cit.*, p. 496.
- ¹⁴ Amalados Michael, "Mission", *op. cit.*, 2000, p. 145.
- ¹⁵ Kwok, Pui Lan, "Mission", *op. cit.*, pp. 185-186.
- ¹⁶ Njoroge, Nyambura, "A Spirituality of Resistance and Transformation" in Njoroge, Nyambura & Dube, Musa W., eds, *Talitha Cum: Theologies of African Women*, Natal, Cluster, 2001, pp. 66-83.
- ¹⁷ Nazir-Ali, Michael, *Mission and Dialogue: Proclaiming the Gospel Afresh in Every Age*, London, SPCK, 1995, pp. 26-27.
- ¹⁸ UNDP & UNAIDS, *Fact Sheets: Global Crisis*, *op. cit.*, pp. 21-22.
- ¹⁹ UNICEF, *Botswana's Children Leading the Battle Against HIV/AIDS*, Gaborone, UNICEF Botswana, 2001, p. 21.
- ²⁰ Okure, Teresa, *To Cast Fire Upon the Earth*, *op. cit.*, pp. 2-31.
- ²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 6.
- ²² Dube, M. W., "Preaching to the Converted: Unsettling the Christian Church", in *Ministerial Formation* 93 (2001), pp. 38-50.
- ²³ See Dube Shomanah, "Praying the Lord's Prayer in the Global Economic Era," in *The Ecumenical Review* 49/4 1997, pp. 449-450, where we 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."
- ²⁴ *Ibid.*
- ²⁵ Dube, M. W., "Preaching to the Converted", *op. cit.*, pp. 38-49.
- ²⁶ UNDP & UNAIDS, *Fact Sheets: Global Crisis*, *op. cit.*, pp. 21-22.
- ²⁷ Garba, Abdul-Ganiya, & Garba, Kassey P., "Trade Liberalization, Gender Equality and Adjustment Policies in Sub-Saharan Africa," *op. cit.*, pp. 26-27.
- ²⁸ APRODEV, *HIV/AIDS: Grasping the Reality of Its Gender Dimension*, Brussels, APRODEV, 2001.
- ²⁹ UNDP & UNAIDS, *Fact Sheets: Global Crisis*, *op. cit.*, pp. 21-22.
- ³⁰ Dube, M. W., "Preaching to the Converted", *op. cit.*, p. 45.
- ³¹ See WCC, The Ecumenical HIV/AIDS Initiative, Plan of Action, Nairobi, 2001.
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- ³³ Anderson, Capel J., "Feminist Criticism: The Dancing Daughter", in Anderson, Cale J. & Moore, Stephen, eds, *Mark and Method*, Minneapolis, Fortress Press, 1995, pp. 103-134.
- ³⁴ Schussler Fiorenza, E., *In Memory of Her: A Theological Feminist Reconstruction of Christian Origins*, New York, Crossroad, 1983.
- ³⁵ Dube, M. W., "Preaching to the Converted", *op. cit.*
- ³⁶ WCC, The Ecumenical HIV/AIDS Initiative, Plan of Action, Nairobi, 2001, pp. 13-14.
- ³⁷ Powell, Mark A., *Fortress Introduction to the Gospels*, Minneapolis, Fortress Press, 1998, pp. 50-52.
- ³⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 51.
- ³⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 52.
- ⁴⁰ Bate, Stuart, C., "Response", in *International Review of Mission*, Vol. XC, Nos. 356/357., January/April 2001, p. 42.
- ⁴¹ Dube Shomanah, M.W., "Praying the Lord's Prayer in the Global Economic Era", *op. cit.*, p. 449.

