

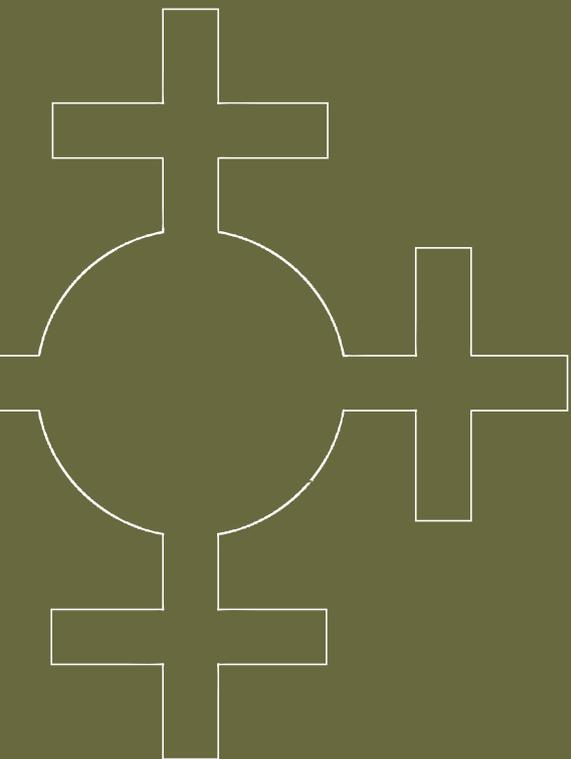


OneBody

VOLUME 2

AIDS and the Worshipping Community





OneBody

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AIDS and the Worshipping Community

One Body Volume 1 consists of a collection of reflections on the challenges, for the Church, of AIDS-related stigma. One Body volume 2 is devoted to resources for prayer, liturgy, worship and bible-study, combined with personal testimonies from people living with HIV and AIDS. Volume 1 is produced in English and Portuguese, volume 2 in English.

EDITOR Elizabeth Knox-Seith, DanChurchAid
PROJECT COORDINATOR Jan Bjarne Sodal, Christian Council, Norway
EDITORIAL COMMITTEE Precious Mwewa, Journalist, Zambia, Rev. Japhet Ndlovu, The Council of Churches in Zambia, Rev. Elias Zacarias Massicame, Christian Council of Mozambique, Jan Bjarne Sodal, The Christian Council Norway, Rev. Birthe Juel Christensen, DanChurchAid, Denmark.
EXTERNAL CONSULANT Gillian Paterson
TRANSLATION Ivan Chetwyn
PHOTOGRAPHER Ulrik Jantzen, Das Büro, Copenhagen
MODELS Beauty Chandra and Preben Bakbo Sloth, HIV+ activists
GRAPHIC DESIGN Kit Halding, DanChurchAid
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COPIES OF BOTH VOLUMES CAN BE ORDERED AT:

Christian Council of Mozambique	Phone: +258-21-322836	E-mail: titosccm@virconn.com
Council of Churches in Zambia	Phone: +260-1-229551	E-mail: info@ccz.org.zm
DanChurchAid	Phone: +45 33 15 28 00	Email: mail@dca.dk
Christian Council of Norway	Phone: +47 23081300	E-mail: nkr@ekumenikk.org



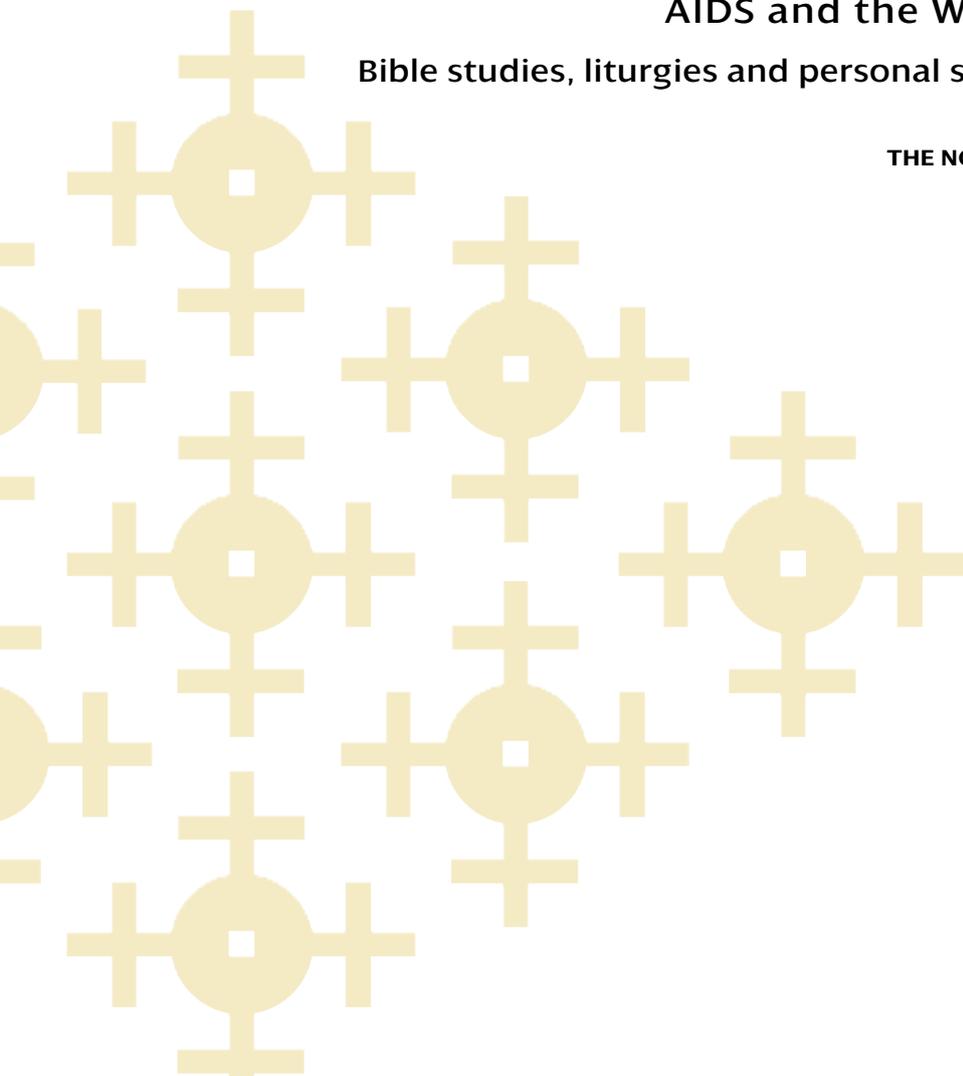
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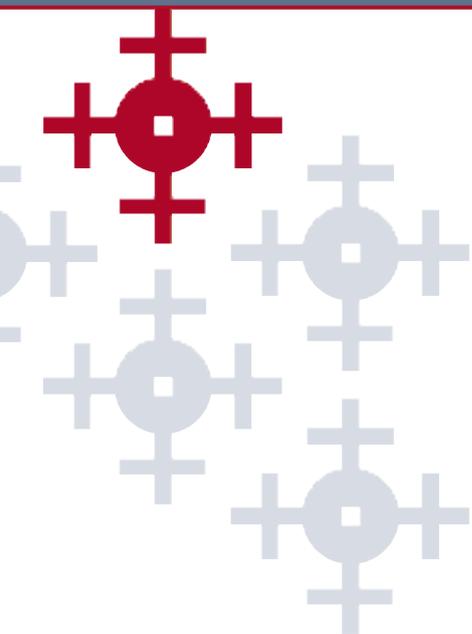
VOLUME 2

AIDS and the Worshipping Community

Bible studies, liturgies and personal stories from South and North

THE NORDIC-FOCCISA CHURCH COOPERATION





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Worship in Diversity

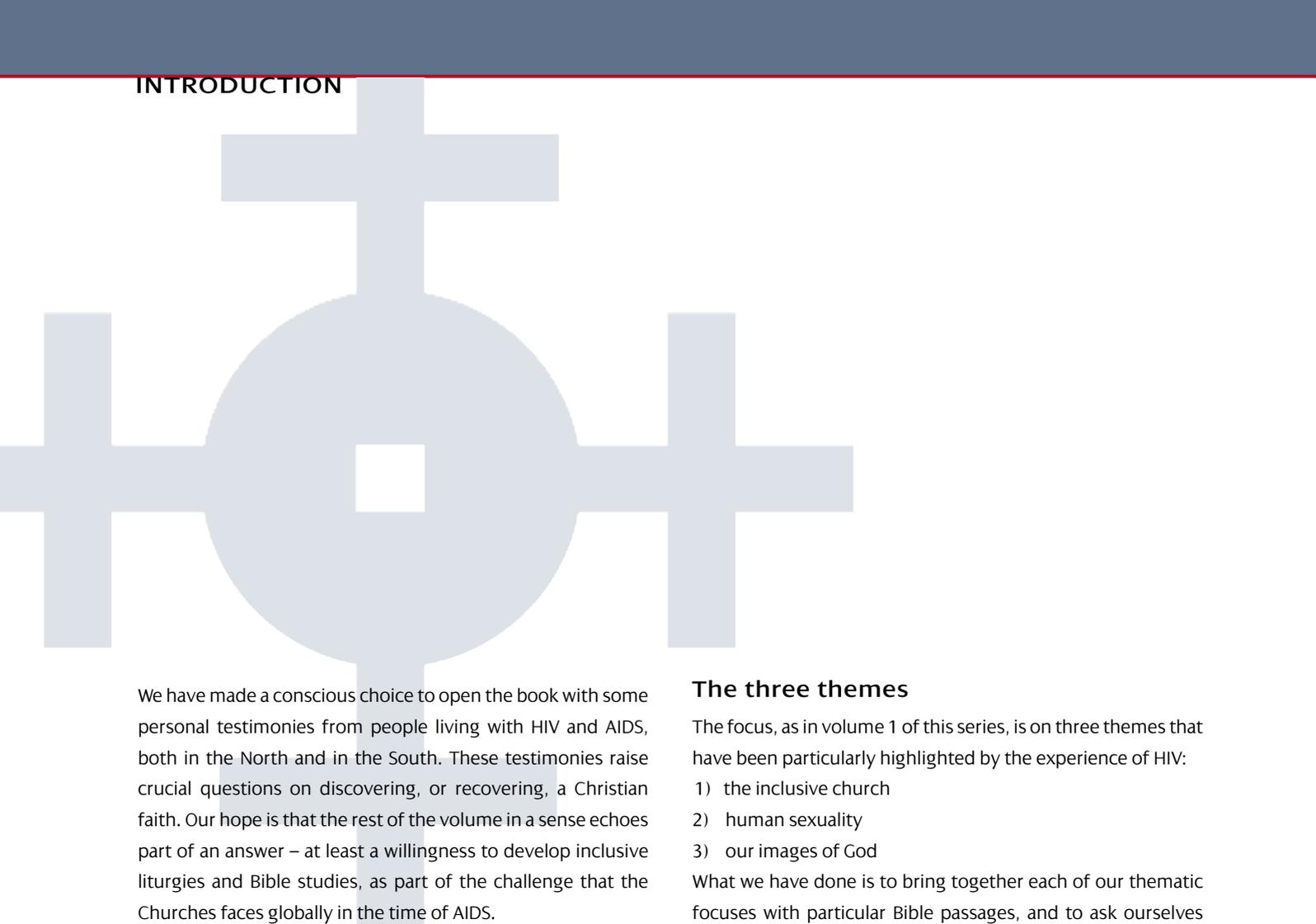
BY JAPHET NDHLOVU, COUNCIL OF CHURCHES IN ZAMBIA, JAN BJARNE SØDAL, CHRISTIAN COUNCIL OF NORWAY, BIRTHE JUEL CHRISTENSEN, DANCHURCH AID, DENMARK AND ELIAS MASSICAME, CHRISTIAN COUNCIL OF MOZAMBIQUE

Throughout history most Christians have considered worship to be the central act expressing Christian identity. Many Christian theologians have defined humanity as **homo adorans**: the being whose nature is to worship. This suggests that the worship of God is at the very core of what it means to be human. It is in our worship – the heartbeat of our lives in community - that we are able to communicate and to bring God into our individual life experiences.

As an integral part of the joint project on theological reflection on HIV and AIDS by Christian councils in Southern Africa and in the Nordic European countries – the Nordic-FOCCISA Church Cooperation – we have been working on liturgies and Bible studies. In the Bible and through Bible studies, and by creating experimental liturgies, we have rediscovered new sources and inspiration. This reflects the urgent need for prac-

tical resources that bring together God's word and our lives, in the context of HIV and AIDS, and in the light of the particular challenges and needs which the epidemic has exposed.

The Church's liturgy is rooted in the experience of particular communities. These communities generally reflect a great variety of experiences and life situations – young and old, rich and poor, healthy and sick, men and women, HIV positive and HIV negative, families and singles, people who are struggling and at peace, those who are joyful and those who are sad. The church's liturgy expresses the worship of the whole community, so worship must be dynamic in that it should touch on all the various challenges facing human beings. Liturgy, therefore, must engage with all the various challenges which humans bring to their worship. It must also be inclusive: so that in talking about or addressing God, we should be conscious of the need to avoid stigmatizing or exclusive attitudes and language. We have tried to observe these principles in our liturgies and Bible studies, and to make them as adaptable as possible.



We have made a conscious choice to open the book with some personal testimonies from people living with HIV and AIDS, both in the North and in the South. These testimonies raise crucial questions on discovering, or recovering, a Christian faith. Our hope is that the rest of the volume in a sense echoes part of an answer – at least a willingness to develop inclusive liturgies and Bible studies, as part of the challenge that the Churches faces globally in the time of AIDS.

Cooperation between South and North

This project was set up by the Christian councils of five Nordic and eleven Southern African countries under the umbrella of the Nordic-FOCCISA Church cooperation. This was taken forward by churches in Zambia, Mozambique, Norway and Denmark, and with the aim of promoting theological reflection on issues raised by the HIV epidemic.

In this volume you will find resources for use, in a time of AIDS, in liturgy, Bible study, worship or other group situations. The material includes personal testimonies, Bible studies, liturgies, poems and reflections. These have been written or prepared by people who are living with HIV or AIDS or are closely associated with them, and who have found that existing resources do not always meet the needs of their groups or churches at this time.

The material is aimed at people in local communities, in the global North as well as the South, who are in charge of teaching, preaching, worship and other congregational work. The need is great, in terms of the provision of Bible study and liturgical material for use in a time of HIV and AIDS. However, our liturgical traditions are very different, and we do not pretend that this collection is broad enough, deep enough or complex enough to address the full range of requirements that exists. Rather, the project reflects the contrasting nature of Christian experience in relation to HIV and AIDS.

The three themes

The focus, as in volume 1 of this series, is on three themes that have been particularly highlighted by the experience of HIV:

- 1) the inclusive church
- 2) human sexuality
- 3) our images of God

What we have done is to bring together each of our thematic focuses with particular Bible passages, and to ask ourselves how a liturgy or a Bible study might look in the light of our reflections - set out in volume 1 - on human sexuality, church, and images of God. The texts, therefore, vary widely according to the particular regional context in which they were created.

We do not suggest that these are the only ways in which particular biblical passages may be used. This will differ radically according to the situation and context of those who are using them. The aim has been that this collection of resources should reflect the unity in diversity to which we are called: the diversity of the one universal body of Christ which we call the Church.

You may use these resources in any way you wish. You are welcome to select, adapt or cut-and-paste in whatever way seems most appropriate in your own tradition and context.

We hope that this material can inspire and generate further reflection, leading to the development of other liturgies and Bible studies on the issues regarding HIV and AIDS. Most of all, it is our hope that the process we have gone through in creating this material, will sow little seeds that might lead to the formation of inclusive fellowships in the Churches, globally, nationally as well as locally.

Wherever we come from, whoever we are, whether we are HIV positive or HIV negative, we need one another in order to become the true selves that God intended us to be – One Body in Christ.



Positive

Afraid...

Afraid for myself

afraid of my illness.

-For when will it happen
when will it happen?

A slow death,

or maybe quick and painless?

People...

those who don't return my love

those who don't give me the security I need

The financial crisis...

where no help is to be found

that makes the pain even worse

They all look at me and shake their heads...

"You're going to die anyway"

"We don't know what the future may bring"

"Have you got life insurance?"

"I daren't love you, what if you die and leave me!"

"What if you infect me?"

I want to do it...

I'll tie a rope round my neck

I'm going to jump

I'll swallow all the pills,

but perhaps tomorrow,

at the road junction

or the jet fighter crashing into my living-room?

No...

I've been warned.

The warning only a few people get.

Does it make me something special?

Something special?

It makes me afraid

- but also glad.

It's taught me to love life

and to appreciate it

instead of just living it.

Now I want to live.

I want to know love.

I want to know security.

Believe in me...

Make me listen...

Listen to my inner voice.

The voice.

It makes me hold my head high

and smile at my fate.

It makes me live intensely

and it tells me

that okay, my life will be shorter than others'

but maybe also better?

I hope...



A testimony from
a long-term survivor

A Jubilee

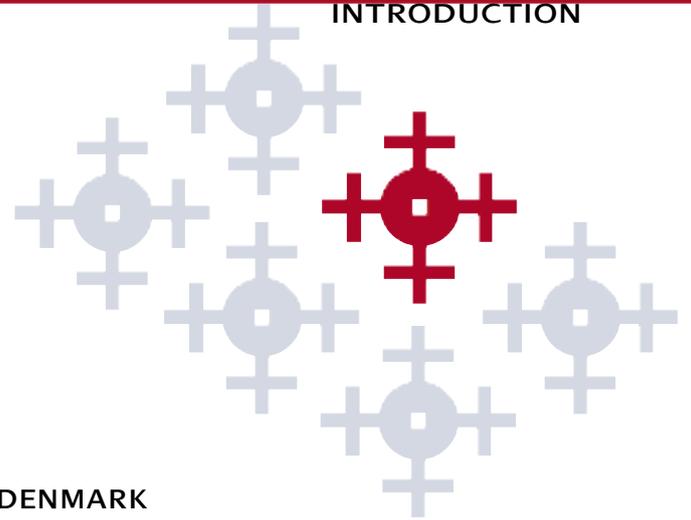
BY PREBEN BAKBO SLOTH

When you are young you are supposed to look forward, make plans, have visions and dream dreams. To focus on suffering and an early death is not what we usually associate with being young. But to test positive on HIV at 24 changes your perspective. In addition, during our first conversation, my doctor told me I had about five years left to live. The future became a threat, planning seemed pointless, visions would be escapism, dreams – just illusions and false hopes.

To be infected by someone who didn't dare to tell the truth, was an overwhelming blow to my confidence in other people. How could I ever again dare to believe in anyone, when my trust had been betrayed so totally that it had even given me a deadly virus? How could I regain confidence in my own judgement? Would I ever again be able to rely on myself to take responsibility for my own life? These questions resulted in very low self-esteem and a feeling of apathy when I let other people down.

At that time some adherents of the right wing of the church were proclaiming at the tops of their voices that HIV and AIDS are God's punishment of a sinful life. Being already paralysed with shock at being condemned to death, it was impossible not to internalise their message, take this judgement of God personally, bear it on my shoulders and try to accept this bizarre divine form of justice. And so it was that I, with HIV's mark of death on me, stricken by the wrath of God, in an existential crisis and pursued by shame and guilt, found it impossible to seek help from anyone. I didn't dare to approach anyone to share my suffering, because I was convinced that everyone would turn their back on me, just as God already had done.

You can't deceive God, but with people you can try. The result was two years alone with my secret. Two years in a psychological, spiritual and emotional hell. Two years with lies, excuses and repression. Two years that took me further and further away from friends and family, into a cold, dark loneliness. I fled



DENMARK

Vision for the Church

from the church that I was a member of at the time, since I faced excommunication.

A new image of God

It was first two years later that I dared to think of seeking help, to risk being open about my HIV-condition, to reflect on whether HIV is God's punishment and to consider my images of God. God spoke to me too, through pictures that told me clearly that I could flee from the churches, but God himself would never let me go. I found a spiritual home in a small congregation in Copenhagen. Here I experienced warmth, understanding, acceptance and caring. I met other people with AIDS, a circumstance that started up a healing process which is still not completed today, fifteen years later. I found out that nothing, not even HIV and AIDS, can separate me from the love of God (Romans 8:38). In this loving and inclusive environment the feelings of guilt and shame quickly faded.

The preaching of the unconditional love of God and the warmth of the fellowship painted a new image of God for me. An image where I could see my own reflection and find strength. Slowly, my confidence in other people and in myself began to grow.

The process towards greater self-esteem and confidence in myself and in others lasted for many years and was helped by patient, loving and understanding persons both within and outside the church, and by the repeated experience of never being abandoned by God.

Life asks for a meaning

Many other questions and problems have left their mark on the past eighteen years. The fear of falling ill, fear of pain, fear of death, the feeling of hopelessness and meaninglessness after losing so many friends and acquaintances already, lack of belief in the future, etc. Sometimes it has been difficult even to hold on to short-time goals, not to mention holding on to a meaning with life in the midst of pain, loss and suffering. It is only in the last four to five years that I have realised that if life

and death have a meaning, then suffering must also have a meaning. Without belief in a meaning, or the willingness to look for a meaning, I would have given up, found everything pointless, and gone to pieces spiritually and emotionally. In fact it is life itself that asks for a meaning, and I must answer. Answer by seeking and finding a meaning – or meanings – in step with the variations in life that time brings. Answer by living.

Fellowship with God in dialogue, prayer and meditation, in seeing my life mirrored in the gospels and the Book of Psalms, fellowship and dialogue in the church and fellowship with others who have HIV have been God's tools in this process of healing.

The church community and fellowship with other Christians have been an invaluable help and support. They have helped to build a bridge from death to life, from fragmentation to wholeness and from self-hate to love.

The Church has AIDS

My first encounter with the church and its message, just after I was infected, was to hear a message of condemnation. But "to condemn is to conceal God's love", as pastor Carina Wøhlk put it once in a sermon on World AIDS Day. Why is it that the church, or at least part of it, is a spokesman for condemnation? I find many examples in the Bible that the main feature of God's attitude towards the weak, the exposed and the excluded is an including, loving and caring embrace. And what you have done to one of the least members of my family, you have done to me – for better or worse.

With Paul's comparison of the church as a body in mind, I sometimes get the impression that some theologians and other exegetes are the teeth, while I am part of the slime that the body wants to get rid of! But when one part of the body has AIDS, the whole body suffers, and therefore the church has AIDS. The church must show compassion in caring, if it is to live up to Paul's metaphor. And if it does not want to do that, then it should call itself something else, because it has then become a spawning ground for frustration, disappointment and suffering.



Homeless

I have grown up with the church, the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Denmark, as my second home. In the same way that I was familiar with my own home, I was familiar with the life of the church, its rituals and language, and I was at home there. But when I discover that in one of my homes I cannot mention the pain and anxiety involved in living with HIV, I suddenly feel that I am not at home in my own home.

Sometimes the pain and anxiety have been so strong that I have been forced to talk about them with someone, and when my trusting confidence and my pain have been greeted with silence and badly concealed disgust, then I feel homeless in my own home. Split up. If I have to pull myself apart just in order to make room for the healthy, well functioning, respectable part of myself to be accepted, then it is less painful to leave home and to remain whole in and with my pain – but homeless.

To hear members of my family and of the church say that they were ashamed of me increased this feeling of homelessness.

When the church rejects people with HIV in this way, they must have a strong faith or a deep religious experience if they are not to turn their back on God. But this ought not be the fruit that the church is known by.

Being a whole person in the house of God

God has created whole persons. Spirit, soul and body. And in the house of God the whole person must therefore be taken into account and cared for. Naturally, this involves pastoral counselling, spiritual direction, intercession etc – but for persons with a stigmatising sickness such as HIV and AIDS, it is not enough just to know that you can go to the church with your spiritual problems.

The church must give explicit and continuous information that people with HIV are welcome. HIV, AIDS, sexuality, stigmatising, etc, must regularly be on the church's agenda – not just in connection with World AIDS Day.

Fortunately I see churches in different parts of the world that live out their vision of the Kingdom of God, both in their own Christian fellowship and in the local community. But with forty million people in the world with HIV this is a crying need. In this situation the church must free itself from conventional thinking and a paralysing, oppressive and exclusive theology and praxis. As an extension of the Old Testament jubilee year - though this may never have been put into practice - the church could proclaim a jubilee year, a jubilee time, a jubilee place.

It could bring about jubilation and liberation from guilt and shame – by showing care and acceptance of people with HIV. The jubilee would involve prayers for forgiveness for many years' delay in doing this. There would be jubilation for a community where everyone is treated equally; where the insight, experience and wisdom of people with HIV is valued and made use of. Jubilation for all the human resources, that are now set free from the anxiety that has previously held them paralysed. Jubilation because we can begin to live a life with quality. Jubilation at seeing the self-esteem of people with HIV growing and their resources being unfolded for everyone's benefit.

The courage

Where can the church find the courage to do all this? I think we must begin by ransacking our feelings – and not just our feelings of love. Also pain, sadness, grief and anger can be dynamic states of mind that can reach out and connect us to other people and society around us. We must investigate the needs of people with HIV, listen to their requests and find ways and means to meet them.

We must pray for courage, pray for confidence in God and in ourselves, for faith that the Spirit of God can equip us to make the jubilee vision come true: a room full of life and liberty and hope, with walls of love, care, respect and trust.

If all the work of the church can begin with an open and trusting heart, as Brother Roger of Taizé has said, then people with HIV will no longer be afraid to approach the church.



Hope

We have a hope of a new heaven and a new earth, where peace dwells, where God's breath infuses life and creates a rainbow of colours and forms.

We have a hope of a new heaven and a new earth, where love dwells, where the life-giving spirit of Christ spreads in people and among people, where all suffering has been suffered, death has been done to death, and the grave is as empty as it was on Easter morning.

We have a hope of a new heaven and a new earth, where joy dwells, where God's Holy Spirit continually renews the fellowship that crosses all human boundaries and the irrepressible hope of a life without limits.

Amen.



The Universal Body

I must confess that I think that the church is often very, very good at taking sides with the establishment that forms public opinion – and by doing so it neglects the role it originally had as an institution and a force for good. The role of the church was to go out to people and show that it was possible to think differently. That there was an alternative way of looking at people, of looking at life.

You're just as much a Christian, have just as much faith, and – I feel myself – are just as legitimate a member of a church, if you are living with HIV as you are if you have cancer or sclerosis or tuberculosis or any other disease. I can understand that some people feel that the church doesn't welcome them – and that makes me sad, because the church then neglects its duty and avoids its original task of being a common meeting-place for the weakest and worst off in society.

If the church is to be an inclusive church, it must include anyone, also those living with HIV – and they can be found in all social groups. Nobody escapes. An inclusive church is able to gather everybody under its wings. That's a fantastic challenge to the church right now, to show how widely it can reach out. Show that it isn't just a meeting-place for the well-established and for theologians. That it's a place where people can come and find the comfort, the strength and the upswing that they need in order to survive mentally, spiritually and physically. This applies not only to those who are sick, but also to those who are near to them.

The AIDS problem is universal. This human need is one that the church must meet, and there can be no doubt that the motivation is there in Jesus' commandments to love. There's enough room for all of us in those words – and we must not judge one another.

TESTIMONY OF JESPER, WHO DIED OF AIDS, DENMARK



Testing and living positively

ZAMBIA

Breaking the Silence and Shame

BY JOY LUBINGA, COORDINATOR FOR CIRCLES OF HOPE

It is not easy to face the fact that sooner or later I will die because I am infected with a disease that has no cure. However one day I had the courage and went for a test and tested HIV positive.

I am a 52 year old widow currently living with HIV. I tested in 2003. I have five children – all girls - aged between 3 and 13 years old, and I am looking after an orphaned niece whose parents died of AIDS.

My husband was diagnosed with tuberculosis in February 1998. Later on he was diagnosed with cryptococcal meningitis and the doctors told me that he had AIDS and would soon die or go mad. This news sent a lot of shivers in me and I cried because I sensed I could be HIV-positive. One day as I was coming home from work I remember my children telling me that their father had not come out of the bedroom. I went in and asked how he was feeling. He just looked away. This was the beginning of a long sickness, He went in and out of hospital for several months until he died on September 5th 1998. After being told that he had TB, he lost hope and only took the TB drug for a very short period. I have the feeling that this is why he died so early.

From then on my life went on normally. I lived with my children, and helped them with the basic needs that they would require for their school. It was not easy. But I managed somehow. The thought of doing a test never crossed my mind as I had no signs of any sickness.

Testing positive

In 2003 something happened to me at my office that disturbed me as I could not accept it. This was the beginning of my constant headaches, loss of appetite and loss of weight. I was not really happy and I lost weight drastically. I looked bad because I had a rash on my legs and pimples on my face. I could not put on

short dresses. Only as my health started to deteriorate I remembered the doctors had told me that my husband had AIDS.

This prompted me to go for an HIV-test.

Testing positive was not really a big surprise. But it was a big blow to me to face the truth that I was now living with HIV. The first thing I thought of was death, and the fact that I might be leaving my children orphaned. This thought is always sad, and the first person I shared this news with was my eldest daughter. We cried together, and she gave me many words of hope and encouragement.

Afterwards I did all the necessary tests. At first my CD 4 count was 314 which was not bad in our Zambian set up. But because of too much worries, the CD4 count went down to 119 within a short period - in just a month or so. I was advised to start the ART treatment. Since this treatment was not cheap I decided to share this very difficult situation with my boss, the General Secretary of the Council of Churches in Zambia. He helped me to get the medicine through a government bond. Indeed I was helped. I was weighing 51 kg when I tested, and I am now about 90 kg. My CD4 count has risen to 470. I see a doctor every month for check up and really look after myself because I know my status.

I have shared my story with many people. It is not that I like to be HIV positive or that I am happy about the situation - but it has felt important to give strength to others who found themselves in a similar situation. I have been stigmatized and rejected in life. But I know that God loves me. I have a purpose in life, and there is a reason why I am still living. I have learnt to encourage others to live positively and accept their status and leave everything to God. He has the final role to play in our lives and really promises to join hands with us in order to break the stigma, silence and shame of HIV and AIDS.



Circles of Hope

is a support-network for people living with or affected by HIV and AIDS. Self-help groups are formed all over Lusaka, and the work is to be extended to other parts of Zambia as well. The groups normally meet in local churches and congregations, but also in private homes. The work is initiated by the Council of Churches in Zambia.

Joy Lubinga is a psycho-social counsellor and Ackim Sakala is a teacher. They are both well known to the Zambian public as they have had the courage to be open about their status. Through many meetings within the ecumenical network of the Churches and through interviews on television and radio as well as in national and local newspapers they encourage others to break the silence and stigma of HIV/AIDS.

The courage to go public

Testimony

BY ACKIM SAKALA, ACTIVIST WITHIN CIRCLES OF HOPE, ZAMBIA

I started suffering in 1998. I had severe abdominal pains and doctors could not find what was causing the pains. I was put on ulcer treatment but I did not have ulcers. Prior to that - in 1995 - I lost a close friend. He died very thin with all the AIDS signs. Later, in 1996 I lost yet another close friend in the same way.

By mid 2003 I also showed the same signs as my late two friends. It was then that I decided to take a step. Between 1998 and 2002 I had lost weight from 70 kg to 41 kg. I had then experienced a lot of malaria bouts, night sweats and rash – just to mention a few symptoms.

Testing

It was around June 2002 when I was in town and saw the New Start Counselling and Testing Centre that something came up in my mind. I decided to go for a test. I went through counselling and testing and tested positive.

As I walked down the stairs after testing I developed a hiccup which lasted for six days - day in and day out. I was diagnosed with tuberculosis and I went on TB treatment from June 2002 to February 2003. I had then gained weight to 65 kg. The first person whom I told about my status after testing was my wife. Later I shared my situation with my sisters and my brothers and a few friends whom I trusted. Since the time I tested I was very sick. My wife concentrated on nursing me, but I know for sure that she was scared to be infected. Six months later she went for an HIV-test. Since then she has been going for a test every third month. Luckily, she has always tested negative.

Living openly as a family

It has not been easy living with the virus. I was born on June 24th. 1961, in a family of nine - four males and five females. After I got married we had five children, three girls and two

boys. The eldest is now 16 and the youngest is 4 years old. The first two years I did not tell my children anything, but when I accessed treatment therapy in 2004 I decided to go public about my status. I was asked to do a profile on the National TV, and just before that I took my two eldest daughters for counselling. This is how my status was disclosed to my children. I know it has not been easy for my daughters who are in high school having a father who is HIV-positive - just as it was not easy for me at my work place and in the community. But I just had to face the stigma and the shame and help break the silence by talking about my status publicly.

Treatment

I started taking the Anti- Retroviral Therapy because I had an attack of TB. Four months later I had an opportunistic infection of Cryptococcal meningitis and had to have a lumbar puncture. Six months later, as I went for a new CD4 count, it was down to 247 but as I went for another count six months later it was 324. I am due for another count soon, and hopefully it will be improved as I am feeling much better than before. After being out of work for one year I am back in my old job as a class teacher and running as a qualified football referee.

My lifestyle today

I now live a holistic life. I believe I am a creation of God and that I am living for the purpose of God. I believe I can help break the silence both in the church and the broader community because of my position as a teacher in society.

I am able to talk about my status in the Church and publicly through the Circles of Hope, the network created by the Council of Churches in Zambia. Through the Circles of Hope I get valuable spiritual support and my personal needs sustained. We all try to break the stigma and shame and give each other the courage to be open about our status in order to help others.

Thoughts, experiences and reflections of
people living with or affected by HIV

NORWAY

Stigma and Humanity

In response to the need to reflect theologically on HIV and AIDS related stigma, the Christian Council of Norway invited HIV positive people living in Oslo to engage in a process of discussion. They were joined by workers from churches, from theological seminaries and from diaconal institutions. The talks took place at Aksept, the Church City Mission Centre in Oslo for all who are affected by HIV and AIDS. These meetings continued over a period of several months, in smaller and larger groups. The following reflections illustrate the flow of the talks we shared in Oslo and are an attempt to share some of the insights that emerged from them. They address the experience of stigma and the need to understand what it is to be human.

The conditions of stigma

In Norway, people who live with HIV experience widespread stigmatization. Although stigmatizing attitudes are rarely expressed in words, they are nevertheless obvious to those who are living with HIV. 'People treat you differently: they avoid you and they talk behind your back,' says one person. 'The message is understood just as clearly as if it were to be shouted from the rooftops.' Even in the health sector, 'at the very place where we expect to find expertise and to be met without prejudice', there are frequent reports of HIV-positive patients being left at the end of the queue for treatment or refused access to surgery. 'It happens,' according to a victim of this kind of discrimination, 'because people's eyes, hearts and consciousness are closed!'

For people living with HIV, the stigmatization experienced in society is often reinforced by self-stigmatization, which in turn can lead to a determination to conceal their status from others. Sometimes this fear of rejection is unfounded, and other people may react unexpectedly warmly and positively to a disclosure of their HIV-status. However, the opposite is frequently true. One mother says she feels unable to tell friends that her son is HIV positive for fear of 'ruining his reputation'. There is a justified fear that children will be stigmatized, or that one will lose the much-needed support of friends and family. Thus 'there are unbelievably many who go into isolation, staying at home and not going out': a state of affairs that can become a self-imposed celibacy, leading to depression and sometimes suicide.

Identity and blame

Identity issues seem to be particularly problematic where HIV is concerned. This is partly because of the element of blame that is attached to it. As one participant put it, 'When I say that I have HIV, I hear a voice that says, "Well, why do you have it?" As opposed to cancer, HIV implies more that this is something you have brought upon yourself.' Faced with these attitudes, living with HIV can lead an individual to internalise the self-image created by others, and then to turn it into a truth about him or herself. Thus the virus becomes the defining truth about one's identity. 'To say that one has HIV is a different thing from saying that one is HIV positive,' says one person. 'Yes,' says someone else: 'that is a really crucial distinction because 'is' relates to one's whole identity; whereas if you say you have the virus, it becomes something separate from yourself, something you have and not something you are. That means it's less connected to identity.' 'Which means,' says another, 'that language is important, including the language we use about ourselves.'

Being excluded

As the conversation developed, it became increasingly clear that the experience of HIV positive people throws a spotlight on our whole view of what it means to be human in our society. 'I won't tell anyone I have HIV because I'm afraid they'll pity me,' said one person; 'they'll relate to me in a completely different way; they'll be careful what they say to me.' 'I feel so small,' said another participant. 'If they could just recognize that I am a real person with potential, and with resources: but all they see is a big virus.' Participants spoke of the wall of incomprehension they often meet when they try to explain that they too are human beings with normal human needs. Many of the participants shared the feeling of being looked down upon and judged.

That is because people are focusing on the virus (which is biological) and giving it a moral (not a biological) meaning. It is not that people with HIV are less sinful than others, but they are not more sinful either. Wickedness and evil do exist in the world, and we are all bearers of both goodness and wickedness. That is what we have in common,' said a participant. 'But the problem is that there is an ideal image that people feel



they must conform to,' said another; 'and to load the burden of evil onto specific individuals is just a way of protecting the "ideal image" we would like to have of ourselves.' 'And then these idealized images and models make it difficult for us to see ourselves and others as we actually are: we create untrue divisions and we lose contact with our own lives, with our own tendency to do both right and wrong.' 'As a result, those wanting to restore morality to society create scapegoats to "carry the sin", as it were; and if that happens then we don't just deny the truth about society, we deny something important about ourselves as individuals.'

The double standard

These artificial divisions create distances between individuals. 'But the problem is,' said a participant, 'that they also create distances within individuals. Thus one avoids relating to oneself and to others as we (or they) actually are. Which results in a double standard: one says one thing, and one does or lives something else. Which is hypocrisy. People see that, and that is why some people leave the church.' 'But "to be human" means learning to be ourselves, not conforming to an ideal image which is artificial anyway. We should not push each other into being like ourselves, and neither should we condemn each other for being different.'

So what does 'being different' mean, then? 'Difference implies a visible departure from some normative image that we have all, in our particular environment, internalised. We subconsciously associate this image with the ideal human being, so we are inclined to make negative judgements about those who do not conform to it. And we distance ourselves from them. But we should not assume that somebody is less than human just because they are different.' There is great variety among us, in the same way that there is variety within each and every one of us.

Fear and denial

Much of our resistance to what is different is the result of fear. 'But everyone is afraid of something,' said one person. 'It's related to survival. We fear the things that threaten our lives. And whatever threatens our lives we try to keep at a distance.' 'But much of this fear is to do with ignorance, and with prejudice,' said another. 'We all have prejudices and hang-ups. But I must acknowledge this fact and do something about it, like correcting my misconceptions, or examining my prejudices.' For the point is that to condemn each other for our difference is a denial of a profound truth about the human condition, which is that we are all different, but in some important way, we are also all the same.'

The Bible itself has often been used to justify discrimination. For example, 'blessed are the poor in spirit' has sometimes been represented as an oppressive message that says to poor or suffering people, 'as long as you suffer or are poor here on earth, then you'll go to heaven when you die.' But the meaning is probably that, because of their experiences, special insights are often given to those who live on the margins, who are sick or excluded or - in this case - living with HIV or AIDS. 'It's as if their eyes have been opened and they have gotten in touch with something important.' 'One is forced to work with oneself, lift up heavy stones in oneself, as it were, and find what is hiding under them.'

Thus the New Testament becomes a prophetic and liberating text, speaking to our weakness and our strength, our sinfulness and goodness, our commonalities and our differences: and insisting that all these are part of what it means to be human.



Some practical suggestions
– experiences from an ongoing group in Oslo

A Safe

The importance of creating a safe place for dialogue is often emphasised. At Aksept in Oslo, The City Mission Center for anyone affected by HIV, a series of talks took place between people who are HIV-positive, and people who are affected by HIV and AIDS in other ways. The idea and inspiration to do this sort of dialogue came from the Contextual Bible Study methodology developed at the Ujimaa Center in Pietermaritzburg, South-Africa. The talks went on for several months, in smaller and larger groups. Based on experience from these talks – both negative and positive – we arrived at some basic considerations and concerns that are necessary in order to make such a sharing possible. The following points are illustrated by examples from our meetings in Oslo.

1. Starting with experiences

In the dialogue we embarked upon, the real life experiences of people who are marginalized and stigmatized had first priority from the very outset. But often, when our background for inviting to such talks is our work in the Church or a theological project, it is easy to set an agenda for the meetings that doesn't meet the genuine experience and felt needs of the participants. In an attempt to avoid this, we arranged the first meeting with just three open-ended phrases: "1. Stigmatisation is sin. 2. Sex is good? 3. The church has AIDS!" Two women with HIV made introductory remarks and were asked to answer the following questions: "What do you think is the church's agenda on HIV?"

And: "What should be the church's agenda on HIV?"

2. Creating a safe space

When we met for the first time, we delayed beginning the meeting, to see if more of those who had signed up would come. Many did not show up. There was uncertainty in the air. What kind of attitudes would we find in the group? Several of the participants had not told anyone that they had HIV. But it was clear when they introduced themselves, who was there because of their work in the church and who was there because HIV was a part of their own life. This was a very uneven starting point, that could be very frightening for some, and it emphasises the importance of creating a safe space.

3. Venue

The venue of a meeting is never neutral. Our discussions were always held at Aksept. This has been important in creating as secure a framework as possible for those who have told of their own experience of living with HIV.

4. Participants

To create greater confidence for sharing personal experiences, the second gathering was a closed meeting, primarily for persons living with HIV. Later we opened the talks to more participants, but also had smaller discussion groups where people could go into more depth about their thoughts and experi-

Creating a Space for Contextual Bible Studies

Many people have had negative experiences of the way in which the Bible has been used. It is almost a closed book for some. But in a safe environment a Bible text can be introduced and found meaningful. Important points in the method we use are:

- **From theme to text**

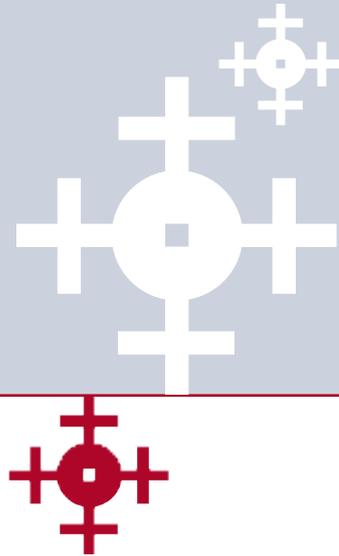
In this kind of bible study we do not just choose any text, but one that we find essential in the process of dealing with our personal experiences or related existential issues.

- **The authority of the text**

The Bible has sometimes been used to oppress or legitimise oppression. Being a religious book, it has considerable authority for many people that sometimes can make people keep quiet about their own lives. Therefore it needs to be introduced and used with care – a care which has its origin in the Gospel itself.

- **A third dialogue partner**

A Bible text can have the function of being a third dialogue partner when sharing. Each of the participants in the discussion has his or her own story and experiences. Reality can sometimes seem hopeless. The Bible's "third" story can often be exactly that "other" story that can shed light on our lives and bring hope, or reveal the hope that is already there.



NORWAY

Place for Dialogue

ences. In Pietermaritzburg they mostly work with organised groups of marginalised people, because these have developed the self-confidence to speak out.

5. Facilitator

The role of the facilitator is important in making the situation safe and open by (a) organising the conversation, (b) making sure that everyone who wants to is given the opportunity to share and (c) assuring the participants that they are allowed to break taboos.

6. Basic rules

Clear rules were made for the talks: you must listen, appreciate and show respect for what is said, and not attack or pull apart what others have said. It may take time for you to realise what is most important and what you really think. This presupposes that you know that what you say will not be subject to destructive criticism.

7. Time

It takes time to develop a safe place. And a stable group that meets several times will always create more confidence than a group where people come and go.

8. An affirming environment

So elementary and so often neglected! But our thoughts, reflections and sharing of experiences need to be confirmed by

others, we simply need to hear that what we are saying is ok or good or even right.

9. Dialogue - active participation

Silence can be a language of power. Once one of the participants in our meetings who works in the church and who had been very quiet was asked by one of the women who had been very open about her own life: "What do YOU think?" The way she said it clearly showed that she wondered whether the silence concealed some kind of criticism.

10. Power structures

In an area such as HIV and AIDS there is a danger of having a hidden agenda. The meetings and discussions can then be unbalanced. The presence of persons with authority in society or in the church can often make other people cautious about what they say. Is it safe to mention things that the church often condemns or to express harsh criticism of the local congregation?

11. Sharing

Gradually, after several meetings, confidence was improved, the distance between us was less and our discussions were on a deeper level. We shared thoughts and questions, incidents in our lives, faith, despair and anger. HIV positive or negative - we were primarily people seeking together something good for our lives and our fellowship.

Methodology for doing contextual Bible study



NORWAY

The Bible as a Sacred Book

Starting point in our lives

The Bible is a sacred book for all Christians. It is important in the lives of individual Christians and for an understanding of society. Many believe that those who have studied the Bible possess some sort of code that unlocks the various texts, and that how they understand the text doesn't matter. We believe that theological insight is important for studying the Bible, but we also believe that our everyday experiences are important for understanding the message contained in the biblical texts. Christians in Latin America and South Africa have opened our eyes to the importance of everyday experiences of ordinary people in reading the Bible. The main principle of contextual Bible study is to actively relate the Bible and daily life to each other, with the conviction that there is a relationship between what the Bible speaks about, and what people experience today.

The method presented here is based on methods used at the Ujamaa center in Pietermaritzburg, South Africa. Bible study groups are arranged there for many different people, including people living with HIV and AIDS. They study the Bible in the light of the experiences of persons who are HIV positive. As a result the Bible texts yield deeper and new insight. We believe their method of Bible study can help us to see more clearly the relevance Bible texts have for HIV and AIDS and stigmatization.

Bible study that involves the individual

As leader of a bible study group, your role is more that of a facilitator than a teacher. The participants are not to be instructed about the meaning of the text. They are to arrive at the meaning of the text for them on the basis of their own situation. Some people think that they know more than others! And there are some who do not believe that their own interpretations have any significance. For example: "You're a pastor, can't you tell us the meaning of this text?" It is impor-

tant that you make clear to all the participants that their experiences are important for understanding the text.

Contextual Bible study is not a method to be followed slavishly. It is more a matter of an attitude towards reading the Bible. As you become familiar and comfortable with this form of Bible reading, you can free yourself from the questions.

Contextual Bible reading can be formulated as four basic attitudes when approaching the biblical text:

1. Read the Bible from the perspective of the readers' own situation and the challenges they face
2. Read the Bible together with others
3. Read the Bible thoroughly and in detail
4. Read the Bible with the thought of making everyday individual and social changes

The four basic attitudes:

1. Read the text on the basis of the readers' own situation

The method we use here is general and may be used with any topics that concern or interest you. We suggest that you begin the discussion with questions that help each person in the group to share experiences that in turn may help you to understand the message of the Bible text. Regarding HIV and AIDS as a topic, there are people who have no idea what it is like to live with HIV. Even though you may not have HIV yourself, we believe you have experiences that you can use.

2. Read the text together

After sharing experiences related to a topic, read the Bible text. It is important that you read it together, aloud. Reading the text together you may understand the text as a group.

You should choose texts that come as close to the topics as possible. You will probably find that the bible does not deal directly with all aspects of a topic you wish to consider. For example, HIV did not exist in Biblical times. But to be stigma-



tized, to be excluded, to ask whose guilt results in sickness are all themes that were familiar.

3. Read the text thoroughly and in detail

After you have read the text together, you can ask questions that will help you enter into the text. Have one of the participants write key words on a flip-over chart and post the completed sheets on a wall. In this way everything that is mentioned will be heard and taken seriously.

First, some general questions:

- What is the text about?
- What themes or topics are dealt with in the text?
- What strikes you most about this text?

Then look at the text more specifically:

- Who are the people in the story?
- What do we learn about the individual in this text?

Spend time on these questions and allow time for some of the things that are mentioned to awaken new ideas in others. You may ask a person to go into more detail about what he or she has said. But you should not say that it is wrong. Each of us sees with the spectacles our lives and our experiences have given us.

Sometimes it may be helpful to have the participants discuss some of the questions in pairs or reflect on them on their own for a few moments before they share their answers with the whole group.

It may also be helpful to look at the relationships between the persons in the text, also from social, political, religious and economical perspectives.

- What is the relationship between the persons you have read about?
- How do they regard each other?
- Do they have a balanced relationship?

When you have become familiar with the "caste of players," you can attempt to imagine what the persons in the text think

about life and about God. If you are looking at one of the gospels, you can also look at how Jesus presents God in the text in question.

- What sort of understanding of God does the individual have?
- What is it that brings hope and light in the text?

After you have worked thoroughly with the Bible text, it is important that you turn to your own life and your own situation.

- Who among us has corresponding or similar experiences to the persons in the text?
- How do we relate to one another in such situations?
- How should we relate to one another?

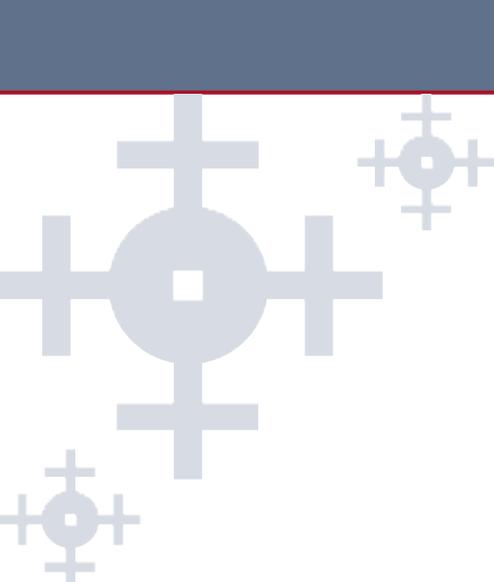
While you talk about present-day situations, you may suddenly find it necessary to return to the text and see what it says. This helps to open a dialogue between the text and our own situation. You may find clarity in your own experience that suddenly helps you to see something new in the text and something new about yourselves.

4. Read the text with the thought of changes

The Bible reading is not finished until you have seen what you can do to bring the dimension of hope in the text to the present day.

- What can we do to prevent injustice today?
- How can we make life better for those who experience injustice?

Sometimes one of the most important changes is simply that themes are brought up and discussed. At other times it may not be clear to you what you can do. But most often you can make small steps to make life better for someone. You can do something to create openness about something that has been very difficult to speak about, work against negative attitudes in the environment, start a project or begin to have contact with people you know are struggling with their lives.



A practical guide

ZAMBIA

Studying the Bible

The following steps can be followed in different forms of Bible study. But three essential points are always necessary:

1. **Spiritual life** – lack of this leads to dry academic discussion.
2. **Use of the intellect** – lack of mental discipline and hard thinking leads to “beautiful thoughts” with no foundation, and also to unbalanced views.
3. **Will** – lack of will to obey makes study unpractical.

1. Read the text carefully

Make a first assessment. Read the passage many times, if possible in different translations. Write down any thoughts that occur to you. Decide what type of writing it is – poetry, prose, history or argument.

2. Detailed study

Try to write in one sentence the main theme of the passage.

3. Dividing the text

Modern translations are in paragraphs. But it may be possible to split up a paragraph.

4. Links

Many passages are a close-knit unity. We must try to discover the links between paragraphs. The words “therefore” and “then” are examples of this: E.g. Romans 6:1, and 8:1

5. Illustrations

We need illustrations to help with abstract ideas, like Christ’s parables and his use of words such as light, salt, etc.

6. Repetition

Every good teacher knows the value of repetition. Note the parallelism in the Psalms: the poetry in the Bible is repetitive; the writer states a truth in one way and then the same truth in another way. E.g. Psalms 42:1-2

7. Character

Sometimes a character is mentioned to illustrate a point. Try to find out more about that person. A contrast may be drawn

between characters, e.g. the Pharisee and the tax collector Luke 18: 9-14

8. Our approach to contemporary issues

If we trust the Bible our approach will be different from that of many others. E.g. we shall not be influenced by convenience. We will take the Bible as relevant to our modern situation. Some issues are clearly dealt with. Other problems are not specifically dealt with – we have to adopt a different method of study for these problems.

9. Finding principles to guide towards answers

As Christians we must model our lives on Christ, so we will find our guidelines for moral issues in the nature of God and in what God has revealed about his intentions for us. The following aspects can form a framework within which we arrive at conclusions about various contemporary problems:

God’s love -Deuteronomy 7: 6-8 Romans 5: 6-11

God’s righteousness -Deuteronomy 32: 4, Romans 3: 21-26

God’s holiness -Matthew 5:48

God is Creator -Genesis 1:2, Psalm 8: 5-8

God is Preserver -Matthew 6: 25-33

God is Redeemer -Ephesians 1:7

God is Judge -Matthew 25:31-46

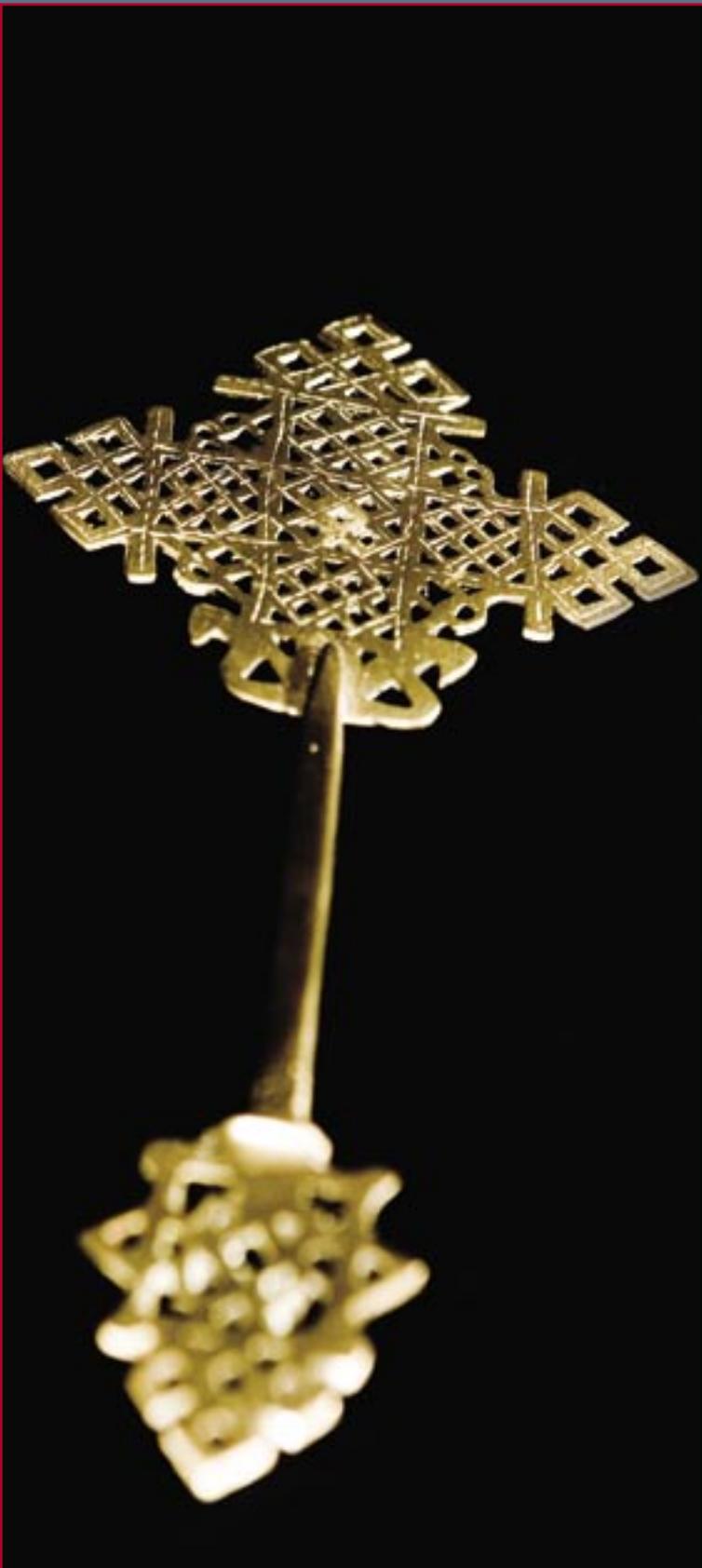
We are stewards of God’s world -Genesis 1: 28-30

We are dependent on one another -Genesis 4: 9-11, Leviticus 19:18

10. How to apply the principles

First collect as much information as possible about the particular problem to be dealt with and then decide what biblical principles apply. Study carefully the sections of Scripture which seem to be relevant. Make allowances for changed circumstances from those of Bible times.

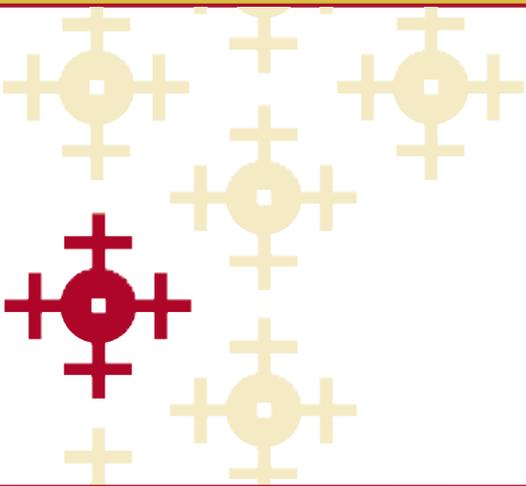
If the principles seem to be contradictory, first check your interpretation. If there is still a conflict decide which principle is higher. Remember to distinguish carefully between your own preconceived ideas and the Bible’s teaching.



One Body

Indeed, the body does not consist of one member but of many. If the foot would say, 'Because I am not a hand, I do not belong to the body,' that would not make it any less a part of the body. And if the ear would say, 'Because I am not an eye, I do not belong to the body,' that would not make it any less a part of the body. If the whole body were an eye, where would the hearing be? If the whole body were hearing, where would the sense of smell be? But as it is, God arranged the members in the body, each one of them, as he chose. If all were a single member, where would the body be? As it is, there are many members, yet one body. The eye cannot say to the hand, 'I have no need of you,' nor again the head to the feet, 'I have no need of you.' On the contrary, the members of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable, and those members of the body that we think less honorable we clothe with greater honor, and our less respectable members are treated with greater respect; whereas our more respectable members do not need this. But God has so arranged the body, giving the greater honor to the inferior member, that there may be no dissension within the body, but the members may have the same care for one another. If one member suffers, all suffer together with it; if one member is honored, all rejoice together with it.

1 CORINTHIANS 12: 14-26



ZAMBIA

Liturgy

A Church of Compassion

In the Reformed Church in Zambia one of the pastors who is an HIV/AIDS coordinator, developed this liturgy and used it with some groups of people living with HIV in Zambia.

L = Leader

A = All

1. Call to Worship

L: Praise the Lord! Praise, O servants of the Lord, praise the name of the Lord! Blessed be the name of the Lord from this time forth and for evermore!

Brothers and sisters in Christ Jesus: we are meeting today before God our loving and compassionate father. Let us therefore with humble hearts worship him in prayer, songs and praise. AMEN.

2. Hymn of praise

3. Opening prayer

A: Dear God, we want to honor and praise your name because of the love and protection that you grant us each day of our lives. Thank you for the continued love and protection that you have granted us today.

Lord we are gathered today to reclaim the lost essence of your church in this world that is in pain because of the HIV and AIDS pandemic.

Lord as a church we have been silent on the issues of HIV and AIDS and in so doing have excluded from your mission and ministry your people who are affected by this disease. We ask for your forgiveness.

Lord we ask you in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ to change our teachings and actions towards our brothers and sisters infected with or affected by HIV. Give us a heart that is not going to judge but to love and care. In Christ's name we pray. AMEN.

4. Song

5. General confession

A: We confess and acknowledge that we have too often contributed to stigmatization and discrimination and that our churches have not always been safe or welcoming places for people living

with or affected by HIV and AIDS. In some cases, Holy Communion has been refused to people living with HIV, funerals have been denied to people who have died of AIDS, and comfort to the bereaved has not been given. We confess that the church has rejected when it should have embraced and judged when it should have shown love, compassion and care. We repent of these sins. We therefore commit ourselves to a faithful and courageous response in breaking the silence, speaking openly and truthfully about human sexuality and HIV and AIDS. AMEN.

6. Proclamation of forgiveness and grace

L: 'This is the covenant that I will make with them after those days, says the Lord: I will put my laws in their hearts, and I will write them on their minds, I will remember their sins and their lawless deeds no more.' Heb 10:16-17.

7. A song of praise and thanksgiving

8. Prayer of opening of the word of the Lord

L: God our father your word is a lamp to our feet, without it we go astray. Open our eyes and ears so that we can be able to see and know the secret that is hidden in your word. Father, teach us through this word. In Christ's name we pray. AMEN.

9. Scripture Reading

1 Corinthians 12:14-26

10. Sermon

- This is a call to the church worldwide to acknowledge the HIV and AIDS epidemic as its own;
- The church should not only admit that HIV is in its midst, but should offer full and open acceptance and loving care to the infected and affected.

11. Prayer after the sermon

12. Closing song

13. The Blessing

A: May God our loving and compassionate father be glorified forever and ever through Jesus Christ our Lord. AMEN.



Bible reflection: Illness, stigmatization

and the role of the Church

MOZAMBIQUE

Embracing the Marginalized

The Old Testament tells us that people who suffered from leprosy and tuberculosis were marginalized and discriminated against by the societies they lived in (Leviticus 13). Society in general has inherited this practice of stigmatizing people suffering from diseases that are considered chronic. But the Lord is the caretaker of all seasons and places because he knows the situation of His people both in suffering and in good health.

For this reason the Church must work with people infected and affected by HIV and AIDS to help them to keep their faith, as it is by faith that mountains are removed, storms can be cooled down and miracles are performed. It is important to remind those suffering that only God can respond to all human situations and by so doing we will help them to recover their spiritual state (Hebrews 10:39). In this reflection faith comes as an important instrument, which is necessary and effective for understanding the challenge of HIV and AIDS. The Bible tells us that Job suffered a lot but his persistence in faith made him overcome evil (Job 1:14-21).

In the scriptures, the Gospel of John 8:1-11 describes an episode between Jesus Christ and a woman who had committed adultery. The fact that Jesus did not allow the woman to be stoned is a clear sign of protection and taking care of a person rejected by the community.

Another example given by Jesus Christ is found in the Gospel of Saint Matthew 8:1-3. This is where Jesus showed love by touching a person with leprosy, who was an outcast according to the Mosaic Law.

By touching the person with leprosy Jesus Christ showed the love He has for everybody without discrimination and broke the tradition of rejection and discrimination of those suffering with leprosy.

Theologically speaking, in this illustration Jesus Christ has shown that a disease is a human weakness and does not represent the will of God.

In his letter to the Romans 3:10, Paul brings out a hard truth for all Christians by stating, 'there is nobody who is just. Nobody'. On the other hand, Isaiah 6:5 also adds, "what of me as I am a man of non-pure lips and I live amidst non-pure people". Therefore the divine action of purifying the lips occurs as a sign of thanks to God. It is due to His grace that we are regarded as pure. We have no right to laugh at others. That is why pointing fingers at people with HIV and AIDS would be unjust regardless of the means or cause of infection.

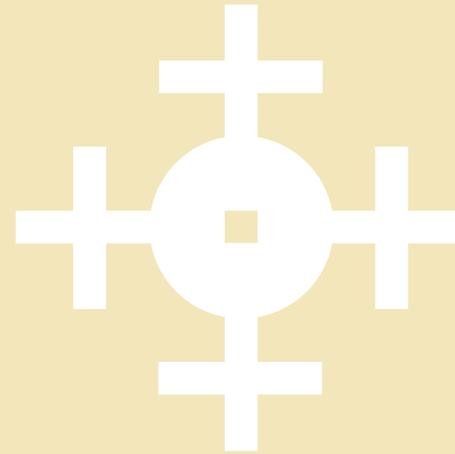
Another example by Jesus Christ is found in the Gospel of Mark 10:46-52. Here the blind Bartimaeus, son of Timaeus, who was rejected by his community in the city of Jericho, upon

hearing that Jesus of Nazareth was passing by, started to cry out: 'Jesus, Son of David have pity on me!' And despite the reaction of the disciples and the crowd of people following Him, Jesus stopped and called Bartimaeus and made him see again.

Today, Bartimaeus represents that brother or sister living with HIV and AIDS. And the Church and its leaders are called upon to open their eyes, think and listen to Bartimaeus' voice, who in today's society is that person living with HIV and AIDS, whose call for action is to the Church and society in general.

Love and compassion characterize Jesus' ministry and He therefore becomes an imperative above all for those who are called by His name of Christ. Therefore, as Christians we are called upon to love and not judge. Jesus Himself gave us the example by the way He showed love and compassion for those who used to suffer in His time. For Jesus, love must be expressed in "love one another as you love yourself" and give compassion "in the deliberate intention of suffering with another".

It is the Church's responsibility to get closer to people living with HIV and AIDS, so that they can find the face of God. The church has the obligation to make people living with HIV and AIDS realize that God loves everybody. That is why He gave His son Jesus Christ, so that those who believe in Him should not perish but have eternal life.



The Ecumenical Café

The Church is called to be a prophetic voice and a healing institution, as part of the journey to fight stigma and discrimination. 'Café Ecuménico' is the name given to a project bringing together people living with or affected by HIV and AIDS, church leadership, the Network of Pastors in Fighting HIV and AIDS and civil society. The main objective is to make the Church an open and secure place for common reflection and dialogue on HIV and AIDS.

Once every month, people are meeting to discuss issues related to the HIV and AIDS pandemic. They meet under the Project of Preventing and Combating HIV and AIDS, in partnership with the Christian Council of Mozambique, the Network of Pastors in Fighting HIV/AIDS at Maputo City and Province, the Association of People Living with HIV and AIDS at Polana Caniço Residential Area and the World Relief.

So far, there are more than 140 lay members of the Association of People Living with HIV and AIDS at Polana Caniço Residential Area and about 30 clergy members of the Pastors Network in Fighting HIV and AIDS. They are playing an important role in creating a network of support. Some of the pastors come from churches that are not members of the Christian Council of Mozambique, which brings another input to 'Café Ecuménico'.

Pastoral counselling and congregational work

among people living with HIV and AIDS

DENMARK

Creating a new community of trust

BY CARINA WÖHLK

During the past few years a congregation for people who are living with or affected by HIV and AIDS has been established in the Church of the Holy Spirit in Copenhagen, where the HIV and AIDS chaplaincy is based. The actual founding of the congregation happened in connection with the first retreat for people with HIV in 1999. The congregation has grown steadily and quietly – side by side with a traditional worshipping congregation and another special congregation exploring worship at night.

The initiative for the HIV congregation came from people with HIV themselves. They said that they needed worship and fellowship in a Christian environment. Their explicit request for Christian fellowship is understandable when I think of the loneliness I so often see in connection with this serious and tabooed illness. In my pastoral counselling I have generally speaking encountered two sets of problems in connection with loneliness: voluntary and involuntary.

Voluntary loneliness occurs with people with HIV who, because of many social tragedies and traumas connected with their illness, have chosen to isolate themselves from social contact. They seek out an emotionally remote life without relationships in order to avoid more losses.

Involuntary loneliness is a problem for people with HIV who have been rejected and excluded from communities because of their HIV status. They have been shoved out into isolation and do not dare to seek social contact for fear of being condemned and cast out.

Overcoming loneliness

In Romans 14:7-8 Paul writes: "We do not live to ourselves and

we do not die to ourselves. If we live, we live to the Lord, and if we die, we die to the Lord; so then, whether we live or whether we die, we are the Lord's."

These words can speak directly to the existential loneliness that many people with HIV experience – as a reminder from the gospel that we are never abandoned, even though it sometimes feels that way.

As I see it, the church has a considerable contribution to make in overcoming loneliness. In the Christian universe, all human beings are created in the image of God and are of equal value. We are living limbs on the same body. This train of thought means that we are connected to and belong together with our fellow human beings. We need one another, so that life can function. But in fact there is a tendency, even in the church, to regard some people as more equal than others – and this is a threat to our fellowship.

A year ago, after my first trip to Zambia and my first encounter with the extent and human cost of the epidemic, I held a lecture for the traditional church-goers in the Church of the Holy Spirit. In the course of the lecture, I used the phrase, "the church has AIDS" in order to stir up Christian solidarity and a sense of responsibility. The phrase caused great offence. The hearers heard only one thing: that the church is sick, and that sickness is associated with sex.

But my point was – and is – precisely that HIV and AIDS concern us all. The AIDS epidemic is a challenge to all of us. As Christians we must be concerned about the suffering that our brothers and sisters in Christ must endure. We must show compassion and take upon ourselves our share of responsibility, if we are to stop the catastrophe.

Only if we work together, can we get rid of the disease and



the prejudices surrounding it. The Christian Church has the resources to open up for a fellowship that can embrace everybody. And in that fellowship we can give one another the possibility to unfold, just as we are.

Forming a congregational network

The HIV congregation in the Church of the Holy Spirit is an example of the formation of a social and spiritual network for people who are deeply affected by HIV and AIDS. To begin with, the congregation was very frail and inward-looking. Services were at first only for people with HIV, because the worshippers had a great need for anonymity and seclusion. There was a tendency to segregation, but the reason was anxiety for – and in some cases concrete experiences of – improper condemnation by fellow Christians.

In the course of time, the church-goers with HIV have become more trusting and open. They have begun to feel at home

and are developing more and more familiarity and trust in relation to the staff and the rest of the congregation in the church.

Today worship is for all who are affected by HIV and AIDS, not only for those who are infected. This means that those who are infected, their families and friends, the bereaved, those who are employed in HIV work and others who are concerned about the issue are welcome. The HIV congregation has not yet come to the point where it will ring the church bells and fling the doors wide, but the tendency is towards full integration.

Four times a year, in January, April, July and October, HIV worship takes the form of Holy Communion followed by a meal together. It is significant that these gatherings attract many participants – usually more than 20. They offer two forms of fellowship – at the Lord's table and at the dinner table.

The worshippers have the opportunity to relate – both to other people and to God. Christianity's most important symbol, the cross, shows us the importance of reaching out towards life – both horizontally and vertically.

Human beings need a firm foundation and close associations. This applies not least to those with HIV, who experience so many losses and broken relationships, so much abandonment, yes, perhaps even the feeling of being abandoned by God.

It is my hope that, with time, there will be a greater willingness everywhere to embrace those who are living with HIV and AIDS. We need a Christian fellowship that is not closed in on itself.

NORWAY

Liturgy

Being One Body

In talks in Oslo, Norway, involving people living with or affected by HIV, one of the important issues was that 'we are all bearers of both goodness and wickedness.' We create untrue divisions and do not speak the truth about ourselves if we load the burden of evil onto specific individuals. In spite of being extremely different as individuals we are all part of the same body. These are some of the thoughts behind this liturgy. The introductory words and the complaints are quotations from the talks. It is good to let different people read the different readings.

L = Leader

R = Reader

A = All

1. Introduction

L: What you do to another, you do to yourself and to all of us. In the deepest sense, we are one person, a universal body. When we destroy another person, we also destroy something within ourselves, and as a consequence, something in humanity. But this does not mean that we humans are all alike. There is great diversity among us, in the same way that diversity exists within each and every one of us.

2. Song

3. Complaint

Two readers from the rear of the sanctuary:

A: How long, O Lord? Will you forget me forever?

R1: It is as though people avoid me, talk behind my back, they treat me like I'm different. They think of me as being a loser, I'm excluded.

R2: I don't dare tell anyone that I'm HIV positive, because I don't know how others will react.

R1: I'm so sick and tired of all the questions! It's a human need

to have intimacy; I have needs too, the desire to have children, the desire to have a husband.

R2: Some people see only the virus, they don't see me!

R1: I'm so afraid of being rejected or disappointed. I don't dare to fall in love.

R2: Why does it seem like God is angry when I do my best?

R1: I have searched for a God who loves me, who doesn't judge and who can help me to accept HIV and to be free from condemnation. I didn't find him in the church. It has been a lonesome search.

A: How long, O Lord? Will you forget me forever?

4. Affirmation of participation in what is constructive

Read from one side of the sanctuary:

R: We affirm that we are a part of all that God has created and he saw that it was "very good," that we all have a part in the good and bear within ourselves a basic goodness.

We affirm that our whole being, also our physical body, our longings and desires are all a part of God's image within us.

We affirm that we all have value, and that we have value because we are God's creation, because we live and exist.

5. Silence or song

6. Acknowledgement of participation in what is destructive

Read from the other side of the sanctuary:

R: We acknowledge our part in creating divisions and excluding some people while including others.

We acknowledge our prejudices, that we are afraid of what is unfamiliar and that we have contributed to people's feelings of being isolated, silenced and discriminated against.



We acknowledge that we are often more concerned about a person's status and their being different than we are about their inner resources, their potential and our common humanity.

We acknowledge that we often identify certain people or groups of people as being evil, and that we do not see that we are all a part of what is evil as well as what is good.

We acknowledge injustice in that the strongest, the healthiest and the wealthiest among us are often given priority, receive the best treatment and in that way receive even more.

Look upon us in mercy, forgive us, cleanse us and make us whole.

7. Silence or song

8. Affirmation of our common humanity

Read from the centre aisle of the sanctuary:

R: We affirm our part in being hurt and injured, naked and exposed.

We affirm one common humanity, where no-one stands above or below others, no-one is better or worse than others.

We affirm that we are part of a diversity, of varieties and variations which are all part of one and the same humanity; that we are members of one and the same body, in one and the same church - where the last are the first and where power belongs to the lowest.

9. Affirmation of God's love

L: You are loved, far more than you know – loved, forgiven and redeemed.

And this love sustains your life. Your deepest identity IS love.

10. Scripture reading

Luke 13:10-17

11. Confession of faith

A: We believe in a God who IS love; who created us in love; who suffers when we suffer, and who is actively at work in the world for good.

We believe in a God who does not send disease or other suffering as punishment for sin.

We believe in Jesus Christ, who took upon himself our flesh and blood; who reveals to us what God is like; who put people above laws and regulations; who cleanses us and sets us free to follow the way of love.

We believe that Jesus Christ cannot be owned or controlled by anyone, nor can he be limited by laws and rules.

We believe in the Holy Spirit, the breath of life; the power who transforms our bodies into a place where heaven and earth can meet.

We believe in a Spirit who does not remove us from our bodies or from earthly life and who does not make some people better believers than others.

We believe that we constitute the church, and that together we are a colourful fellowship; in this church no one is by definition placed outside; in this church people find help to accept and love themselves and their neighbour.

We believe in a church that does not stigmatize, discriminate, exclude or condemn anyone.

We believe, God. Help our unbelief.

12. Meditation on the text

Here are some guidelines:

In Luke 13:10-17 we come face to face with a God who opposes the authorities and loosens the chains of people who are bound. He is a God who is not only active during business hours from 9 to 5, i.e. within a certain framework, but is a force that will not be confined or limited. God himself breaks



the rules of Scripture because people and compassion are more important than laws. The intention of the law is more important than obedience to individual laws. God's nature is love, and the purpose behind his words and actions is to loosen bonds, to lift up the downtrodden, and to make people free; God heals and saves.

This episode and other central stories about Jesus can help remove notions of God characterized by aggression, revenge and punishment, and instead point to the very core of the gospel - God's love for each and every one of us.

Christianity and the gospel have potential that at times appears to be totally untapped. They can be fantastic tools for our lives; they can set us free and cleanse us from everything in ourselves and our surroundings that suppresses the individual. They do away with a fragmented view of humanity, which creates guilt and shame and which holds people down. They emphasize the importance of having love for oneself and for one's neighbour.

13. Intercessory prayer

- God of every human being, give us the strength and courage to recognize and resist every form of stigmatization, exclusion and discrimination. Help us to fight against prejudice, and give us the ability to recognize your presence in every person. In our hearts we lay before you those whom we know personally who experience what it is like to be excluded.
- God of love, reveal yourself to us and help us to witness to you in truth. Free us from the temptation to misuse you in order to take advantage of other people, or to be served rather than to serve. Help us to share the love you bring to

us and to strive to replace destructive conceptions of you.

- God, the source of all life and vitality, help us to look after our bodies, our lives and each other. Give us courage and strength to oppose disparagement, discrimination and the violation of women, and to put an end to the violence that occurs both within and outside marriage. Help us always to care for people who are less fortunate than ourselves, and to speak about HIV in language characterized by respect, love, forgiveness and intimacy.
- Triune God, make our congregations places for inclusive fellowship and diversity, where our variety of experiences may find recognition and the value of each individual find affirmation. Help us to be what we deep down already are: members of one and the same body. Enable us to see the individual ahead of laws, viruses or sickness. We pray for a church that can make life beautiful and possible for us all, that can be a channel for your healing powers in the world.

14. Benediction and dismissal

L: The Lord bless you and keep you;

The Lord make his face shine upon you and be gracious to you;

The Lord lift up his countenance upon you and give you his peace.

Go in peace:

in pride and in joy;

in the knowledge that you are loved;

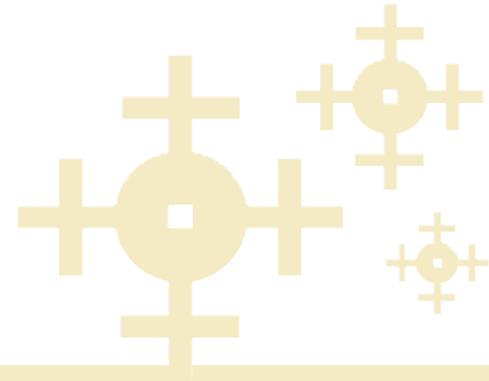
in the knowledge that you always and in all places are part of the body of Christ.

Go in peace and serve the Lord of Life.

A community was planning to condemn a woman who had been caught in the act of having sex outside marriage; the man who was with her was not to be condemned. They brought the woman to a teacher who was in town at the time. The teacher didn't oppose their plan. He simply said that whoever was without sin should be the one to throw the first stone.

One by one, beginning with the oldest, they went away. So an attempt to divide and exclude was averted, not by a miracle, but by the revelation of the common ground that we all share. In this way we are all one body.

SEE JOHN 8:2-11



NORWAY

Bible study on stigmatization. John 8:2-11.

The Woman Who Was to be Stoned

While reflecting on the inclusiveness of the Church it also becomes important to look at and examine the key reasons why stigmatization and discrimination takes place in our communities and what it feels like to be the one who is stigmatized. This Bible study, and also the story of Zacchaeus in Luke 19:2-10, can help us to do this.

1. Read the text in the light of your own situation and challenges you face

- Can you tell about a time when you were treated unjustly?
- Or about a time when you got the blame for something you hadn't done?
- What did you want to happen when you experienced injustice?

2. Read the text together

Read the story of the woman who was to be stoned, John 8:1-11, together.

This can be a very powerful text, especially for persons who have been bullied. Strong emotions may be evoked as you work with the text.

3. Read the text thoroughly and in detail

Write key words on a flip-over chart. Ask general questions about the text first.

- What is the text about?
- What strikes you about this text?
- How can this text relate to being treated unjustly?

Then look more specifically at the text:

- Who do we meet in the story?
- What do we learn about the persons in the text?

It may also be helpful to look at the relationships between the persons in the text, also from social, political, religious and economic perspectives. For example:

- How do you think the scribes treated the woman?
- Why do you think the scribes brought the woman to Jesus?
- Where do you think the scribes caught the woman in the act of committing adultery?
- Why do you think we hear nothing about the man she was said to have been with?
- Why do you think there is no commandment saying that men should be stoned?
- What does Jesus do when he meets the woman and the scribes?
- Why do the scribes leave without stoning the woman?
- What does Jesus reveal about God?

After you have worked closely with the Bible text, it is important that you look at your own lives and situations.

- Can you see yourself in the text?
- With whom do you identify?
- Have you had similar experiences?
- Who do you think has similar experiences today?

4. Read the text with the thought of making changes

A contextual Bible study is not finished until you have seen what you can do to bring the dimension of hope in the text to our present day.

- What can we do to prevent people, especially women, from being exposed to this type of injustice today?
- How can we make life better for those who experience injustice?

DENMARK

Retreats of Hope

BY CARINA WØHLK

A retreat can be defined as a strategic withdrawal. The word is a military term that does not necessarily imply defeat. It can simply indicate a need to pause and think through the particular situation that has arisen.

Holding retreats is a long tradition within the church. A retreat in the church's meaning of the word is a time and place for quietness and meditation. A retreat is an opportunity to withdraw in order to rest and gather strength.

Jesus Christ himself offers us the possibility of retreat. In Mark 6:31 Jesus says to his disciples, "Come away to a deserted place all by yourselves and rest a while". Jesus himself seeks clarification and reflection – just think of the Garden of Gethsemane. In recent years there has been a renewed interest in retreats and in the energy and perspective that they can give to people in the modern world. A retreat can be a direct protest against the noise pollution and stress level that we experience today. Or it can be defined positively as a search for a spiritual breathing space.

Since 1999 I have co-operated with a colleague from the National Lutheran AIDS-Association in holding retreats for persons affected by HIV and AIDS – that is to say those who are infected and relatives and friends of those who are living with HIV or have died of AIDS. The retreats are held at a retreat centre in pleasant surroundings.

One of the main challenges in connection with the retreats has been to find the right relationship between conversation and quietness. The first retreat was held in silent fellowship, and we only used our voices when we sang and prayed. For several of the participants this caused considerable anxiety.

One of the participants put it like this: he felt that a mental lid was lifted, and he didn't know how to cope with the chaotic feelings and thoughts that flooded over him.

Silence

It became clear for me that many people with HIV associate silence with death. People who live in isolation and loneliness because of their HIV-condition need to talk, not to be quiet. It

Providing love and care in a
spiritually nourishing environment

is very important to share experiences and meet with others who have the virus. By seeing their own situation reflected in others', people with HIV can learn new strategies for combating the sickness.

In recent years we have organised the balance between conversation and quietness in a special way. We have made sure that we can make use of two common rooms. One is for conversation, and the other is for those who need quietness and who want to concentrate on their inner needs. In addition, all participants have single rooms that they can retire to in order to find peace and quiet.

We impress on the participants, that they are to be quiet in the period from the evening devotions to breakfast the next morning. On the final day – before our closing service – we eat breakfast in silence. Instead of talking, we communicate with smiles, hugs and caresses.

The rhythm of the retreat

The themes of the retreats in recent years have been "Light in the darkness", "Courage to Live", "Anxiety", "Nearness", "Joy in Life", "Guilt and Forgiveness" and "Thy will be done!". After each year's retreat an evaluation form is sent out, and we encourage the participants to suggest themes for the next year's retreat. In this way the consumers themselves influence the form and content of the retreats.

A retreat has a special rhythm. It is held at a weekend, from Friday afternoon to midday Monday. Two Bible passages related to the theme for the year are chosen. These passages are expounded, one on Saturday and the other on Sunday.

The retreat is rounded off on Monday with a thematic service with Holy Communion. This retreat service gathers up the thoughts and feelings that concentration and conversation on the year's theme have raised.

The Communion and the liturgical use of the Peace in the service reinforce the retreat's function of creating fellowship. The participants can go their different ways knowing that they are not left to their own devices. God is with them – and there are others who share their experiences spread around the country.



The two whole days that we spend on the retreat have three periods of worship as their framework: Morning prayer, meditation on a mosaic of texts in the afternoon and a reading in the evening. These three devotions are the only fixed items on the programme for each day. Being together on the retreat is in itself intensive. It is important that the programme is not too hectic. We have to consider the participants' need for rest and for meals and medicine. In addition there must be time for spontaneous conversations and walks.

Inspirational fellowship

Each year between 20 and 30 persons take part in the retreat – homosexuals and heterosexuals with HIV, family, friends and those who have lost loved ones through AIDS. In short, the retreats are an opportunity for down-to-earth and inspirational fellowship for those with HIV and their families. Many evaluation forms through the years testify to the importance of the retreats, both spiritually and socially.

Perhaps the most thought-provoking consequence is that these retreats have strengthened the formation of worshipping communities for people who are living with or affected by HIV and AIDS. After the first retreat, the idea was conceived of holding regular services for the participants. Over the years this community has been consolidated, and consists now of over 30 persons.

The recurring interest year after year for the retreats and the growing worshipping community of persons affected by HIV and AIDS emphasises how important it is for the church to offer a warm and inclusive fellowship to this group of people. The Christian church must reach out to those who are weak – in order to draw them into the sphere of love.

The Quiet Song

I have never thought that faith is about what you do in church. Faith is something that is a part of your life, your everyday life. Nor have I ever thought that you can settle your account with God just by saying your prayers before you go to bed or saying grace before you eat. Prayer is the best opportunity we have for close contact with God, and it can be used in all situations and at all times of day – and night. I think that it's lovely to pray together in church – for example to say the Lord's Prayer or the Creed out loud together – but I think that it's just as important to have a completely private relationship to God.

I feel sad when I see people who chatter away at the tops of their voices about making intercessions here and there or let's sit down and fold our hands and ooh, how strong our faith is and what good Christians we are. It's just as important to remember to keep it up all the time, in whatever condition you're in, in your whole life.

I don't mean to say that intercession isn't valuable, or that there isn't a lot of strength to be found in knowing that someone is praying for you and that you are in people's thoughts in a loving way. I have experienced many positive fruits of that – but for the sake of your own relationship to God, it's important that you don't convince yourself that this is something you can only do when you kneel at the bedside before you turn the light out.

It's an opportunity we have all the time, and that's something that I find very valuable and relevant when I sing. I think that it's through singing that I've had my closest, most intense contact with God. I've almost felt that singing has been my way of praying – my way of confessing my faith. Some people call it a testimony, and they are welcome to do so. Faith has nothing to do with reasoning for and against. Faith is really a very simple and quiet thing, and it lies there like a thread through all my life, quite naively.

TESTIMONY OF JESPER, WHO DIED OF AIDS, DENMARK



I would give up an arm or leg to have a new Circle of Hope group. I could share with these people my deepest secrets and still be loved. When I first became sick it was the group that gave me the strength to keep going. In the group we talked about life and we also got a guest to come in and teach us nutrition, legal aspects, alternative medicine and many other programs. When I heard the facilitator share her story of how she discovered that she was HIV-positive, I identified with her. It gave me strength to realise that I was not alone. It saved my life. So I know how important it could be for others.

A MEMBER OF THE GARDEN TOWNSHIP CIRCLE OF HOPE GROUP

Bible study on human sexuality, stigma and HIV

ZAMBIA

Patriarchy, Gender and Jesus

Introduction

Simply put, sex is the physical, biological difference between women and men. It refers to the fact that we are born female or male. On the other hand, sexuality has to do with sexual feelings, behaviour and relations. It is the inter-relationship between potential or actual sexual partners. But in many societies, the notion of sexuality as synonymous with sin is deeply entrenched in cultural norms.

Biblical perspective

- The woman caught in adultery

In the story we see how sexual sin is entrenched in the Hebrew culture and tradition. The Pharisees were the keepers of the Law of Moses, the Torah. They brought a woman caught in adultery to test Jesus. His answer to their question challenged the accusers. Jesus said, let anyone among you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone at her. He protected the woman. The accusers left one by one in submission. Jesus asked the woman not to sin again and she was forgiven.

- What is our reaction to those accused today?
- Are we challenged in the same way today?
- Do we forgive or do we still carry the same attitudes?

Reflections

- We may want to know why the man involved in the act was not threatened.

- What in our own view is sin?
- Are women regarded as more responsible for sexual sin than men?
- Do we regard human sexuality as a cultural norm determined by tradition?
- Is sexuality a gift from God or a curse from Satan?
- What is the value of sexuality to both men and women?

Conclusion

The story in John 8:3-11 announces the status quo: "Moses commanded us to stone such women". Patriarchal and stereotypical attitudes are still rife in our church today. Sexual sin is stigmatized as the SIN. Jesus challenged the Hebrew men in the answer given. Jesus knew their motive of discrimination of women.

We can hear Jesus saying:

- Sexuality is a gift from God – Gen 1:27-28
- It commands respect
- It demands full responsibility of both sexes
- It requires forgiveness of each other
- Above all it requires loving each other. Eph. 5: 25-32, Col. 3:12-14

The social norms and values are centred on stereotypical attitudes that in turn promote images of men as forceful and powerful, while women or girls are portrayed as "powerless victims". It lies within the responsibilities of the Church to eliminate this social injustice and gender discrimination.



Sexuality

ZAMBIA

- Gift and Responsibility

Liturgy on human sexuality

This liturgy was developed and used at the Busokololo Circles of Hope group in Lusaka in Zambia. Circles of Hope are support groups for persons living with HIV and AIDS.

L = Leader

R = Reader

1. Procession while a hymn or song is sung.

2. Greetings and welcoming remarks

L: Dear brothers and sisters, we are gathered here today to celebrate the beauty of Gods' creation, and this is the beauty of our sexuality. "So God created humankind in his image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created themThen God saw everything that he had made, and indeed, it was very good." Let us therefore, with prayer and praise, thought and deed, worship the everlasting God. Amen.

3. Opening reading

1 Corinthians 7: 3-12

4. Hymn of praise

5. Opening prayer

L: Holy and loving God,
From whose expert hand we proceed,
We thank you for the gift of sexuality,
We praise you for your mighty works.
Guide us that we may appreciate our bodies,
That we may express our sexuality in a responsible way.
Lead us to accept that we are temples of the Holy Spirit.
Forgive us when we minimize your creation.
Teach us to avoid abusing the power of sexual attraction.
Give us courage to denounce all systems that commercialize

human bodies.

By your spirit, enable us to cherish our sexuality
Through Jesus Christ we pray. Amen.

L: Let us reflect for a while and bring to mind all the wrongs we have done in the area of our sexuality

6. Prayer of Confession

L: In our roles and responsibilities as individuals - fathers, mothers, spiritual advisors, youth leaders etcetera - we have not thought of or done all that we are supposed to do in explaining the beauty and mystery of sex, sexuality and healthy relationships. We have mostly dwelt on the negative aspects of sex and hence demonized sexuality. Lord we pray for your forgiveness.

7. Song

8. Bible reading

Genesis 1:27-28, 2:24

9. Sermon Guide

a. Introduction

With millions of people living with, or personally affected by HIV and AIDS, the pandemic constitutes one of the most critical problems for our time. Religious institutions in general and churches in particular have very important roles to play in fighting the spread of the disease from one person to another. God created human beings with powerful sexual feelings, which human beings can use or misuse. These powerful feelings can be lived with and dealt with in a responsible way. One role of the church is to talk about values and responsibility and to help to minimize vulnerability through education. Christianity has stigmatized sex as a sin above all other sins and yet biblical faith understands sin relationally.



When celebrating our sexuality, we are

- acknowledging that God made human beings - male and female - in God's image, and in so doing gave us a gift that is to be valued, enjoyed and cherished.
- accepting sexuality as an integral part of our identity which enriches partnership between persons and brings pleasure.
- being reminded that along with its potential for bringing the richness of intimacy and joy to human relationship, sexuality makes people vulnerable to each other and to social forces.

b. Lessons learnt

- The creation of humankind as man and woman was not accidental;
- Sexual unions in marriage were intended by God to offer psychological, physical, emotional and social satisfaction and spiritual lessons, apart from procreation;
- If the Christian family cannot give answers to teenagers, the family will lose them to someone who can. If the church is silent, the church will lose them as well.

10. Prayers

- Ask that God may give us wisdom to teach about what is right and what is safe concerning sex, sexual acts and relationships in the light of HIV and AIDS
- Pray for abused women and children
- Give thanks for God's guidance, protection and will that we may live productive and fruitful lives.

11. Offering while a hymn or song is sung

12. Prayer for the offering

13. Benediction

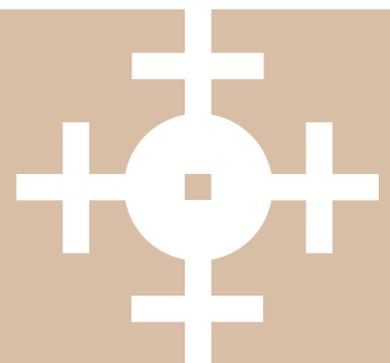
L: May the God of peace himself sanctify you wholly; and may your spirit, soul and body be kept sound and blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you. Amen.

14. Dismissal hymn

Human sexuality

Human sexuality indeed is a gift from God which is to be enjoyed between faithful partners. This gift of sexuality continues to exist in HIV positive people and it is supposed to be utilized, not to be suppressed. Sexuality is a wonderful creational gift from God, and is to be enjoyed by both the HIV positive people and those who are not.

CIRCLES OF HOPE, ZAMBIA





NORWAY

Who dares to Throw the First Stone?

From Bible study to sermon on John 8: 2-11

Every year the worship service on World AIDS Day in the Lutheran Cathedral in Oslo, Norway, is prepared at Aksept - The Church City Mission's center in Oslo for all who are affected by HIV. In 2002 the sermon was prepared in cooperation with users of Aksept. The following is an account of the process and the resulting sermon preached at the service.

Stigmatization, discrimination and sexuality

The process began with a brainstorming session to find themes and texts experienced as timely and relevant for those who took part in the discussions. The notes from the meetings formed the basis for writing the sermon. The goal was a dialog between human beings and God – a sermon that listens, understands, comforts and challenges. This methodology can be utilized and form the basis for one's own sermon preparation and sermon. Further, it provides insight into the thinking and dialog between those affected by HIV, a pastor and a Bible text.

1. The first brainstorming

HIV positive persons at Aksept had the opportunity to meet twice for group work to say something about what they feel it is important to express on World AIDS Day this year.

The first meeting was with 'The open discussion group on

ethics, religion, and philosophy' at the centre. These are some of the notes that were taken:

Wishes for and thoughts concerning the worship service:

- Sexuality should be the main theme this year.
- The church is too far removed from reality when it comes to sex.
- But even our own ideal about sexuality is quite difficult to fulfill .
- It would have been appropriate with an inter-religious service on a day like this! HIV and AIDS affects us all.

What do we want to say to God? The sermon can be like a dialogue between God and people.

- The need for a medicine against HIV!
- More acceptance from other people. God must open people's eyes!
- The urge to find someone to love. HIV-positive need a chance to love!
- The concern for children who are born with HIV.
- "Why me?" It's difficult to accept one's status; irritating; makes one angry!
- The need for help to return to the work place. People still experience discrimination .

HIV positive persons do not comprise a homogeneous group:



Stigmatization is, initially, a protection mechanism. It is linked to a perception that something is threatening us: often something that is unfamiliar or 'foreign'. Our fears may be well-founded, or they may be entirely groundless. Nevertheless, we form ideas and images about what we believe to be threatening. These are ideas that we may not even be aware of, for stigmatization often has its origins in our unconscious minds - in the attitudes and thoughts we have, but that we do not talk about or even acknowledge. In order to access these images, we need the will and courage to test our prejudices against reality, and to evaluate them against the view of humanity we claim to have. But this can be a painful process, so opportunities need to be deliberately created, and 'safe spaces' made available.

FROM THE THEOLOGICAL REFLECTIONS IN OSLO

women and men, young and old, native Norwegians and foreigners, gay and straight, etc.

Two themes came up quickly as important on World AIDS Day:

1. Stigmatization/discrimination and
2. Sexuality. At the first meeting we worked on finding a Bible text that could be the basis for reflection on these two themes. References to Samaritans were suggested - the Samaritans were a stigmatized and discriminated group at the time of Jesus. But there are few references dealing with sexuality in that text. The Song of Solomon was also mentioned, but it contains no mention of stigmatization. We finally ended up with the story about the woman who was taken in adultery.

2. John 8:2-11 is read

3. The woman taken in adultery

We were not completely satisfied with this text either, because it connected sexuality and sinfulness. The text itself could be seen as stigmatizing; why is only the woman caught in the act? What became of the man (we must suppose a man was involved)? Also, the associations on a day like this, World AIDS Day, can easily go in the direction that all HIV positive persons are unfaithful to their spouses. That in itself is a stigmatizing attitude.

4. Possible associations

On the other hand, the text provokes many interesting associations. At the second meeting, two weeks later, the following reflection on the text in John 8:2-11 was made:

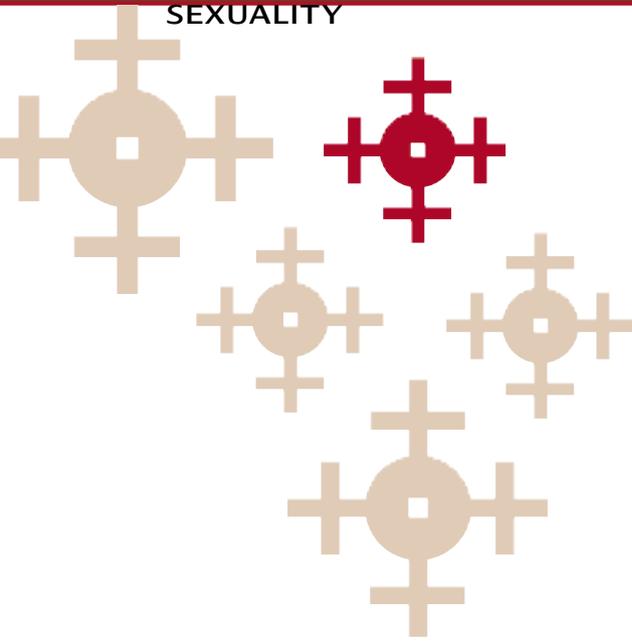
This woman was already judged by the men who brought her to Jesus. What were they, the scribes and Pharisees, guilty of? Did they see a reflection of themselves in the woman? We should search ourselves before judging others.

The Scribes and Pharisees show a poor attitude toward women. Does the woman know what is going on? Where is the man? Perhaps she hadn't done anything wrong at all. She was just the victim in a male-dominated society. Could the woman have been HIV positive? Was she accused of infecting someone? Did the woman take it upon herself to get involved in an activity reserved for men? Was she a sex-worker? Or was she a woman who loved a man and was a victim of forced marriage? There are many possibilities here. The text really tells us nothing about the woman. She says nothing in her defense.

We learn more about the men who take her to Jesus. They wanted to lay a snare for Jesus, either by forcing him to follow the law and norms or prove that he broke with tradition, laws and Jewish customs. The theologians and the pious knew the law, they were experts at it. According to the law, the woman should be stoned! And they were ready to do it! Did they actually misunderstand Jesus, thinking he was on their side?

But what did these men have on their consciences? Why were they so aggressive? Were they against women having their own sex lives? Were they frustrated husbands? How many acts of sexual abuse had they committed? We aren't told anything, but we can use our imagination...

This text seen in relation to HIV is stigmatizing in itself: HIV doesn't need to have anything to do with unfaithfulness. Besides, sex is not the only thing that infects/communicates disease. But everything related to sex is guilt-ridden. Sin is actually a wrong concept in this context because sex is not sinful. But sex is difficult with HIV. Sex was difficult before HIV. Some people quit having sex after becoming HIV positive. The woman in the text was, and we are, judged by a whole society. One does not have the right to life as HIV positive. People say "they got what they deserved"; "it's God's punishment". You still hear clergy and imams talking like that. One in the group had heard



about a woman who was murdered because of false rumors!

What is sin? How do we take care of “good sexuality”? It is bad when others describe and decide what sin is. It should be the responsibility of the individual, because what some believe is wrong may not be wrong for someone else. What about those who are not married? But unfaithfulness is sinful; someone always gets hurt in the end.

What does it mean to cast stones today? It is acts of judgment, putting oneself above others and excluding others. 183 countries will not issue entry visas to persons who are HIV positive! But do we condemn those who have infected us? Do we report them? Or not? Sex is a situation in which both parties are responsible when the relationship is equal. What about if you were caught in the act of having sex, and perhaps infecting someone else with HIV? “If I knew I had infected someone I love – I couldn’t cope with it.”

Does the woman receive an answer? Is she rehabilitated? Neither do I condemn you! These are important words. “Go and sin no more.” Does that mean no more sex? Or does it mean: “Depart from here and live “normally” from now on? Depart and look after yourself; avoid abuse, don’t let anyone hurt you anymore.”

What is it that changes attitudes? Knowledge, personal knowledge: “it could have been me.”

5. Prejudices

There are many things here we can identify with. People with HIV are often confronted with this attitude: you should not have sex. Many expect to find this kind of attitude even in the health care sector. And there are many HIV positive persons who will not allow themselves to have sex with others because they are afraid of infecting someone, feel they are unappealing or think that no one wants to have sex with someone who is HIV positive.

Many have therefore shared an experience somewhat simi-

lar to the woman’s in the Bible text. Some have been exposed in the media because they have let themselves have sex with someone, but in contrast to this story people today are more than willing to cast stones, in part by placing more responsibility on HIV positive persons than on those who are negative. What do these stones look like?

“You’ve gotten what you deserve”. “Don’t come near me!” “You’ve brought shame upon your family!” These are how some of the stones ‘sound,’ and they hurt more than real stones.

The main reason for the stigmatizing of HIV positive people is that the HIV virus is connected to many things that have been condemned as sinful in our culture: sexuality, prostitution, drug abuse, homosexuality, promiscuity, etc.

People have thrown stones in these contexts for centuries, in spite of the story in John chapter 8.

6. Humans as sexual beings

What can we do to get rid of these eager stone throwers? We find them within ourselves, too, if we do some soul searching.

Perhaps it helps to speak about sexuality in as open and forthright a way as possible. Not just about how it ought to be or how one wishes it to be.

Sexuality is not something one has; it is something one is. Sexuality is complex and difficult both with and without HIV. It is difficult to live up to one’s own ideal. Sexuality includes both ups and downs. It is heavenly and it is frustrating. It can be just as problematic within and outside of marriage. No joy can be greater, none can be more vulnerable.

It is difficult to speak about one’s own sexuality, both about the happy moments and about those moments one wishes had not occurred. It is painful to give oneself away, because there are people standing in line to cast stones. Many who are HIV positive experience that the virus in itself is a symbol of sexual impurity; it reveals in a sense that one has not lived a perfect life. As though anyone does.

7. Stigmatization and discrimination

It is remarkable that a church that has inherited this story about the woman who was taken in the act of adultery has not managed to educate its members and changed its culture to be less judgmental. Instead, we have church history in which the stone-throwers have been given free rein. It's time that this stigmatizing and discriminatory attitude be labelled for what it is, namely a sin against God and the gospel. If sexuality is more than reproduction—and it is—then it must be something that everyone has a right to, not just a select few – with responsibility of course. This must be the starting point for all discussion about how we are to live together as sexual beings. But only when this includes everyone will the boundaries we set up for ourselves cease to be discriminatory. And, it goes without saying that this must also include persons who are HIV positive.

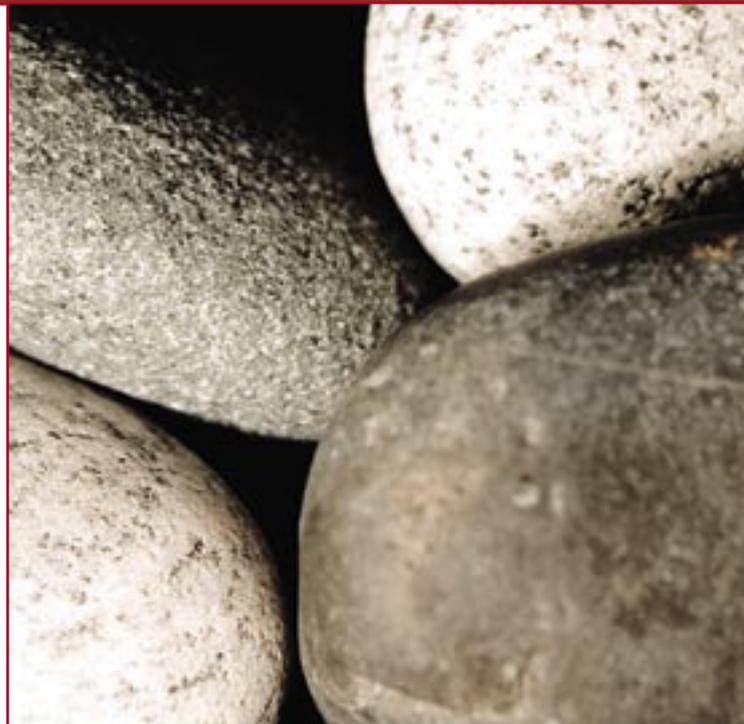
The stigmatization is obvious. People living with HIV are denied travel visas in 183 countries of the world, dentists refuse to treat them, and they are shunned by friends or at their place of work. All this amounts to attitudes to sexuality that are equivalent to stoning.

8. "Neither do I condemn you!"

This is the gospel: "Neither do I condemn you."

When this is determined: that no one is in a special class when it comes to their sexual life, what is the way ahead? How are we to live together with our sexuality? How can we avoid hurting anyone? How can we manage to respect one another? Tolerate other solutions, etc.?

Jesus' invitation to the woman at the end – "do not sin again" – does not mean not to have sex in the future. It is more a matter of looking after oneself in the future. That is the challenge! We are not spared from the discussion about what is right and what is wrong. But we are spared from the hypocrisy that some people are better than others in this area.



What does it mean to be human? HIV positive or HIV negative, all life and each individual life is endangered life, each life is vulnerable life. Beneath all the differences, every person is naked and, in the deepest sense, injured.

We are reminded of this again and again. Even so, we try to deny it, to keep it at a distance, try to convince ourselves and others that we are invulnerable, whole, and almost immortal.

True fellowship can only take place when people come together in the acknowledgement that every single life is vulnerable - not as abstract knowledge but as the disclosure of one's own vulnerability, exposure and injury.

Then there is room for a meeting between us, we are on the same level and we can talk.

FROM THE THEOLOGICAL REFLECTIONS IN OSLO



Existential realities in
the face of AIDS

DENMARK

Meaning, Death and Loss

BY ELIZABETH KNOX-SEITH

In Western culture, death is seen as a defeat – and being sick, that is to say, being threatened by death, becomes subconsciously a more or less subtle form of punishment. Since we have tried to eliminate death as a natural part of our life cycle, being sick, and therefore perhaps also in the process of dying, becomes a threat to our innermost human dignity. We must not die; whatever happens we must stay alive – for ever, or at least as long as we can. This in itself turns disease into a failure.

In order to constantly explain away the fact that death is a natural part of our life cycle, we often individualise reasons for being ill. It is the individual who has made a mistake, failed morally. The individual has behaved in such a way that it is only right and proper that he or she should fall ill. Disease and death mean, deep in our subconscious, that we do not deserve to live. When suffering strikes us, it tells us, indirectly, that we have lost our value as a human being, our right to live.

In one way, this way of thinking makes things easier both for those who are ill and those who are healthy. Those who are ill can, if they would only change their way of living and give up their so-called “mistakes”, hope to regain their right to live and thus recover from their illness – while those who are healthy can at the same time triumphantly proclaim that those who live a just and “upright” life will also be given the right to live for ever.

But a disease like AIDS glaringly exposes the helplessness that every human being and every society deepest down experiences when faced with a reality like death. With an air of desperation AIDS brings to the surface the question, Why me? Why must I be stricken? Why must I lose my life? AIDS makes it clear that death can intrude at any age, and that modern medicine does not guarantee an eternal extension of life. And if the question is not about me, it may be about my brother, my sister, my girl friend, my boy friend, my son or my daughter, my mother or father. If someone near to us is in the danger zone, then the question resounds deafeningly in our pain – and the



The experience of love, acceptance and support within a support group where God's love is made manifest can be a powerful healing force. Healing is fostered where churches relate to daily life where people feel safe to share their stories and testimonies. Through sensitive worship, churches help persons enter the healing presence of God. The churches exercise a vital ministry through encouraging discussion and analysis of information, helping to identify problems and supporting participation towards constructive change in the community.

JAPHET NDHLOVU

prospect of losing that “someone” becomes the guiding impulse in the search for meaning that now begins.

Being told the truth

Being told that they have HIV is for almost everyone a shock, a hard blow that changes their lives completely and inevitably. Everyone who has taken an HIV test knows what a nightmare one goes through, while one waits for the result. However hard one tries to prepare oneself for the result, it is impossible to be prepared. Even for those who think that the risk of their being infected is minimal, the waiting is an experience they would rather have been without. And it is not advisable to take the test if you do not have a solid, supportive network around you. To be confronted with the risk of having HIV is to be confronted with profound, unforeseeable questions, and if you are left alone with all the speculations and worries involved it can lead to a personal breakdown.

Anxiety for judgement is a prominent part of the pattern of feelings about HIV and AIDS, both for those who are infected and for their families. What will the neighbours say if they find out that my son...? What will my mum and dad think, if they get to know that I...? I have always been a nice girl,... what will they think now...?

Pictures dance before our mind's eye as soon as the conversation turns to HIV and AIDS – and an inevitable question that is not always asked aloud is, How did he or she become infected?

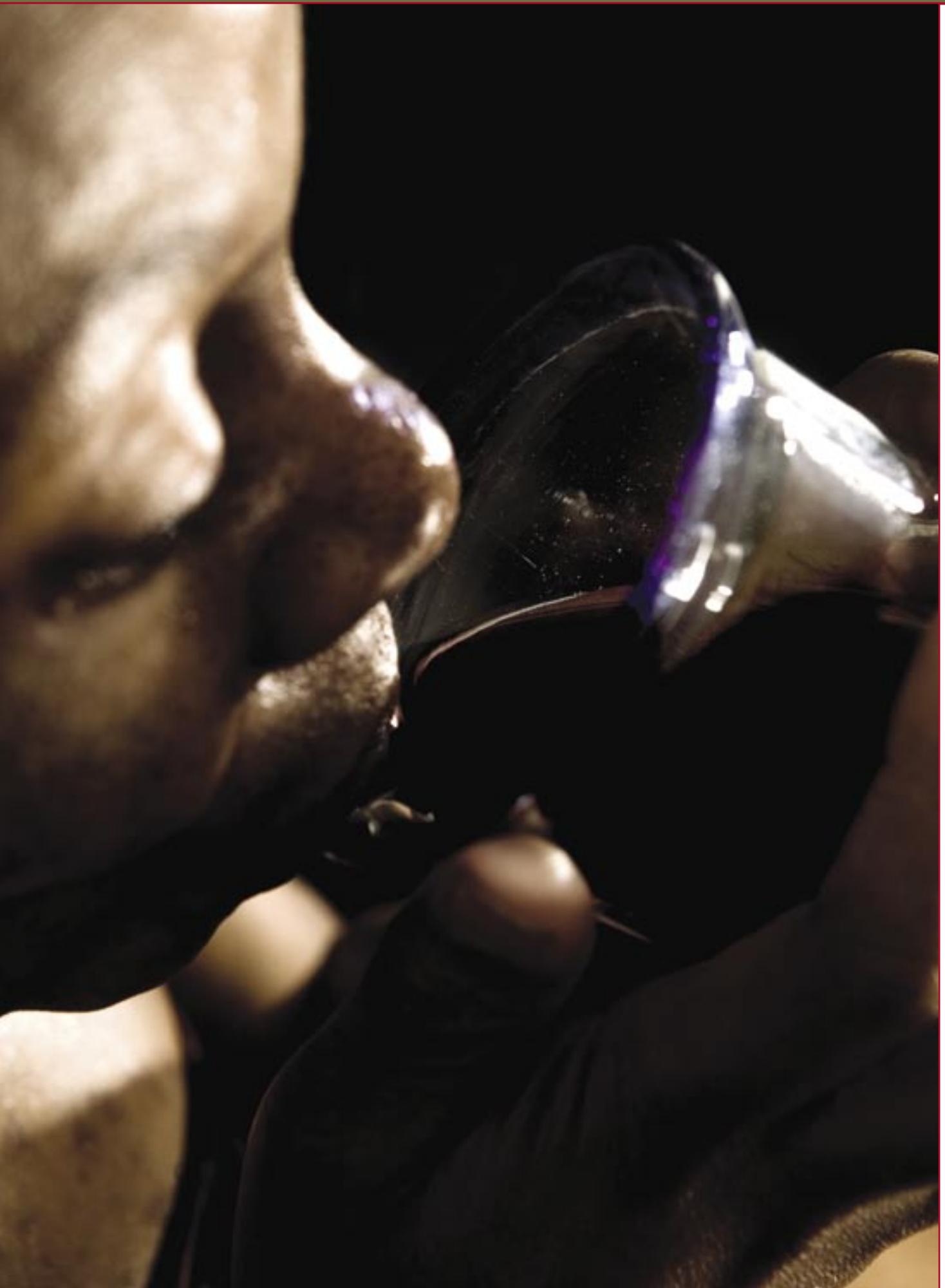
Sex is still an area surrounded by mystery, speculation and horror – and there are no limits to the ideas that get stirred up to the surface, when someone discovers that a person near to them has been infected.

Questions of guilt are always lurking in the background – and it is therefore important to take the bull by the horns and say that it is not possible to distinguish between “guilty” and “innocent” victims of HIV. They are all in the same boat, however

they were infected. That someone can have a personal experience of guilt and shame that needs to be dealt with, is another matter – but that experience can be just as difficult, whichever way the virus came. A mother who let her child be given a blood transfusion at a time before blood was tested, can have a painfully heavy burden of guilt to bear – and she must be given help in the same way that someone who was infected by his boy friend must be helped to deal with the anger that he may feel, towards his boy friend and himself. Experiences of guilt and shame are often a result of unacknowledged anger. That is another bull that it is important to take by the horns, and that demands a considerable effort – but it is so peaceful when the bull is out of the way! Bulls can be led away by the horns at the right time, but it will always mean a struggle. If they are allowed to stay, the damage can be as bad as in a china-shop!

The anxiety that most people experience is due to fear of the unknown, of death and of the course that the illness will inevitably take, usually over a long period of time. For the person with HIV, the unknown is known, or becomes known a step at a time, as time goes by. Usually those near to the person with HIV experience more anxiety than the victim himself, precisely because they are not themselves experiencing the process and can only guess how the suffering feels. Fear of what is going to happen is greater than the fear one feels when it is already happening – and many people with HIV therefore say, paradoxically, that it is a relief when they reach phases of the illness that they had been afraid of beforehand. This does not mean that anxiety disappears – there is always something new that can happen; new unpredictable phases of illness that lurk on the existential horizon as indistinct threats.

Living with HIV and AIDS is a delicate balancing act between the ability to let go and the ability to stay in control – not only in sexuality, but in life as such. This is a balancing act that considerably sharpens one's awareness of what it means to be human.



Being part of an universal hope
in the midst of suffering

DENMARK

Faith

I have been a believer as long as I can remember, but as with most people, my faith has gone through various phases and crises.

For a long time before I was infected with HIV, I was going through a period full of confusion about religion, and I didn't have much of an emotional life either. After I found out that I have HIV I've more or less returned to my starting point. I had had doubts about the whole of my view of Christ, my view of Christ as an idea. But in the crises I went through in finding out that I have HIV, I've in a way returned to the faith I had as a child. I remember experiences I had as a child, experiences of a deep relationship to Christ. Those experiences have given me strength – and are the source of a completely new way of resting in my faith.

After I found out that I had HIV, I went through a number of emotional crises. Thoughts of sin and guilt came, as they do for most of us – the feeling that the illness was my own fault, and then shame that followed as a result. I struggled with that for a year, and the battle made me feel dreadful.

I was very, very hard on myself. I had a judge within me, who kept telling me that it was my own fault that I was ill. Feelings of shame, guilt and sin quite simply hounded me all that year, while I struggled and struggled with them. I really missed having a Christian fellowship around me that could have helped me to get rid of my guilt and shame and sin. It's bad enough just to know that you have HIV. You begin to get some small symptoms here and there, and it just breaks you down.

I came through the struggle in the course of a year by working it out within myself. But I missed having someone to support me in doing so. I didn't have anyone.

Prayer

Prayer has helped me through my crises. When I found out that I had HIV, a process began, and at one point I realised that I must start to pray again. It came all by itself. I isolated my-

self in a house in the country and began an intensive period of prayer. I wanted to pray – and the inner life began, as it does when you are praying. An inner world that sort of opens itself ... a sense of communion. I lived through my fear of dying and my fear of developing AIDS, and gradually I realised that it wasn't my fault that I had got the disease. It wasn't because I had to be punished. The disease has been given to me for completely different reasons.

I got more psychological energy and more room. I noticed that I was becoming more and more happy. Prayer opened up for happiness, and I was able to gather together a whole lot of resources and strength that I could use the rest of the time. It was like a spring of joy gushing up inside me. I had come into contact with something or other...and as a Christian I would naturally say that I had come into contact with Christ or the Holy Spirit. God touched me, touched my heart... opened my heart, so that I could feel a fundamental delight in existence, a delight in being human and living with other human beings. My fear decreased, and it became less important whether I got ill or died. The present moment, now, became so important. I experienced an inner world that was so full, that gave me so much energy and power for living, that my plans for the future once again began to be meaningful.

My deep conviction is, that all people who suffer, take part in bearing the universal suffering in the world – the suffering that Christ lived through, when he saw all the sins in the world throughout history – all at once. My belief is that every human being who suffers takes part in bearing this collective suffering, which the whole of humanity shares. And for me, this means that through the suffering I endure because of my illness, I'm taking part in bearing this universal suffering. So in a way I'm sharing in bearing Christ's suffering. This gives me an incredible strength and joy.

TESTIMONY OF BJARNE, WHO DIED OF AIDS



Bible reflection

ZAMBIA

The Healing Acts of Jesus

BY JAPHET NDHLOVU

The biblical accounts of the healing acts of Jesus include details of the people who are healed, and how they respond. The unclean lowly woman, the despised and outcast leper, the isolated paralytic, the blind beggar – these experience the dramatic embrace of God's love. Once thus loved and accepted, their experience threatens all those powers, traditions, and people that have ignored, rejected, and suppressed them.

After Peter's Pentecost sermon to more than three thousand people, a forty-year old lame man lying at the gate to the temple was healed. Peter proclaimed that the resurrection power of Jesus, which was active to restore all things, had healed the cripple, and that this Jesus was to be worshiped as Lord over all. The threatened authorities arrested Peter and John. They understood that this healing was no mere good deed, but rather a challenge to their power, a call for a new allegiance, and an assault on the prevailing system.

The intensity of Jesus' response to sickness is illustrated in the story of the healing of a man with a crippled hand (Mark 3: 1–6). The healing is necessary on the Sabbath, since in Hebrew thought not to heal the man would leave him nearer to death. The struggle against sickness is a struggle to save those afflicted from the power of death and the threat it poses. Since sickness opposes the creator God's saving power, it must be righted and the creation restored. Jesus is the Redeemer in whom the mercy of God is present. What is new in his ministry is that the beneficiaries of God's mercy are not the religious authorities and legal scholars but those considered outsiders: the poor, the disabled, the sick, and the bereaved. Jesus made himself accessible to those who needed him, ignoring conventional limitations and thus according proper recognition to those who were cast out of society for whatever rea-

son. Consistently, he met people at their particular points of need and addressed those needs. Jesus is presented as a combatant, constantly opposing with his power those forces that kept people in subjugation. Whatever held people must be confronted and its power to do so destroyed. Thus, the sick were healed, the disabled returned to full activity, and the oppressed freed.

When Jesus welcomed the sick and disabled with open arms, he presented a potent model to his followers. The manner in which churches and their members respond to the challenge of HIV and AIDS is an indication of the degree of seriousness with which they follow the example of Jesus. A response of love and compassion – an open-arms response – is demanded of God's people. It is a mandate expressly given by Jesus, as for example, in the parable of the judgment (Matthew 25: 31–46). Further, such a response is a sign of God's gracious love, not only in the face of HIV and AIDS but also to the entire community. It announces for all to see and hear that the reign of God is being realized and that it is taking shape in the world. Loving acceptance of people living with the virus announces that God's saving power takes the field against death's destructive power. Compassion is indeed a first call upon God's people in the crisis created by the HIV and AIDS epidemic.

What insight does the Christian faith offer to us at this mature stage in the AIDS epidemic? Some New Testament texts indicate what we believe must be involved in a truly holistic Christian response to fighting silence, shame and stigma as these are associated with the HIV infection and AIDS, a response that is as important today as it was when AIDS was first diagnosed.

Perhaps no disease was more horrible in first century Palestine than leprosy. Leprosy spread slowly until it made the body



ugly and robbed it of vitality. Infection meant separation from contact with all non-lepers; and not only was leprosy incurable, it was eventually fatal.

When Jesus encountered the leper on the Galilean pathway, he could have spoken the word of healing from a distance, as he had done on other occasions (e.g. Luke 7: 1-10). Yet Jesus chose to extend his hand to touch the leper as he healed him. In so doing, Jesus both defied social custom and disregarded the horrible nature of leprosy. He chose to risk both health and acceptability in society to place his healing hand on the desperate man. Why did Jesus act in this socially and medically unacceptable way? Mark informs us that Jesus did so because he was moved to compassion by the plight of the leper.

The healing of the leper was no isolated incident. Compassion characterized Jesus' entire life and ministry. Repeatedly he sensed compassion in the face of ignorance, hunger, sickness, and even death. Thus, Jesus was gripped by compassion when he saw the aimlessness of the common people as "sheep without a shepherd" (Matthew 9:36; Mark 6:34), the sick and the blind among the multitudes (Matthew 14:14; 20:34), and the sorrow of those who had lost loved ones (Luke 7:13; John 11:35). Not remaining merely on the level of emotion, Jesus' compassion expressed itself in practical ministry. Out of compassion, he raised the dead (John 11; Luke 7:14), taught the multitudes (Mark 6:34), and healed the sick (Matthew 14:14; 4:23; 9:35; 19:2).

In ministering to the needy, the Lord Jesus was not afraid to make physical contact. He took the hands of the sick (Mark 1:31; Matthew 9:25) and the demon-possessed (Mark 9:27). His fingers touched blind eyes (Matthew 20:34; John 9:6; Matthew 9:29), deaf ears (Mark 7:33), and silent tongues (Mark 7:33). Most astonishing of all however, Jesus touched the lepers—the

outcasts of his day (Matthew 8:3; Mark 1: 41; Luke 5:12-13), thereby demonstrating the depth of his compassion.

Jesus' compassion knew no boundaries, extending beyond his friends to encircle his enemies. Anticipating the final rejection he would experience by the nation he loved, Jesus wept over the city of Jerusalem (Matthew 23:37). During his arrest he offered his healing touch to the soldier whose ear had been injured in the scuffle (Luke 22:51). Jesus even prayed that his Father respond with forgiving mercy to the soldiers who were crucifying him (Luke 23:34). In so doing, Jesus lived what he taught, namely, that compassion should be extended to anybody without exception, after the example of his compassionate heavenly Father (Matthew 5:43-45). As one of his early followers concluded after reflecting on Jesus' life, "For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ that though he was rich yet for your sakes he became poor so that you through his poverty might become rich" (2 Corinthians 8:9).

According to the New Testament, Jesus is not merely a grand example of human compassion. More importantly, he embodies the compassionate heart of the God of the Bible. The theme of the compassionate God, as arising out of God's own self-disclosure, lay at the center of the faith of the Hebrew community. After revealing the divine name to Moses on Mount Sinai, Yahweh described himself as "the compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness" (Exodus 34:6). This God responds compassionately to the plight of humans, not because of human merit but because of God's own love and gracious mercy. Consequently, God is gracious even in the face of human rebellion and sin. God is surely gracious in this context of HIV and AIDS. Divine compassion leads to divine action displayed above all in Jesus Christ.

Bible study

DENMARK

Four images of God

Since the first outbreak of the epidemic, HIV and AIDS have often been interpreted as God's punishment. Many people with HIV accept this interpretation, and this adds suffering to suffering. The idea that HIV and AIDS are divine punishment implies an image of God as a reprimanding and chastising power.

In the following Bible study we will focus on four stories from the New Testament that bring out alternative, loving and constructive images of God.

A common factor for these four stories is that they reflect images of a God in movement. God moves and is moved. God is not rigid and distant. He meets us here, where we are.

LUKE 15:11-32

The Parable of the prodigal son God who runs to meet us

The story of the prodigal son shows us a powerful image of God through the attitude and actions of the father. God is the one who embraces us – eagerly and welcomingly. He runs towards us and puts his arms around us, as the story says that the father does. And what compels him is the dynamic power of love. The prodigal son is a symbol of human beings who are down and out. It can happen to anyone. And many things can make us sink down in despair. The point of this gospel story is that God gives us the possibility of a new life, defined by the experiences we have had and the insights we have gained on our way down. There is a turning-point in every crisis, also for us when we have messed up our chances, also for us when we are ashamed of our choices and our mistakes.

This story gives us hope that we can get on with our lives in spite of everything – and that there are both human beings and a God waiting to welcome us as we are – whatever our HIV status and our life-story.

Questions to think about

- When has God come to meet you in the course of your life?

- With whom can you most easily identify– the prodigal son or his ill-treated big brother?
- Which of them is really farthest away from their father?
- What is the relationship between “forgiveness” and “justice”?

LUKE 24:13-35

The account of the journey to Emmaus God who walks beside us

Grief can numb our senses. That is what happens to the disciples after Jesus dies. They are hard of hearing, dim-witted, blind and far away. They don't realise that the risen Lord is walking beside them.

The story reflects an image of God who has conquered suffering in order to identify with us in our grief. He walks the hard road with us – without letting us become disorientated or disillusioned. He jolts us in order to make us see everything in a new perspective. His powerful love makes us take in the world around us – and get on with our lives. He encourages and challenges us to live. He meets us in words and actions.

This image of God is influenced by the Old Testament idea of God as Immanuel, God with us. Yes, God is with us, and he has come to stay. He is near – even when we are weeping or raging over his absence.

Questions to think about

- How often in your life have you felt that you were abandoned by God?
- Can this image of God be an example for us?
- Can the God who walks beside us teach us how to walk beside fellow human beings in need?
- What does the image of God who walks beside us mean for those dying of AIDS?
- The disciples recognise Jesus when he breaks bread at supper. What does the sacrament of the Lord's Supper mean for people in grief?



JOHN 13:1-17

The story of Jesus washing his disciples' feet God who bends down to touch us

The story of Jesus washing his disciples' feet paints a picture of God who is ready to kneel down in order to draw near to us. This readiness is revealed in the Incarnation, where God in his Son bends down from heaven to earth, and in this scene, just before the events of Good Friday and Easter, where Jesus bows down to serve his disciples. In this way he shows humility and a readiness for intimate contact.

Many people with HIV are victims of arrogance and a fear of physical contact. They feel that their illness forces them to their knees – and that other people look down on them and withdraw from them. Jesus' willingness to reach out to, touch and lift up the weak is an example – for individual Christians and for the church as a whole.

Questions to think about

- When was the last time you knelt down in order to reach another person?
- Have you been, or do you feel that you have been, a victim of a fear of physical contact?
- How do you feel about an image of God that is so down-to-earth that he is literally on his hands and knees?
- What does such an image of God mean to people with HIV and AIDS?

JOHN 9:1FF

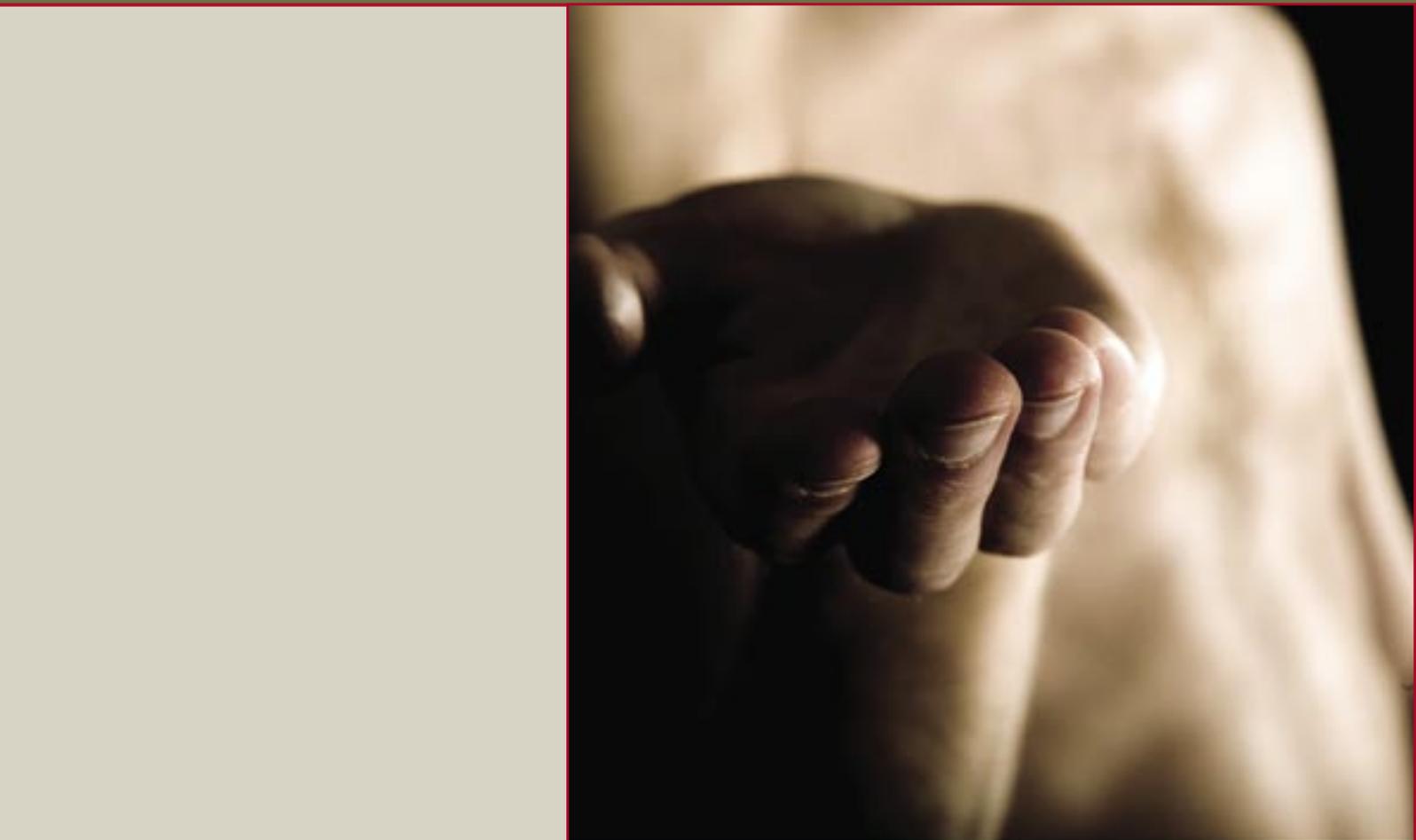
Healing of the man born blind God who reaches out to heal us

In this account of a healing, Jesus dismisses any connection between guilt and fate. And by doing so he also dismisses the image of God as a sentencing and punishing power, who gives us what we deserve. Instead, in the healing itself, he paints a clear picture of a God who reaches out in order to make us whole.

When they meet the blind man, the disciples are calculating and ingenious. They long to be able to assign guilt. Many people with HIV are met with a similar moral meticulousness when they are open about their illness. A typical prejudice is that people with HIV have made their own bed, and now they must lie in it. In this story Jesus makes it plain that we do NOT get what we deserve. This gospel story is only one of many New Testament accounts of healing. People who are seriously ill need hope, but false hopes can cause a lot of pain. As yet there is no possibility for those with AIDS to be healed, but the hope that the gospel gives, is the image of a loving God who can reconcile us to the reality of the illness and give us the strength to live – in spite of everything.

Questions to think about

- Do you believe that there is a connection between what we do and what happens to us as a result?
- Is the time of miracles over?
- Can reconciliation with a serious illness be spiritually healing?



The parable of the prodigal son
Bible study, Luke 15:11-32

ZAMBIA

The Forgiving God

1. Introduction

In most African cultures, if not all, the relationship between child and parent cannot be easily broken by anything. Not even sin and death can end such a relationship. When we relate to God the almighty creator of all, humanity included, we realize that nothing can separate us from God's love. Can HIV and AIDS separate us from such a forgiving God?

2. Reflections

In doing a detailed study of the passage – which can be read many times from different translations in order to appreciate the parable - the following questions would be helpful:

a. Questions concerning the text itself:

- Show how this parable answers the Pharisees' objection found in Luke 15:2.
- What are the Son, the Spirit and the Father all eager to see happen and to bring about?
- If the younger son in the story condemned himself, would the father have been able to receive him back?
- What does the parable of the prodigal son teach about our relationship to God?
- What were the Pharisees meant to learn from this episode?

b. Questions related to HIV and AIDS:

- Do you see the same tendency in our response to the challenge of HIV infection?
- Do we sometimes look down upon people living with HIV and AIDS as children who are lost?
- Do we look at them as sinners who contracted the virus through careless living?
- How would we know the source of the infection and why do we want to know, is it not for the same reason of wanting to apportion blame?
- Does God look at the people living with HIV and AIDS as wrongdoers who should not be pardoned?

c. The relevance of the text in our context:

- Do we see the attitude of the older brother in the story among other members of the Christian family in perpetuating silence, shame and stigma associated with HIV infection?
- Look at the characters mentioned in the text and what lesson may be drawn from them and apply this to fighting HIV stigma.
- What principles do we derive from the passage?
- How can the Church be an oasis of love and accommodation?

I've never before experienced life so intensely as I have done after I found out that I have HIV. To have to make contact with yourself – it's tough, it's hard work, something you would obviously rather do without, and we need one another's help and support, all the way.

TESTIMONY OF RONNY, WHO DIED OF AIDS, DENMARK



Two Bible studies

ZAMBIA The God of Creation

At a seminar conducted at Kabwata St Paul's UCZ hall a discussion was held with a team of people living positively with HIV. They are members of the support network called Circle of Hope. The following is a recording of their responses to some passages from the Bible.

LUKE 15: 1-11

The lost sheep and the lost coin

The passage was read by the group from different Bible versions to appreciate its meaning.

After reading this passage participants were challenged to be honest as to how they would feel as HIV positive people when this passage was read to them.

The following were the responses;

- A feeling of forgiveness – God forgives
- A feeling of love – God is love
- A feeling of welcome – God is welcoming
- A prayerful feeling after going through problems. We should always remember that there is an almighty God to pray to.

The passage gives a feeling of assurance that even after going through problems or difficulties there is God to forgive us as long as we make a move.

The others felt the passage brought about feelings of being condemned – one person said, “when you first listen to this passage you might think you are being condemned especially if you have led a careless life where sex is concerned”. The group affirmed that they have learnt that God is there to for-

give and help them to start a new life where they will not look at how they got the disease but live a positive life.

GENESIS 1: 27-28

God creating humankind in his image

The passage was read by the group from different Bible versions to appreciate its meaning.

After reading this passage again, the participants were asked what was going on in their minds as they heard the passage.

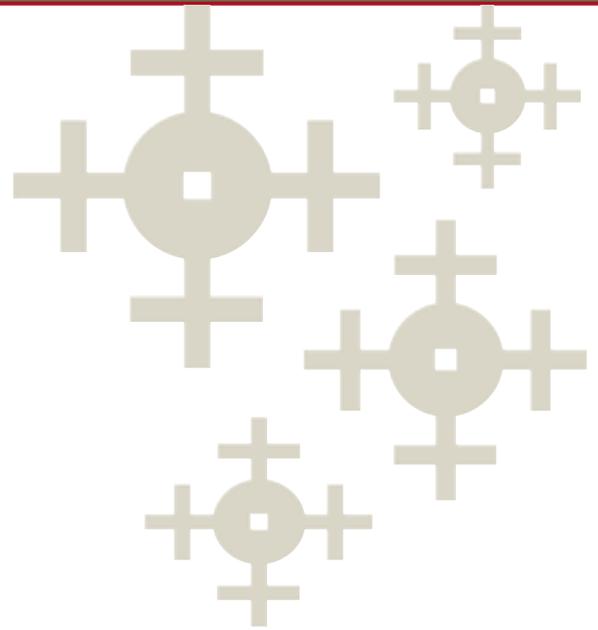
The following were the responses;

- God is great.
- God is almighty.
- God is the creator despite our HIV status, he has blessed us.
- We are created in God's image so we are like God and whatever we are going through, let us leave it in the hands of God, since he is our creator. This creator also knows and understands this virus very well.

- We are supposed to be grateful and always pray to God and continue to thank him for our lives.

The other feeling from the members was that if God was our creator – why should we go through so much suffering – why have HIV? Why can't he just remove the virus away from us?

In the end the participants encouraged each other, that no matter what situations they were going through they should always remember that there is something to learn from everything. They should learn to have compassion and care for one another, and to count on God and always pray to him for direction.



Bible study on Luke 13:10-17

NORWAY

The Crippled Woman

In the dialogues in Oslo, involving people infected and affected by HIV, this Bible passage became very important for our understanding of what it means to see the person before us and not to be obsessed with rules and regulations. The following guidelines can be a help in studying the text.

1 Read the text in the light of your own situation and the challenges you face

Before reading the Bible text, you should ask some questions about how the participants regard God and how different life situations can provoke different images of God. For example:

- Can you tell about a time when you felt God punished you? What had you done?
- Have you ever thought or felt that God loves you only if you are worthy of it or if you are obeying God's commands?
- Have there been other kinds of situations where you have not been sure about God's love, thinking that God might be a bit moody or difficult to trust?

Let the participants think about this for a while before initiating group discussion. You could begin by telling about a time when you perhaps felt that God was punishing you, in order to make things a little less intimidating for the others. Try to help people to understand the different kinds of images that we often carry with us. You can also write the different images mentioned on the flip-over chart, for example: the angry God; the moody God; the judging God and so on.

2. Read the text together

Read the story about the crippled woman in Luke 13:10-17. Read a sentence or a verse each.

3. Read the text thoroughly and in detail

Write key words on the flip-over chart. Ask general questions about the text first.

- What is the text about?
- What strikes you about this text?
- What are the themes in the text?

Then look more specifically at the text:

- Who do we meet in the story?
- What do we learn about them in this text?

It may also be helpful to look at the relationships between the persons in the text, also from social, political, religious and economic perspectives.

- How do the leaders of the synagogue relate to the woman's suffering?
- How do the leaders of the synagogue relate to Jesus?
- How does Jesus relate to the woman?
- How does Jesus relate to the leaders of the synagogue?
- How does Jesus relate to the Sabbath?
- How do the leaders of the synagogue relate to human life according to Jesus?
- How did the different people react at the end?
- What theology or understanding of God do the different people or groups in the text have?
- What is Jesus' theology or understanding of God in the text?
- How do you feel in relation to the text?

After you have worked closely with the Bible text, it is important that you look at your own lives and situation.

- Can you identify with the woman?
- Have you had experiences similar to the one of the woman?
- Who else today do you think is in a similar situation to the woman's ?

- How do you relate to others who are like her today?

4. Read the text with the thought of making changes

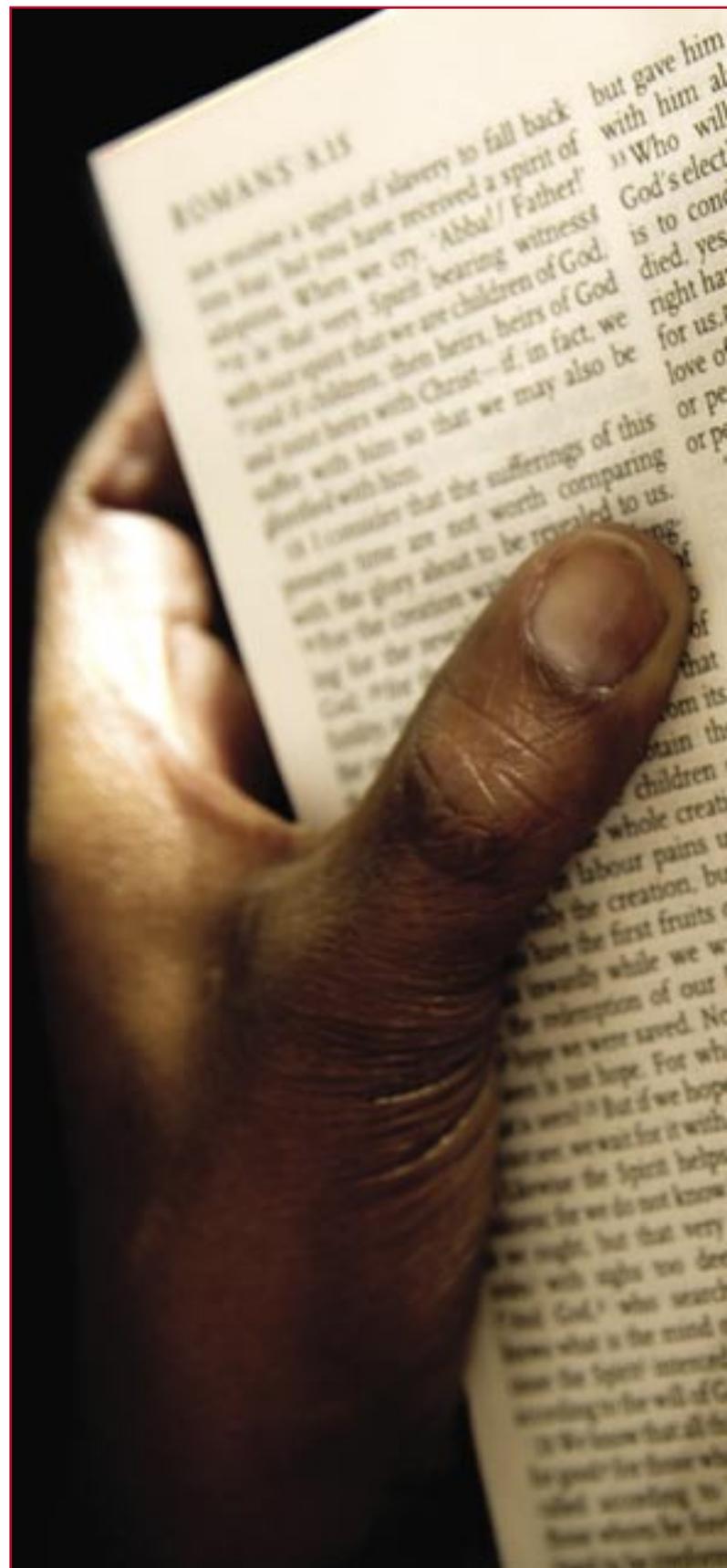
A contextual Bible study is not finished until you have seen what you can do to bring the dimension of hope in the text to our present day.

- Who communicates or where do we find the image of God that Jesus represents today?
- How can we fight against negative images of God?
- How can we communicate the image of God that Jesus brings?
- How can we make life better for people today who are in a situation like the woman's?

Reflection

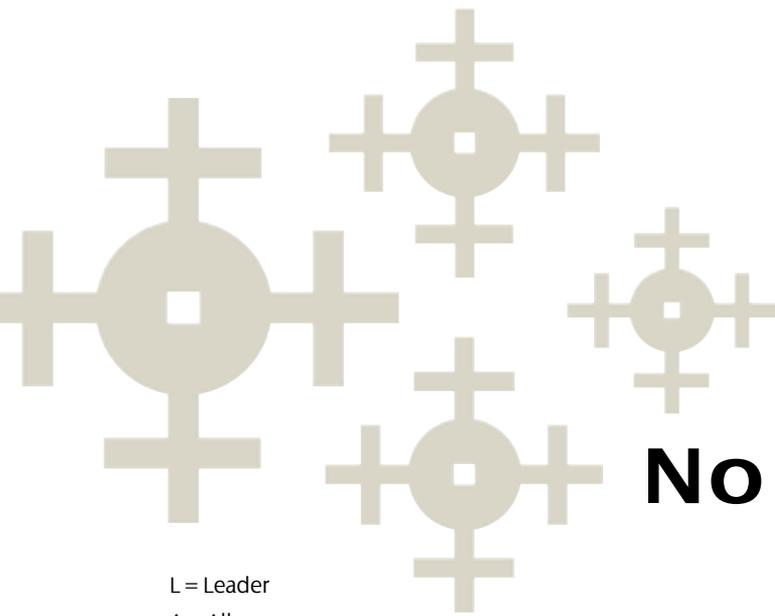
The talks in Oslo on this text can be summed up in this way: The fact that Jesus healed on the Sabbath proved important for the understanding of one of God's most significant attributes. Here we meet a God who opposes the authorities and loosens the chains of those who are bound.

'It is a God who is not only open for business from 9 to 5, but a force that will not let itself be limited.' In this story we see God himself breaking the rules of Scripture 'because God put people and compassion above the law. What Jesus implies is that the intent of the law is more important than absolute adherence to individual rules.' Or as one participant put it, 'It is God's nature to love, and the purpose of his words and actions is to loosen chains, to lift up the oppressed, to set people free, to heal and to save.'



God is the ever loving creator. God is a forgiving God. Despite being HIV-positive, we know that God loves us and cares for us. Since He is our creator we have accepted our status and continue seeking him throughout our lives. Neither people living with HIV and AIDS nor God is to be blamed for the disease. God's love and works may be revealed through those of us who suffer. God is a loving God because we were created in his image and blessed by him.

CIRCLES OF HOPE, ZAMBIA



ZAMBIA

No Condemnation

L = Leader

A = All

1. Gathering of the people

Music is played

2. Call to worship

L: The Lord says, "I am your healer...Look unto me and be healed."

Friends, we are gathered here today in the presence of God almighty, a caring and compassionate God. Let us therefore with prayer and praise and song worship the everlasting and ever-loving God. Amen

3. Hymn of praise

4. Opening prayer

L: Father, your love is working through all creation. Son of God, in your likeness we shall be made new. Holy Spirit, you touch our lives with hope. Receive our worship; reclaim us for your service; set us free to honor you today.

Lord, in your presence we acknowledge our place in a world that is weary of pain. And in our age, we experience pain in many ways. As we gather today, many are suffering because

of the HIV and AIDS pandemic. People who are living with the virus are being stigmatized. We pray Lord that you will use us as instruments through which your love can flow to our brothers and sisters living with the virus.

Gracious Lord, where we have stigmatized our friends and one another, forgive us and revive your love in our hearts so that we can show care and compassion to those living with the virus.

Lead us in this service. May we experience true fellowship with you and with one another.

Hear us in the name of your Son our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen

5. Prayer of confession

L: Gracious Lord, for all our confessions of faith that fizzled out when it came to action, for all our affirmations of love to you and to one another that have come to nothing,

A: Forgive us we pray

L.: Forgive us that by our disobedience

A: We share in the violence, cruelty and stigmatization against those among us living with HIV, thus depriving people of the abundant life and hope you give in your Son Jesus Christ.

L: As a community of faith in your Son, we have not shown your kindness to all our brothers and sisters

A: Have mercy on us Lord

L: As a church, we have not loved one another as Christ loved



us; we have not forgiven one another as we have been forgiven; we have not given ourselves in love and service to the broken world

A: We confess our sin as a church in the name of our gracious Lord. Amen

6. Declaration of forgiveness:

L: Friends, in Jesus Christ, here is the proof of God's amazing love: it was while we were still sinners that Christ died for us. Receive God's forgiveness in the name of God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Spirit.

A. Amazing grace how sweet the sound that saved a wretch like me, I once was lost but now am found, was blind but now I see.

7. Prayer of illumination

L: Gracious Lord, your word gives us abundant life in the midst of pain and suffering. It brings hope in times when we despair. Grant that we may hear your voice today as we read the holy word and may it bring healing to our brokenness. In Christ's name we pray. Amen

8. Scripture reading

John 8:1-11

9. Sermon Guide

- The teachers of the law only brought the woman and one wonders where the man she was committing adultery with was. The law of Moses required the execution of both parties and not just the woman (Leviticus: 20:10, Dueteronomy 22:22)
- The teachers of the law also wanted to humiliate the woman and stigmatize her. Something very wrong to do. People infected with HIV must not be stigmatized
- Some of us act as though we have not sinned before and think that our brothers and sisters living with the virus have sinned more than us. And yet we are sinners too.
- Jesus did not condemn her but showed mercy and graciously told her not to sin anymore

10. Prayer

Of your own choice

11. Closing hymn

12. Benediction

A: May the grace of our Lord Jesus, the love of God the Father and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit, be with us all today and for evermore. Amen



“In him we live and
move and have our being”

NORWAY

Liturgy of the Stations

This worship service is the result of conversations held in Oslo concerning the stigmatization of people living with HIV. It is intended that the entire worship area should be a sermon, and express both an image of God and a view of humanity.

Introduction to the liturgy and the preparation

This liturgy is not a linear order of worship. During much of the service those who wish to do so may make their way to various stations in the room. The various stations relate to human life and what happens in the presence of God who has created us, accepted us and set us free.

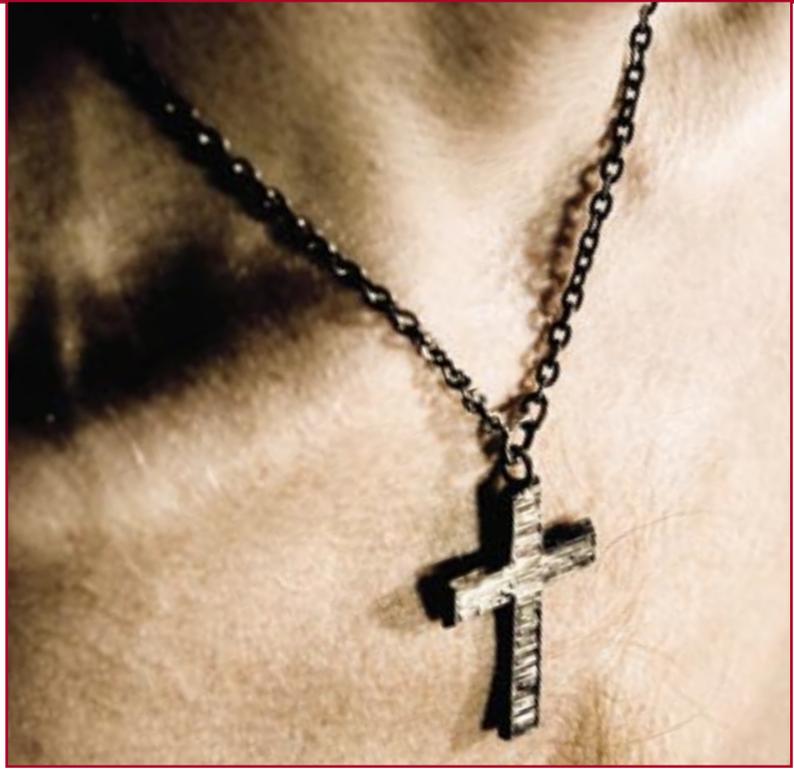
This worship service is quite out of the ordinary, so it is important that the worshippers be prepared in advance so that they have some idea of what they will be taking part in. This preparation may take place in earlier worship services, church newsletters, etc. This is important so that people will not feel excluded or alienated. It is also important to set up an agenda for the service that explains the concept behind it as well as its progression. The service has some similarities to the traditional Stations of the Cross.

The stations mentioned here are our recommendations. They should be made ready before the service. Since they require some space, you may add or reduce the number according to local preferences and space limitations. In most contexts, the number of stations listed here would not be feasible. We therefore recommend that you make a choice. But the station we have called the Place of Wonder should be included. It is best to find local forms of expression that can symbolize the various stations. We have made a few color suggestions that

can be included by hanging pieces of fabric on the wall or laying them on the floor. It is also possible to let thin strips of fabric extend from the individual station to the Place of Wonder. There should be an open Bible at each of the stations, preferably open at one of the suggested Bible passages. In addition, the brief text could be written on a sheet of paper and hung up or placed next to the Bible. This will make it easier to see what the station symbolizes. We do not recommend “Post-it” notes. Most important: keep it simple and do-able! What we have suggested here is possibilities, not necessities; local conditions and contexts should be taken into consideration and will determine to some extent what you decided to include.

We have also suggested where the various stations may be positioned in the room. These positions are also optional. Another possibility is to hold the entire service outdoors. The entrance to the “church” could be a sort of altar area. But it is not a good idea to have some stations indoors and some outdoors. This may easily be interpreted as some stations being more important than others.

A school or parish hall may also be used as a worship setting. Preparation for the service could be a good opportunity to hold a workshop involving both young people and adults. Time could be spent reflecting on the stations and arriving at which stations ought to be included, working out the unity of the service, designing and making the stations, and perhaps finding an alternative way in which to introduce them. You could, for example, attach personal experiences and stories to some of the stations. It is important that these be kept brief.



The Stations

- **Place for grievances/complaints**

Bitterness. Stones. Dark and striking colors. Near the entrance to the sanctuary. Psalm 22:2.

- **Place for conversation**

The possibility to unload burdens; confession. Placed in a rear corner of the worship area. Chairs placed in pairs. Tables with cups and warm tea. Stones with burning candles on them. A deep, dark and restful green color. John 3: "Nicodemus came to Jesus by night and said ..."

- **Place for fellowship**

Placed in the opposite rear corner of the room. A burning candle in the center where people can sit in a circle around the light. I Corinthians 12:12-26 (v. 13); Philippians 2:1.

- **Place for joy and laughter**

Along one of the outer walls. Yellow; the clown; or many colors, red noses or a picture of a clown. Genesis 18:12; I Corinthians 1:27a .

- **Place for the body and sexuality**

Massage (feet or hands). Warm colors of love, pink, flowers, veils preferably shaped as an abstract installation. Song of Solomon 4:1; Luke 7:38b .

- **Place of worth**

Pearls, stars, blue. From Isaiah 45:3: "I will give you the treasures of darkness and hidden riches of secret places, that you may know that it is I, the Lord, who call you by your name."

- **Oasis**

The wellspring. At the baptismal font, with potted plants, a tree. A water faucet for watering the flowers; cold water to drink; a wash basin. Blue and green. John 4:14; Jesus' baptism; Revelation 22 vs. 1 and 17; Psalm 42:1.

- **Place of vulnerability and pain**

Center, toward the rear of the worship area. Blood red fabric. The possibility to share poetry and other texts. Jeremiah 30:17.

- **Place of Wonder**

The place of transformation, zest for life and strength. In the center of the worship area. Bread and wine. All the colors may come together here.

- **Place for intercessory prayer and lighting candles**

On the way up to the altar area. The opportunity to light candles and to write intercessory prayers on slips of paper. A pot or similar receptacle in which to place the slips of paper. Color of hope. Philippians 4:6.

- **Place of rest**

In front of the altar. Warm and dark colors, pillows, blankets, mattresses. Matthew 11:28.

- **Place of struggle**

Behind the altar, preferably along the wall toward the pulpit. Posters/sheets of paper on the wall on which to write. Battle colors. Purple. Ephesians 6:12.



“In him we live and
move and have our being”

The Liturgy

1. Procession

While an appropriate hymn or song is sung, Participants carry wine and bread (a loaf of bread), water for the oasis and a candle for each station. One person to each candle, which is carried in cupped hands. The procession moves toward the altar.

2. Greeting and short Bible text

- Acts 17:24-25; 27b-28.
- The persons with candles go to their respective stations either following the greeting or during the introduction as each of the stations is mentioned. In the latter case, the closest stations should be mentioned first, so that the congregation can see that that is where the candle bearers go, and then the stations towards the rear of the worship area.

3. Song

4. Introduction

Opening words and description of the room. Create a sense of security in relation to what is going to happen. Things to be mentioned:

- The right to be whole.
- “Behold the man!” Make room for all of life supported by God.
- All the stations are mentioned, either with someone telling of a personal experience that connects them to a specific station, or by taking some ideas from the sermon listed at the end of this suggested order of worship. If the candle bearers have gone to their stations, they stand up as their station is mentioned and hold up the candle.
- Tell the people that they may remain quietly seated in their places, or go to whichever stations they wish. There is no point in going to as many stations as possible. Listen to your feelings.
- Announce whether there will be Holy Communion or an Agape meal or perhaps something else following the visits to the stations.
- Everything IS DONE in the sight of God, in his sanctuary, and points to God who accepts and has created us as we are.
- Prayer concluding the introduction: “Thank you, God, that

we can be whole persons in your house: you, our creator; you, Jesus, who acknowledge us and set us free; you, the Holy Spirit, the giver and renewer of life within us.”

5. Confession of faith

Suggestion: The Nicene Creed.

6. Music

Instrumental music or meditative song

7. Visit to the stations

At least half an hour; either with quiet, meditative background music, or in silence if that is not too threatening. If silence is chosen, it may be good to break the silence two or three times with meditative songs. This creates a feeling of fellowship in the whole of the room while people are visiting the various stations.

8. Holy communion or an Agapé meal

While people are still dispersed in the room, the service continues. People may remain where they are.

- When there is Holy Communion: the celebrant kneels next to the bread and wine in the center aisle by the Place of Wonder and may begin directly with the Words of Institution: “In the night when he was betrayed...”

- Exchange of the sign of Peace: “Let us greet one another with the peace of Christ / ‘The peace of the Lord be with you.’”
- The distribution takes place from the Place of Wonder. Those who wish may receive Holy Communion. Bread that has been blessed (not consecrated) may be distributed to those who do not wish to receive Communion. The distribution may take place in silence or accompanied by meditative songs.

9. The Lord’s prayer, Benediction and dismissal

Everyone gathers in a circle, or in circles within circles. The Lord’s Prayer is prayed in unison, a pastor pronounces the Benediction.

10. Recessional song



Suggested Sermon

We are here. We have come to stand in the presence of The Holy One. We have turned our backs on the world. The fragile, difficult, hard, unjust, sumptuous and wonderful world. We stand here, looking neat on the outside. But “the world” has not turned its back on us. We are still carrying it with us, inside ourselves. Frustration and anger stir beneath the surface. Longing and failures compete with each other to divert our attention from our meeting with The Holy One. Perhaps our physical body still remembers the experiences of the night, even though our spirit tries to forget them, pride over yesterday’s good deeds threatens humility or shame over who we are threatens our self-esteem.

We try to be perfect and believe that it is synonymous with being whole—and whole is what we must be when we are going to meet God ... Or is that the way it should be? Isn’t being whole to accept all the diversity of good and evil? Isn’t it to give oneself the right to be a part of creation, but also to be part of a struggling world?

It is when we accept this and take with us into church all that we are as human beings, that the meeting with The Holy One takes place. Then we make room for grace, restoration and joy. Everything happens -in God

In this service we are going to be permitted to be what we are, namely, human beings. Within each of us there are many rooms, and today there are also many “rooms” in this house of God. Some days it is the rooms with joy and thankfulness that dominate the space within us. If that is the case for you today, then follow the candle bearer to the place for joy and laughter.

If, on the other hand, this is a day when the room with shame and anger dominates, then follow a different candle bearer to the place for grievances/complaints. If your body switches between the longing to be touched and wanting to rest, then visit both the place for the body, sexuality and sensuality – and the place of rest. Or if you are at a point in life where everything feels dried up, as though you are wandering in a barren landscape, then follow the candle bearer to the spring with living water or take a trip to the place of worth where you can again rise up in all your greatness. Or a possible path may take you from the place of conversation, where you can unload yourself of whatever it is that hinders you from having contact with others, to the place of fellowship where you receive new courage from others. From there you can go further, either for others at the place of intercessory prayer and lighting of candles, or you can hurl yourself into the fight for the good life at the place of struggle.

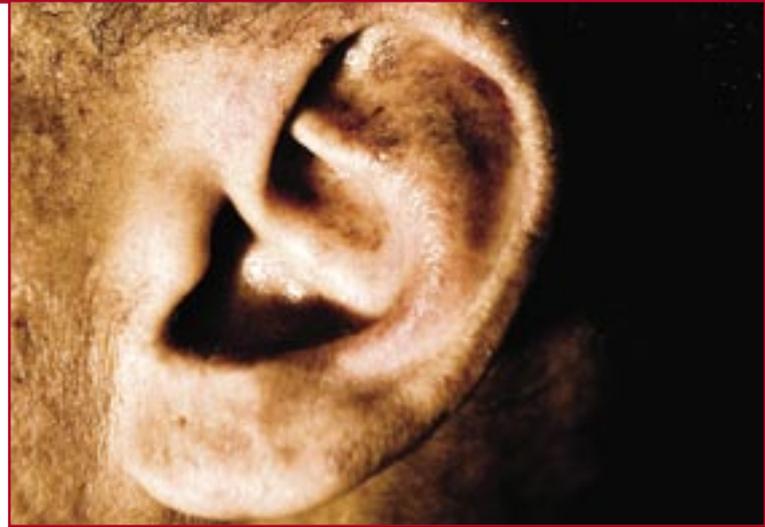
Finally, take the road leading from all the stations to the PLACE OF WONDER, where we raise our hands like empty vessels and receive bread and wine, the courage to live and strength to go out into the world – together with God.

Here we are safe. In God’s house, face to face with The Holy One, we can be who we are. Everything happens - in God.

Sit quietly for a while and feel what you need today. Perhaps it is enough to visit one station—or maybe you just want to sit in the church pew all the time? Whatever is right for you is right.

In God’s house we are free.

In God we live and move and have our being.



Retreat liturgy:
morning prayer

DENMARK

On Nearness

Every year during winter, a retreat is held for people living with HIV and AIDS and their loved ones. People get together to meditate, pray, reflect and support each other – in silence as well as in sharing. This is an example of the shared liturgy.

1. Hymn

2. Morning prayer

Let us pray:

Lord our God

we thank you for quietness

in a world full of noise and commotion.

Thank you that you are here.

Lord, go with us into the new day

that lies before us.

We don't know whether this day will be bright and beautiful
or blighted and bitter.

But we believe and hope that you are the God of love,

that you go with us every day until the end of time,

yes, into the endlessness beyond,

that you love us and support us whatever happens.

May we experience moments of prayer today.

May we hear your heart beat.

Amen!

3. Bible Reading

LUKE 24:13-35

4. Meditation

We can follow many paths through life. We can take the main roads or the side roads. We can take short cuts or make de-

tours. We can get lost and go astray. We can stand at cross-roads and have no idea which direction we should choose.

We can follow many paths through life. Some of them just lead to dead ends. Others end up where we want to be. And then there are the paths we have never set our feet on, un-trodden paths, the country of undiscovered opportunities.

Once upon a time there was a man who came to his journey's end – heaven. Together with the Lord he watched his life go by. He smiled when he saw the beautiful moments and wept when he saw the painful ones. But he realized that in all the good times, there was another set of footprints beside his own, traces of a companion. But in the bad times there were only two feet treading their way through life.

The man looked at the Lord and asked reproachfully, "Why were you only with me when everything was easy and I was happy? Why wouldn't you walk with me when things got hard?" The Lord stroked his cheek and said, "My dear child, when life was unbearable for you I didn't just walk by your side, I carried you..."

We can follow many paths through life. But more important than the paths we take are the people who walk beside us, the companions we have on our way. Jesus Christ is not only our guide, he is our companion. Step by step he leads us and helps us with our loads when the going is heavy. He will put up with us, and lift us up on his shoulders and carry us if we are forced to our knees. Amen!

5. Hymn

6. The peace

The peace of God is shared with hugs and embraces.



Afternoon devotion

Listening

1. Hymn

2. Prayer

Like your disciples on their way to Emmaus
we are often unable to see
that it is you, Jesus, who have joined us on our journey.
But when our eyes are opened
we realise that it was you who talked to us all the time,
even though we perhaps turned away from you
and didn't listen to a word you were saying.
But this is the token of our trust in you:
that we try to love and to forgive
together with you.
In spite of our doubt
because of our faith
you, Jesus, are always here,
your love burning in the depths of our heart.
Thanks be to God!
Amen!

3. Meditative reading

Luke 24:13-35 is read slowly.

4. Short silence

The participants choose a word or sentence from the reading, which is spread like a mosaic on the chapel floor.

5. Silence

6. Hymn

7. The Aaronic blessing

Which is read while all hold hands:

The Lord bless us and keep us. The Lord make his face to shine upon us and be gracious unto us. The Lord lift up his countenance upon us and give us his peace! Amen!

There you sit

**with scabs
of dirt and shame**

**on your scarred and naked arms
on your scarred and naked soul**

**You tell your story
count your losses**

**the man who left you
the child you had to leave**

**the poison
flooding your body**

**a swollen river
that nothing can check**

**that will never stop
raging
bursting all your fragile dikes**

**I want to die
you say**

**I say
nothing**

**reach out and hold
your hand
your rough and restless hand**



**“Lord, be always with us here,
near us when the day is dawning
and when sun and starlight fades
in the depths of night-time darkness.
May your Spirit never leave us
till in heaven you receive us!”**

Amen!

B.S. INGEMANN, NO. 366 IN THE DANISH HYMN BOOK OF 1966

Sermon at a retreat service

Luke 24:13-35

DENMARK

God Who Touches Us

BY CARINA WØHLK

We are so afraid of touching one another. And you who have HIV have to a high degree experienced this fear of nearness in your body and soul – both when those who are not infected have drawn away from you in their anxiety and ignorance, and when you yourselves have pushed others away from you because you have been afraid of being despised and rejected.

We are so afraid of touching one another, because physical contact exposes our weakness and differentness. We therefore dazzle people at a distance rather than letting them get close to us. We avoid getting involved with others. We seldom dare to come forward and admit who we are. That requires sensitivity towards ourselves and others – it requires nearness to God who enfolds us and who loves us beyond the boundaries of reason.

During this retreat we have looked at the nature and importance of nearness. Far from the bustle of daily life we have dwelt on words and thoughts. We have spoken the language of prayer and met one another in quietness. Now we are going to walk a little way with the disciples on the road to Emmaus – in order to grasp and understand the divine nearness.

The Emmaus story takes us to the time and place – to the empty space – after the madness of Calvary. Two of Jesus' disciples, two of his close and dear friends, are on their way to the village of Emmaus. They sigh with sorrow as they go. Even though it is still daylight, they are completely in the dark. They cannot see a way out of their agony. Why should Jesus, who was so good, come to such a bad end? Hadn't he promised that he would always be there for them? And then he goes and abandons them irrevocably. They don't understand a thing – least of all that Jesus should be meant to suffer. They find no meaning in the madness.

The disciples are lost. They lose themselves in their feeling of loss. They have lost a person they loved. And they have lost their faith in his words, they can no longer believe that he was the one he said he was: their liberator and the son of God. All their hopes and expectations are dashed.

They have followed the man whom they believed was the way to heaven – and that way has obviously turned out to be a dead end. They are disgruntled and despondent. They have left Jerusalem in disappointment and disgust. Rumours claim right enough that Jesus' grave is empty. But that seems unbelievable, too good to be true.

Suddenly a third man comes on the scene. It is the risen Lord, Jesus Christ. We know that. But the disciples do not recognise him. All they see is a stranger. They are not just disillusioned, what they see is an illusion.

The man asks them why they are so downcast. They look as though they have just lost their closest friend... The disciples explain to him what has happened in Jerusalem during the past few days. They tell him of all their dreams that now lie crushed at the foot of the cross.

Fervently and fully the man interprets the ancient prophecies for them. He explains that it is written in Scripture that the son of God must suffer and then be taken into glory. He tries to modify the disciples' black-and-white view of what has happened.

As they come near the village to which they are going, the stranger walks ahead as if he is going on. But the disciples, who enjoy his company and his glowing words, urge him to stay and eat with them. During the meal, the miracle happens. Scales fall from the disciples' eyes.

In the split second when Jesus breaks the bread, the Last Supper is recreated – but with a difference. Now it is clear that the one who gives is also the one who is given. Jesus Christ has died and is risen. His flesh and blood are one with the bread and wine.

And it is this living fellowship, not the dead letter, that gives the disciples faith in the resurrection. It is the company, not the conversation, that opens their minds. The disciples see Jesus alive in the flesh on the road, but it doesn't register with them. They hear him interpret Scripture, but they don't listen. They are not just heavy-hearted, they are hard of hearing and slow to learn.

It is only at the moment when they are about to eat, at the



moment when they are one with Jesus in the meal, that they realise how suffering and glory hang together in his story. Revelation is to have your eyes opened!

In the joy of recognition, Jesus now vanishes into thin air. Their ways must part, but the disciples no longer suffer from separation anxiety. They have seen him and realised who he is. They have recognised him and acknowledged him as the son of God. And that sets them free to return to their lives and their relationships with others. The paralysed disciples become men of action.

The conditions of life and its unpredictability are unchanged, but not the disciples' faith. They are no longer disillusioned. They are no longer disorientated. They can suddenly see the meaning in what has happened.

The story of the journey to Emmaus is the story of a grief process. The disciples go on an outer and an inner journey. They travel from doubt and despair to faith and action.

When we lose those we are fond of, when things fall apart instead of going ahead, when our hearts break and nothing seems to hold, we are overwhelmed by feelings of meaninglessness and hopelessness. We are like the two disciples on their way to Emmaus. We feel lonely and abandoned by God, our "Why?" cries out to heaven.

But even though we cannot catch sight of the meaning in the meaninglessness, even though we cannot recreate coherence in the collapse, we are not left to ourselves. There is a way out of suffering. And Jesus Christ will join us on that way – even when we see him as a stranger.

He will snatch us out of the darkness of doubt and despair. He will give us insight so we can see our own situation clearly. He will pour out his love and fill us with hope. Hope casts light over life. Hope sees our lives as they are – and at the same time opens for the possibility of change.

We are so afraid of touching one another. But we have a God who touches us with his enormous eternal goodness. We are

so terrified of closeness. But we have a God who wants close contact with us; a God who – quite literally – gets under our skin, because he loves us.

We are so afraid of touching one another. But in our living and our relationships, God comes near – even though we don't want anything to do with him. He comes near with a love that crosses our boundaries and overwhelms us with its strength. Amen!

Dear God,

Thank you that we have been present here together with you and one another during this retreat.

We pray:

Keep our hearts receptive for love.

Keep our eyes open for your revelation.

Keep us firm in faith

that you are Lord over life and death, over the living and the dead.

You who are only a prayer away, be near us always.

Amen.

Let us pray for a moment in silence...

Now you can stand, and with the apostle we pray for ourselves and one another:

The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God our Father and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be and remain with us all...

Amen!





Lighting Candles

God, you created one world, without boundaries and divisions.
We confess that it is our fault that your world is split and divided.
Help us to restore unity to the world,
and unite us in the struggle to give all people with HIV the same opportunities and rights as other people.
God, we pray for those countries where the authorities close their eyes to the reality that HIV and AIDS represent.
Give us the courage to expose them, so that no-one else needs to be sacrificed on the altar of denial.
We light a candle for the unity of all humankind. **(A candle is lit.)**
God give us courage to work for unity.

God, you who are the source of our humanity and dignity:
Show us our responsibility for one another.
Help us to create a world where no-one profits from other people's suffering and distress,
a world where research workers, the drugs industry and we ourselves are aware of our ethical responsibility.
God, we pray for a world where life is the main issue – not statistics and profit.
We light a candle for right priorities in society. **(A candle is lit.)**
God give us insight to work for justice.

God, you who have created us equal whatever our occupation, social status, nationality or sexual preferences.
Unite us over all the social boundaries that we create.
We pray for all sex workers who are exploited and live under pressure.
We pray for all who struggle for the right to protect themselves against HIV,
May they be heard and may they find powerful spokespersons and comrades-in-arms.
We light a candle for a world where there is no "we" and "they". **(A candle is lit.)**
God give us solidarity to be a voice for the voiceless.



Loving God

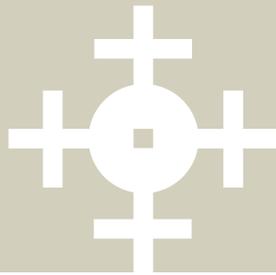
We have shared our pain and loss with you.
You are our hope
in our suffering and our longing.

May we find peace in believing
that you are powerful in the powerless.
Show us that your strength can unfold
in our incredible weakness.

You Lord of the lack of prejudice,
help us to create a world
where no-one needs to die alone
and where everyone can live
daringly and fearlessly.

This we ask
in the name of Jesus Christ.

Amen!

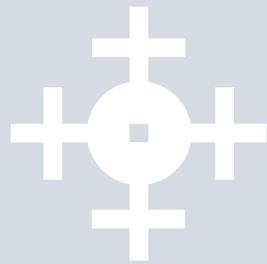


God, you serve us and have called us to serve one another without counting the cost.
Strengthen our inclination and our willingness to serve one another.
We pray for employees in the social and health sectors and for volunteers who work for people with HIV.
Let them know that they are serving you, o God, and give them endurance.
We pray for the friends, families and partners of people with HIV, for those bereaved by AIDS.
We light a candle for comfort for those who mourn. **(A candle is lit.)**
God give us compassion to serve those who suffer.

God, you have created us all in your own image and have made us co-creators of a just world:
Help us in the struggle with prejudice, ignorance and stupidity,
so we soon can see the contours of a world that treats all people with HIV with respect.
God, be near to those who have lost their jobs, friends, families and partners because of their HIV condition.
We light a candle for a world with respect for the dignity of all. **(A candle is lit.)**
God give us a vision to share with those who have lost all hope.

God, you who know us and feel our pain:
We know that nothing can separate us from your love.
We pray for all people with HIV and all who are affected by HIV and AIDS,
who live with anxiety, with grief and with loss.
God, who created all people in your image, help us to be there when others suffer.
We light a candle for a world where suffering is shared and burdens relieved. **(A candle is lit.)**
God, give us more of your love so we can understand more deeply the pain and the hope that are part of being human.

Prayer on World AIDS Day



Our Father in heaven,

on this World AIDS Day
we come to you with everything
that crushes and compels us.

We pray:

Be with all your sons and daughters
who live with HIV and AIDS.

Children become orphans.
Women become widows.
Generations disappear.

God give us strength to react
to the extent and expense
of the AIDS epidemic.

Raise us up,
so we can go out into the world
and fight against HIV -
and against arrogant discrimination.

Help us to confront
our own self-righteousness
and our false ideas
about HIV and those infected.
Open our hearts
for change and reconciliation.

In your goodness God,
give rest to those who have died of AIDS
and hope to those who live with HIV.

This we ask
in the name of Jesus Christ our Lord.
Amen!



OneBody

One Body was initiated by a joint core group that met in Lusaka 2004. From Zambia: Japhet Ndhlovu, Joy Lubinga, Munalula Akakulubelwa, Rose Malowa. From Mozambique: Dinis Matsolo, Elias Massicame. From Norway: Jan Bjarne Sodal, Estrid Hesselund, Steinar Eraker. From Denmark: Carina Wohlk, Birthe Juel Christensen. From EHAIA: Sue Parry.

CONTRIBUTORS TO VOLUME 2:

ZAMBIA

Rev. Japhet Ndhlovu, General Secretary of The Council of Churches in Zambia, in cooperation with Circles of Hope. Joy Lubinga, Psycho-social counsellor, Circles of Hope. Ackim Sakala, Teacher, HIV+ activist, Circles of Hope. Bishop Luckson Chibuye. Rev Pearson Banda, HIV/AIDS, Coordinator from the Reformed Church in Zambia

MOZAMBIQUE

Rev. Elias Zacarias Massicame, National Coordinator of the HIV/AIDS Project at the Christian Council of Mozambique, in cooperation with Rev. Dinis Matsolo, General Secretary of the Christian Council of Mozambique

DENMARK

Rev. Birthe Juel Christensen, DanChurchAid, Denmark. Rev. Carina Wohlk, National Lutheran AIDS Association. Preben Bakbo Sloth, HIV+ activist. Elizabeth Knox-Seith, Cultural Sociologist

NORWAY

Jan Bjarne Sodal, Project Coordinator on HIV and AIDS, the Christian Council of Norway, along with people living with or affected by HIV, meeting at Aksept - the Church City Mission Centre in Oslo. Rev. Helge Fisknes, pastor in Oslo City Mission. Rev. Steinar Eraker, former pastor at Aksept. Rev. Elisabeth Tveito, board member in the Norwegian AIDS association HivNorge, co-editor, with Estrid Hesselund, of Positive: Branding, sexuality, HIV and AIDS. Verbum, Norway, 2005 pages 16 and 29

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