



One
for
all



Human dignity
inherent in **every**
human being



Preamble

One Body is part of the Nordic-FOCCISA cooperation on hiv and aids. This material is the result of a close and collaborative dialogue between people living with hiv and aids and people from the Churches in Southern Africa and the Nordic countries.

The cooperation between the Churches in the two regions is based on two fundamental issues: First, our belief that we are all created in the image of God, every single one of us. Second, the Church has a responsibility to address and combat hiv and aids related stigma

Ubuntu is a word from many African traditions. The phrase expresses issues like caring, grace and dignity, and Africans usually say that “I live because you live” and that “I am not me, without you, without a fellowship”. In that way, *ubuntu* is a word that says something important about an African way of understanding life as something relational. By the way we relate to one another, we create one another’s lives, and by the way we meet one another we can either expand or reduce one another’s lives. This is the opposite of an understanding that sees life in more individual terms. Christian theology has a lot to say about the fact that we need one another. In God’s first observation of the creation, God said: “It is not good that the man or the woman should be alone” (Gen 2:18).

We are reminded about the same in the story of the two disciples going to Emmaus after Easter. They had lost a dear friend, life was hard and then suddenly, a stranger joins into their conversation. In that moment, the

two disciples experienced what we often need: that someone is willing to listen when we are telling our story, without interruptions, with patience, without saying that there are others that are feeling even worse.

When we come to periods in our lives when the days are heavy, and we can’t see the sun or experience any happiness, do we then have someone willing to listen? We have Jesus, but this story also encourages us to be fellow human beings for each other, who in fact are able to help one another through the heavy days of our lives. This corresponds with the title of our cooperation: One Body.

The Church is one body: “Though we are many, we are one body in union with Christ, and we are all joined to each other as different parts of one body” (Rom 5:8).

As co-chairs of the One Body Core Group, we would like to express our gratitude to all those who have been involved in developing this material, and we recommend it for study and reflection in all our Churches.

“Though we are many, we are one body in union with Christ, and we are all joined to each other as different parts of one body”

Rom 5:8

Osborne Joda-Mbewe
Co-chair,
One Body Core Group
Malawi

Knut Refsdal
Co-chair,
One Body Core Group
Norway

♀ Towards gender equality, including young people and overcoming abuse

Throughout the centuries, the voice of Jesus about equal value and equal respect for both women and men has been echoed by many people in the church; sometimes more strongly and sometimes less strongly. Sometimes they have been heard and taken heed of, sometimes they have either not been heard at all or have been silenced.

During the 1960's, as the world rose against the infringement of human dignity called apartheid, countries in the Nordic region and countries in the Southern part of Africa chose to work together with many other activists in society, to oppose this evil.

In the 1980's The Nordic-FOCCISA Cooperation was formed by the Fellowship of Christian Councils in Southern Africa and the Nordic Ecumenical Council. The cooperation began in 1988.

When apartheid as a legal system was successfully abandoned and the God-given dignity of millions of South Africans of all races was restored, the Cooperation turned to new areas where human dignity was being infringed. This time the focus was on HIV. Faith communities and societies both within the Southern part of Africa and in the Nordic countries struggled with fear, prejudice and exclusion. Greater scientific knowledge in the

field of HIV did not necessarily lead to greater social acceptance of people living with and affected by HIV. On the contrary, many were ostracized, estranged, openly called sinners and even killed. Stigma and discrimination were the order of the day. In this environment the Nordic-FOCCISA Cooperation sought to reexamine what our common faith says about HIV. The initiative came from a meeting in Morogoro, Tanzania, in 2003, which was attended by the general secretaries and representatives of the Christian Councils in the Nordic region and the Fellowship of Christian Councils in Southern Africa. The meeting aimed at assisting faith communities to restore the dignity of those affected and infected by HIV. Out of this process, a project which was later called "One Body" was born. The project developed reading materials volume 1 and volume 2 to deal with the stigma and discrimination towards people infected and affected by HIV and AIDS. The material comprises the true life-stories of victims and is aimed at showing the devastating effects of the HIV virus. The material also reaffirms the intrinsic value of every human being and assists the faith communities to reaffirm their diaconal roles and to abandon discriminatory language and actions.



In this current publication, the theme of human dignity is further explored in relation to gender, youth and abuses. This has been done with an understanding that there are still many gaps in the churches' response to HIV.

Through personal stories from many of the participating countries, through selected bible-studies, and through questions to be considered and debated, we hope that this material will be helpful in the further steps needed to be taken towards a strengthened sense of human dignity and gender equality.

The material has been developed through many dialogues in the involved countries, in the South as well as in the North. In addition, several meetings have been conducted across the regions, in order to give the result the form of a dialogue.

Dialogue as a tool of reflection

In the Nordic-FOCCISA cooperation, the focus on human dignity has brought a number of sensitive issues to light. Facing these head on is imperative if people are to be truthful to each other and to their faith. But facing issues →

Dialogue should never be used or viewed as a disguised form of compromise or a betrayal of cultural or other values.

→ requires first of all recognizing each other as created in the image of God and as full inheritors of human dignity. This openness to each other, rooted in listening and sharing, is the basis of dialogue.

Dialogue should never be used or viewed as a disguised form of compromise or a betrayal of cultural or other values. The function of dialogue is largely a matter of opening up issues and understanding one another's views. In reflecting on the themes of human dignity, gender, youth and abuse one should be able to agree or disagree without losing respect for one another.

Dialogue expresses the important fact that cooperation takes place between persons and not between systems. Knowledge of the specific cultural and social system to which a

In our context, dialogue is an activity focusing on human dignity. In it we explore shared beliefs, cultural traditions and practices, peculiarities and differences within our communities at different levels.

There are many different levels of dialogue: individual, family, church, community, national, regional, continental, and international. As the One Body Project we have experienced all these levels, both directly and indirectly.

In dialogue we respect other views, making it possible to understand existential themes from different points of view and in different contexts. It is easier to listen to others when we accept that every human being has inherent human dignity. Open-mindedness and respect are the foundation of cooperation between people. Dialogue conveys ideas of friendship rooted in equality.

Dialogue in the Bible

In the Bible people are given a chance to take part in a dialogue about their complaints, doubts and fears. Therefore, many texts in the Bible show how faith makes it easy to have a dialogue with God, with Jesus, and with

other people, across ethnic borders, between women and men, and between generations. These encounters open up for changes in attitudes and beliefs. Christianity can be seen as a community of dialogue between God and humanity. Dialogue is an open invitation to reason together about issues in our societies in the presence of Christ.

Dialogue implies a willingness to listen to each other's views with an open mind. This challenges us to be one as the body of Christ, even though our viewpoints differ. This oneness, in which we can see our unity in Christ despite our differences and take responsibility for each other, is central to the meaning of the African word Ubuntu, a concept that we also find in 1 Corinthians 15. It is our hope that the dialogue can continue in the spirit of partnership.

Dialogue is a tool for reflection and should seek to identify challenges and agree on concrete action.

person belongs is necessary, but it is not fair to judge people according to the system they belong to.

Dialogue is an exchange of interesting thoughts on the agreed theme combined with an attitude of openness and respect for each other. True dialogue requires a radical openness and respect for each other as bearers of the inherent gift of human dignity.

Such a dialogue always places women and men, all human beings at an equal level regardless of class and gender.

The dialogue process

Dialogue has to do with the development of reflection or exchange of views, by which new insights come to birth... It is a well prepared and organized method. Cooperation between the participants provides its inner dynamic.

Creating a safe space

The conditions for successful dialogue are that everyone should be serious, have respect, show courtesy, be willing to learn, be ready to change and to accept criticism, and not put pressure on each other.

Over the years open dialogue about many issues has become easier, especially in the Nordic countries. These are issues related to gender-based violence, gender equality, sexual abuse and the abuse of sexual minorities. For some people in Africa, this is seen as a disguised form of compromise or a betrayal of Biblical and cultural values. On the other side, lack of dialogue and mutual respect in relation to these issues has created space for destructive forces. Everyone has a duty not to become tired of attempts to engage in dialogue with these different perspectives on matters of human dignity and human rights.

It is agreed that dialogue is a tool for reflection and should seek to identify challenges and agree on concrete action. The aim of dialogue should be to build up trust in order to improve cooperation and utilize spiritual and cultural richness and diversity.

Dialogue should take place with due respect for differing viewpoints and contain a willingness to learn from each other. For

issues within societies the ultimate aim of dialogue should be to have an open mind that thinks “outside the box”.

Eight guiding points for dialogue:

1. Create a safe space in which no one is to be harassed or silenced because of their opinions.
2. Ensure confidentiality. What is said in the room stays in the room.
3. Respect the human dignity of each participant in the dialogue and regard it as fundamental.
4. Listen carefully to everything being said, rather than focusing on what you yourself would like to say.
5. Give women and men, girls and boys the same attention, space and respect.
6. Dialogue is not about “convincing” anyone of your viewpoint, but about helping each other to move to new levels of understanding.
7. Keeping in mind and being reminded that since the first day of Christianity, the faith has been translated differently in different cultures.
8. Adhere to the slogan:
Nothing about us without us.



What are your personal experience(s) of dialogue?

What are the obstacles towards being in “real” dialogue?

How do you view the difference between dialogue and debate?

In your experience of dialogue until now, have women and men been treated equally?

How can we overcome differences and create a “safe space”?

What are the pre-conditions of a “safe space”?

What are the qualities of a real dialogue?

How do we recognize the core of human dignity in everyone participating in the dialogue?

How can dialogue help us move forward?



The concept of **human dignity**

Human dignity is not earned but is inherent in every human being. Human dignity is the God-given intrinsic value of being human—irrespective of class, race, gender, ability, nationality, culture, sex, religion, education, sexual orientation or any other division.

While there are many people living in situations where their human dignity has been denied, it should be remembered that while the very core of human dignity can be abused,

even attacked, it can never be taken away.

For faith institutions, the concept of human dignity is anchored in the belief that every human being - woman, man, girl and boy is created in the image of God, and has been given a unique position in God's world with the same responsibilities and tasks.

The concept of the intrinsic value of every human being is further developed in the Gospel, reflected in the stories of Jesus

and how he approached women and men. By him, we are considered close friends, equal as sisters and brothers of Christ. Stigma, discrimination or condemnation of human dignity was not a part of Jesus' language. We are One Body, united in the spirit of love and compassion.

In the world we live in today, the notion of human dignity is often connected to the social and economic status of a person. A person with a higher level of education is perceived to have a higher dignity, whereas a poor person is seen as almost without any dignity.

In some African societies male children are regarded as having more value than female children. Young girls are brought up in the notion that they are born with lower value, born to serve boys and men. In certain societies, only males can ascend to the position of headmen, chiefs or kings. In politics, we also find serious injustice as males within the same families and circles tend to take the higher positions, whereas women are left out completely.

Ideally, human dignity has nothing to do with gender, status or social rank, but in reality these factors influence the way we view each other and other people. Many struggle with their sense of dignity and often devalue themselves. The self-image of people influences the way they view the world and the relationships they are in. Disregarding oneself can lead to the disregard of others. Jesus tells us to love others as we love ourselves, and yet many people perceive humiliating themselves to be a Christian virtue. This is especially the case with women. This might lead to the notion that human dignity is not inherent, but has to be "earned".

It is important for every woman and man, boy and girl, regardless of age and class, to be respected and treated with dignity, to be protected, and to have equal access to what is needed in daily life. To be able to participate fully

in society on equal terms with others is the basis for strengthening and promoting human dignity. In this regard, human dignity and human rights are words with the same content and meaning.

People often need to "think outside the box" in order to understand what human dignity is really about—in its full depth, length and strength. Their cultural perspectives need to be challenged.

In order to do that, it is important to work together across cultural and national borders. Being one in the body of Christ, we "learn from each other". In this material, the concept of human dignity is explored. Questions to be shared and taken up in dialogue are raised.

In order to fully understand the concept of human dignity, we also need to explore how it is being abused in some societies. By looking at "the dark side" we can see the light as a contrast. We need to ask ourselves: What would it be like, if a society respecting human dignity was created? How can people struggle against any form of abuse and misuse of each other? How can they move beyond the divisions in their society, whether due to race, class, gender, sexual orientation, age or other factors?

By him, we
are considered
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and brothers.

The three interrelated themes:

Gender Youth & Abuse



The word *gender* is used to describe the characteristics, roles and responsibilities of women and men, boys and girls in different cultures and at different times. The concept of gender is related to how we are perceived and expected to think and act as women and men—not because of our biological differences, but because of the way our societies and cultures are organized and developed. Gender perceptions change over time and in different cultures.

can bear children and breastfeed, men cannot do that, but have an equal part with women in procreation. These biological characteristics do not change with time and place.

Abuses or violations related to gender are widespread and seen in all countries and cultures both inside and outside the churches, society and the family. They are often embedded in the unequal value attributed to women and men, unfortunately also expressed from the pulpit.

Gender

Abuses or violations related to gender are widespread and seen in all countries.

The word *gender* is therefore a socially constructed term used to describe how different societies define the roles of women and men and the relationship between them at a certain time.

Most of these roles and relationships are derived from cultural traditions and practices. It is important to realize that culture and traditions are always changing and that every generation has to address issues in their cultures that are or might be contradictory to the intrinsic value of every human being. However, the gender roles of men have been changing much more than the gender roles of women.

The word *sex* relates to biological characteristics and the physiological differences between women and men. For example: Women

Gender analysis

Sometimes it is good to make what we call a gender analysis of a community, a church or a society. A gender analysis examines the relationships between females and males, their roles, their access to and control over resources and the constraints they face relative to each other.

Some of the questions that can be asked are: Who participates, who decides; what kind of work are women and men, girls and boys doing and how does that fit into issues of human dignity? How are women and men depicted in sermons, in church teaching and in the way the Church is structured? These are important questions to discuss openly and in a framework of dialogue.

Both women and men have strengths and weaknesses, skills and resources, needed both in church and society. If women and men are not cooperating and taking into account each other's equal rights, values and resources, there will be no justice, no equality and no development for either of the sexes. The strengths and resources of a person should not be attributed according to gender. It is not in accordance with human dignity values to say: "Because you are a woman, you do not have the skill to think consistently and decide what is right". And it should not be said: "Because you are a man, you cannot show any sort of grief".

In the way language is used, full value should be given to every human being, irrespective of social status or position, in the way they are talked about. In many societies, women are often only valued if they are married

and give birth to a child (preferably a boy). In some women's organizations in churches, unmarried women or single mothers are not allowed to be members. As Christians, we are asked to give equal value to every human being, irrespective of age, gender, race, class or other differences.

Many people seem to compare the history of creation with the history of the fall, and make the results of the fall into the will and intention of God. Theologians have over the years blamed Eve for eating the apple and thereby bringing sin into the world. Patriarchy as a cultural value and as an institution is seen as a sort of punishment for this "original sin". As Christians we are called to deal with the results of the fall. No one should build up power structures that can be used to oppress and diminish the value of any human being, especially if this is only applied to one of the sexes. If we do not prevent this from happening, women may be confined to submissive relationships without their own will and rights. In fact, most violence is directed towards women because they are women. This is what we could call a patriarchal sin.

When gender is mentioned, people often talk about women and relate it to abuses — especially sexual abuses and gender based violence. This might give the impression that

women are always subject to and victims of abuse and are vulnerable creatures who always need protection. Such a way of thinking will lead to a devaluation of women and their resources and strengths, and at the same time will also devalue men. Men will be depicted as people with power who mostly exert this power as violence against women. At the same time this sort of language "justifies" that men are given the power to make decisions over women. It is very important to be careful about how one uses language—to make sure that the language is gender-sensitive, describing the values, strength and resources of every human being. In themselves, women and men are not vulnerable, they have vulnerabilities, and that goes for both sexes.



How would you describe the gender roles of women and men in your context?

Which cultural traditions and practices are promoting or destroying equality among women and men?

Share stories on gender-related discrimination from your own cultural setting.

Give examples of how women and men in your opinion are treated differently.

Do you think this affects their view of themselves related to human value and human dignity?

What can be done to change the traditional views regarding gender roles?

What is a patriarchal sin? How do we counter patriarchal sins?

Can the Bible be a help for us in our dialogue on gender issues? If so, how?

How do we restore human dignity in our gender relationships?

Stories of Gender Abuse

Chikondi – the blessed child A story from Malawi

Gender violence is common in my country. It is taking place at an alarming rate and magnitude. However, government has taken steps to minimize incidences of this violence. There are a lot of stories of gender abuses, of which my story is one.

Four years ago my husband and I got married. My husband was in his thirties and I was twenty-six years old. We lived happily the first year and were blessed with a baby girl whom we named Chikondi, meaning there was love between us.

Later on my husband began showing his true colors and whenever I asked him anything I was beaten, telling me all sorts of things—I had no powers of questioning him.

One day when coming from his beer drinking my husband found that I had locked myself in the house because I was tired of being beaten. He started shouting and broke down the door and began to beat me with a big rod. My grandmother came to my rescue and she too was beaten until unconscious. He ran away and no one knows exactly where he is until now.

The sad news is that nobody, not even the village chief, reported the matter to the police.



What are the human dignity issues in this story?

How does this story challenge our view of masculinity?

What can we learn from gender relations and power through this story?

Who should have reported this abuse to the police?

What does your faith community do about gender based violence?

What are the options for this woman?

What would the reactions be for this woman from her family, the community or the church, if she left her husband?

What is the responsibility of the state?

How can messages in sermons challenge our understanding of gender or sustain oppressive perceptions of gender?

How should faith communities intervene?

What is the role of the faith community in such situations?

What kind of preventive or responsive structures can the faith community build up?

How does this story affect you?





Broken dreams A Story from Namibia

I never dreamed of becoming a “second wife”. I grew up with a dream of becoming a television presenter. I was the cream of my family, and my siblings looked up to me. I am a great communicator, full of charisma. I could draw the attention of a crowd and sustain their attention. However, I did not meet the criteria to qualify for media studies at the University. Although my family begged me to repeat my Grade 12, I could not bring myself to do that. My public image was at stake, after all, everyone had expected a lot from me.

In the meantime, I got two children from two different men. At the age of 22, I got married to a man who was 25 years older than me as his second wife; although my Christian family neither supported nor approved my marriage. My husband was abusive, yet I could not leave him, I could not live without him, because he paid my bills. Even though I did not believe in polygamy, because of my Christian beliefs, my reality had consumed my beliefs. And I had to share everything

with the first wife and do what she said, for my children and myself.

All this because I met a man who was prepared to be with me and take care of me and provide financial security. I felt I had a formal financial income. But every day I woke up to the reality, that I had a different dream. Seemingly, I made a mistake, but I opted to remain in the mistake, because the alternative was humiliating. I dreaded the “we told you so” reactions. So I strengthened my resolve and remained in the abusive relationship, for in my mind it was better than going home to face humiliation. I was stuck like a broken step in the staircase to my destiny.

My husband was abusive, yet I could not leave him, I could not live without him, because he paid my bills.



What are the different forms of abuse and vulnerability you see in this story?

How do you believe this woman looks at herself?

Is remaining with an abusive husband simply to have the bills paid another form of sex work?

What are the gender implications for women within polygamy?

Is it manly to have more than one wife?

In your opinion, has this something to do with human dignity? If you are a man, what would a woman say and vice versa?

How can pride make us vulnerable?

How does this story affect you?

How do you think faith communities could intervene or support in situations like this?

Olive's testimony A Story from Zimbabwe

My name is Olive. I'm 52 years old and I have 3 children and 3 grandchildren. I was born in a family of six and my parents were former teachers. I'm a victim of Gender Based Violence and this all started when I got married in 1982. I could not have children and my husband verbally and physically abused me. I wanted to leave him but my elders told me to stay with him because of our culture, and this was 4 months after the marriage. My husband ill-treated me and even went to the extent of impregnating a schoolgirl. This made the relatives happy but it further worsened my situation, as he became more violent. His family therefore concluded that I could not bear children and we got divorced.

When I got divorced I met this other guy who took great care of me and I fell in love

with him and he told me that he was also a divorcee. He paid the lobola, the bride price, to my parents. All I wanted that time was to be loved and to have children and I got pregnant with my first child. He was excited because it was his first-born girl. That was the time I found out that he had several children with different women, and I was surprised. I became pregnant again with his second child and yet he also impregnated another woman. My husband became erratic in his home-coming, and became violent; asking me why I did not ask him where he had been. He concluded that I have another man. I had decided not to ask him since it worsened the abuse. I struggled to raise my children though it was tough. He started to demand to have a third child with me and I was refusing and he nearly killed me, but I got a protection order from the Police. I was so stressed and finally did get pregnant, hoping that the situation would change, but it only got worse.

He started to have more women and these women had their sexual partners which scared me. I went and got tested for HIV and found that I was HIV positive.

I confronted him and urged him to get tested too, which he refused to do until at a certain time he fell ill and was found to be HIV positive. I supported him and helped him take his medication and now he is fit and wants to be a family member.

He started to have more women and these women had their sexual partners which scared me.



What are the different forms of abuse you can see in this story?

Why do we tend to attribute blame to women who are abused?

In which way can having or not having children affect a person's perceived value in your society?

When should we report abuse? And where?

Should Olive have left her second husband? What did Olive have in the second marriage?

How could faith communities respond to gender based violence?

He was to leave for a journey A story from Sweden

Today I have no difficulty talking about David. That is good. It took me many years to overcome my mourning.

David was the entire world to me. We met in the underground and made immediate contact. I was 21 and he was 23. After leaving the train he followed me to a shop where I stood looking at CDs. I watched him out of the corner of my eye and saw him coming up asking for my phone-number. I told him that I was new in Stockholm and not ready to give anyone my phone-number but asked him for his. Later on that very day I called him and we spoke for hours. The following Sunday we met and we remained inseparable until he died.

It took David a long time to tell me about his HIV-infection. First I thought he was shy or prudish, carefully determining his boundaries and defining his limits. Is there any young man of 23 who is in love and not interested in sex?

Finally he told me that he was infected with HIV by injections when he was living abroad with his parents. He was so afraid that I would leave him and now he cried and was ashamed of his fear and his hesitation to tell me.

I made it clear that I needed all possible information and together we contacted the hospital. My mother said she would do anything to support us but at the hospital they told me to leave David. "You are not infected, so why don't you leave him to find another man." That attitude made me even more determined to stay.

We protected ourselves carefully when we had sex, every time using a condom. One day it happened that a condom got broken. Shortly thereafter I got a strong infection. That happened just before our first long trip together. We were going to Turkey, fulfilling a dream. Just before our departure I was terribly ill. The doctor said that it was probably herpes and I did not take the medicine prescribed since I was sure I had something else.



What was beautiful for you in this story? What was sad?

What is abuse in relation to HIV?

Do you see signs of stigma in this story?

Do you know of incidences where medical facilities have abused people because of HIV?

How should we respond?

Is David's partner a woman or a man? Does it matter?

What does this tell us about gender roles?

How should faith communities respond to people living with HIV and those they love?

Our journey was wonderful. After our return I went for an HIV test. When I received the answer David was in such despair that my own reaction was somewhat out of the way. It didn't take long until David was very ill and after ten months he died. During his last months I grew more and more ill myself and for a time we were both in hospital. I could walk with my portable drip stand and visit him in his room. I would go to town and fetch information from travel agents and together we would sit on his bed reading and planning trips. In fact, he was dying.

Why did he have to beat me? A story from Zimbabwe

My name is Dorothy. I got pregnant just after completing my schooling and I eloped with Peter, my child's father, who accepted responsibility and took me in. We got married but no bride price was paid. We were unemployed and Peter decided to go and seek a job in the capital city, leaving me behind to take care of our three children.

Recently Peter remained unemployed for two years. Life was not easy for him in the city and he could not visit me and the children for two years. Accommodation in the city was scarce and Peter ended up co-habiting with some rich widow. The rumors got to me in the village about my husband's marital unfaithfulness, forcing me to seek means to visit my husband to verify the matter.

I borrowed some money for the bus fare from a young herd boy from the neighborhood, to visit my husband. When I got to the capital city I found my husband, and my suspicion were confirmed, he was indeed going

out with that rich woman. My heart was broken because of my husband's unfaithfulness.

I went back to the village and reported everything to Peter's parents. I packed my belongings and left for my parents' home. At my parents' home, I was encouraged to return to my matrimonial home to wait for Peter my husband, as our culture would not allow me to get another man. I listened to my parents and returned to my husband's home.

Rumors began to circulate in the village that I was having an affair with the herd boy I had borrowed the bus fare from. Peter heard about the gossip and this caused him to come quickly home to find out. From the time my husband came back, our relationship was abusive. Peter began to demand to have unprotected sex with me. I refused and insisted that we be tested for HIV before having sex. However, Peter refused to be tested. He accused me of infidelity and began to physically abuse me with fists, whips and boots. I ran away and reported the matter to the police who advised me to seek a peace order for protection against Peter.



How does the culture of the bride price affect human dignity?

In your view, was Dorothy abused?

How would you define abuse in this case?

What are the cultural practices in your environment relating to unfaithfulness? By a man? By a woman?

If Dorothy was having an affair with the herd boy,

would Peter have been justified in his actions?

May a woman deny her husband sex? May a man deny his wife sex? Is there a difference?

How does poverty increase our vulnerability to HIV?

Should Dorothy divorce Peter? Why?

How should the faith community respond?

Who is the faith community actually? The pastor? The congregation? The elders? Both?

Which issues in this story are for common actions and which issues are for counseling?

Do you see dangers that a faith community can assume a role as a judge over sin? How would you approach that?



The heart of

An article from **Zambia**

The socio-cultural setting in Zambia generally relegates women to being considered as subordinate to men therefore making them experience exclusion and marginalization. This is a situation that is evidenced by having less voice, less autonomy and fewer opportunities to make choices about their lives and lowered self-esteem.

Women have limited access to and control of productive resources in comparison to their male folk. Despite their numbers making up more than 50 per cent of the population they are invisible in decision making at all levels from the household to the highest macro level of society and in both the non-religious and religious spheres.

Women are often subjected to violence and abuse, lack of employment opportunities, poor schooling options. They suffer the bur-

den of abandonment and exclusion and lack supportive mechanisms to claim their rights and fulfill their potential. As a consequence women are heavily impacted by HIV, AIDS and poverty. Faith based organizations and communities are not excluded from this picture and in some instances this is re-enforced

den of abandonment and exclusion and lack supportive mechanisms to claim their rights and fulfill their potential. As a consequence women are heavily impacted by HIV, AIDS and poverty. Faith based organizations and communities are not excluded from this picture and in some instances this is re-enforced

both by interpretations of doctrines and non-contextualizing of Biblical passages and consequently practice. Religious, traditional and political attitudes have been a barrier to the protection of women's rights; as a result, Zambia has experienced gender imbalances, gender based violence and inequalities.

Another challenge is rampant poverty in the nation which has the effect of denying women and youth the opportunities and choices enabling them to lead fulfilling, healthy and long lives. In addition they are robbed of dignity and self-esteem and are sidelined in the decision making processes.

Despite the high pronouncements made by government about development of the nation, it should not be assumed that economic growth and development will automatically benefit men and women equally as the profile of women and men within an economy tends to be different in terms of the position which they occupy and the activities which they undertake. Development cannot take place nor the impact be sustained if the people affected do not support them by change of their attitudes and practices towards

the promotion of gender equity and equality through the searching of religious texts, reviewing negative customs/traditions and stereotypes.

On the other hand, cultural socialization has also made men vulnerable to abuse both in homes and community. Due to high expect-

Women have limited access to and control of productive resources in comparison to their male folk.

the problem

tations from society for a man to be strong in all situations, they have not been provided space to vent their frustrations and concerns. This has resulted in many men abusing their spouses and children as a way of taking out their stress. In the *Zambian culture*, a strong man is one who has more than one sexual partner exposing the man to contracting sexually transmitted infections or resorting to using traditional concoctions that eventually impede on the health and wellbeing of that individual. Men's self esteem is also affected if they are not able to provide for the family even when the wife has a higher income and providing beyond what the man can provide. Society looks down on the man and sometimes families call for dissolution of such a marriage de-humanizing the man.

Injustice dehumanizes life and prevents full participation in co-humanity. Justice is, therefore, viewed simply as 'that which people need to be human' and therefore: "let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an overflowing stream" (Amos 5:24).

Cultural socialization has also made men vulnerable to abuse both in homes and community.



Do you recognize this description in your own context?

How is the situation in your country?

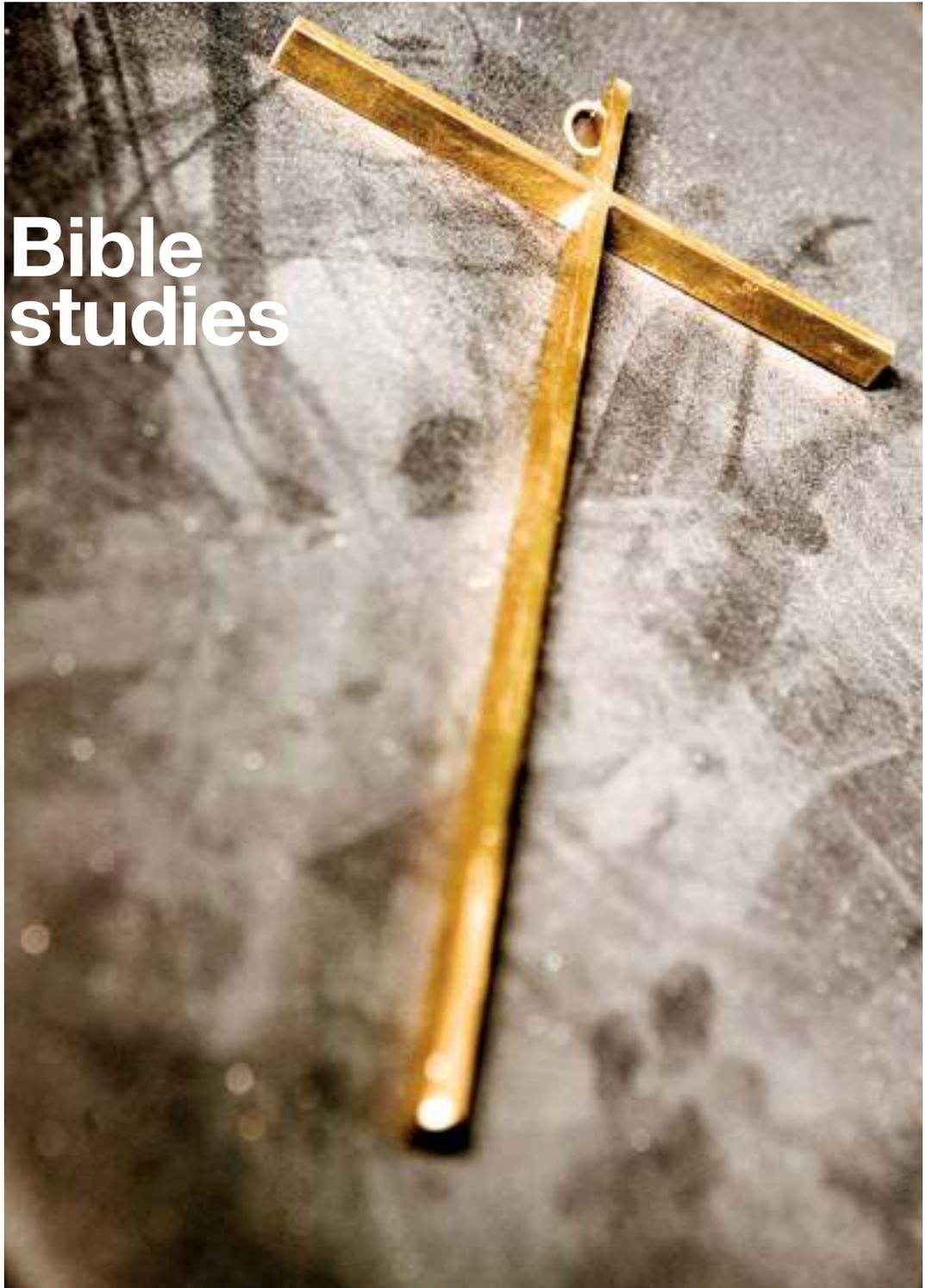
What are the cultural traditions and practices that are promoting/abusing human dignity of women and men in your country/environment? *(Let women and men speak for themselves.)*

What role can the church play in advocating for change?

What role can you play as a change agent? Please elaborate fully!



Bible studies



“In the likeness of God they were created, male and female God created them”

Genesis 1:26–28, 5: 1–2

Created in the image of God

The history of creation is familiar to every Christian. One of the challenges of this story is that in some translations the language that has been used is not gender neutral. In the original it is gender neutral, and both the passages referred to in this Bible study make the point that “in the likeness of God they were created, male and female God created them”. In this bible study we seek to understand how language can influence our attitudes to men and women.

Is the version of the Bible you are reading gender neutral? (*Does it refer to mankind or humankind?*)

What do they say about the relationship between women and men?

If both men and women are created in the image of God, what does this tell us about God?

How could these texts influence our views on gender issues?

Give examples of how the Bible can be used to abuse women—and men?

Give examples of harmful traditions and practices for women and men that you envisage destroy the image of God in women and men? Does your church support such traditions?

Give examples of how some practices have been changed into positive practices giving equal value to women and men.

Genesis 16: 1–16

Hagar and Sarah

At the time this incident takes place there were very specific gender roles which people lived under. Women were expected to be able to have children, and more specifically male children. A woman who could not bear children was considered useless. Having a son was like having a pension fund; it meant security for your old age. We see here that the equality of the creation has already been challenged.

Why does Sarah

humiliate Hagar?

Where do we

find the lack of human dignity in these stories?

What is the

Lord’s angel saying to Hagar?

How does this

influence her identity?

Is Hagar aware

of her human dignity or is her shame hiding it from her?

How is Sarah’s

self-respect restored?

How do the

attitudes to gender reflected in this passage compare to gender attitudes where you live?

Galatians 3:26–29

In Christ we are all one

It is believed that St Paul founded the churches in Galatia, and that after he left, a group of people came along teaching that believing in Christ Jesus is not enough; one also has to observe the Law of Moses. In chapter three St Paul is trying to show that baptism into Christ and faith in Christ is what makes us God's heirs. But what St Paul teaches is even more radical, because he goes further to show that among those of us who are heirs of God there is no hierarchy, all are equal: those who observe Mosaic law and those who don't, those who have earthly freedom and those who are owned by others, yes even men and women are equal.

How are we justified by faith, according to this text?

How does this influence our human dignity?

What does this text say about gender and equality?

Which implications does this have in our daily lives, in our faith communities or in our living together as women and men?

What would complete equality look like in your community if it was truly lived?



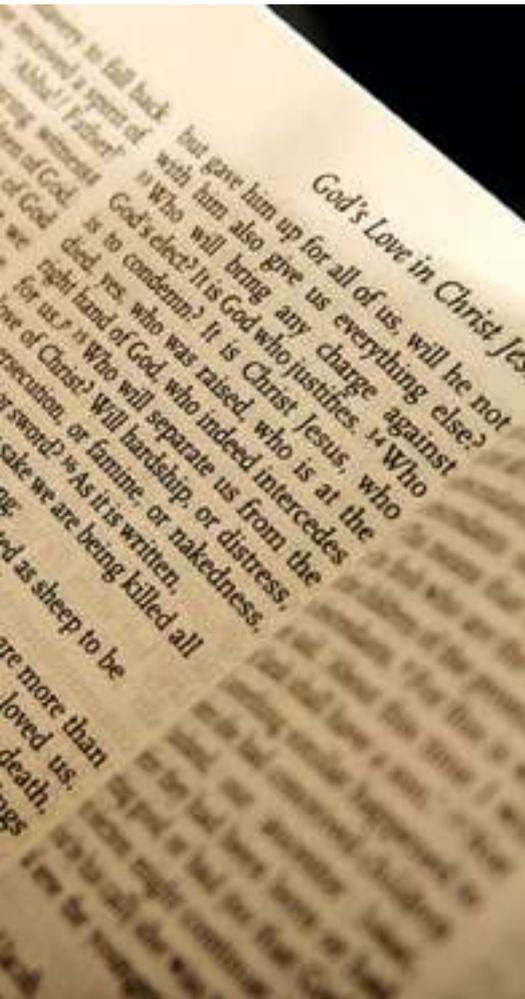
John 4:1–42

Jesus meets the woman at the well

As we read the account of Jesus talking to the Samaritan woman we are not always aware of just how remarkable this event is. Jesus freely engages with a woman who is perceived to be his inferior because she is a Samaritan. She is perceived as unclean, not worthy to give him water. The woman then becomes an evangelist in her town, bringing people to Jesus. Jesus agrees to stay two days in a place where no self-respecting Jew would ever stay. We find here many different levels of acceptance and of challenging social norms.

What does this story tell us about leadership in its Biblical meaning?

How should a pastor or a church leader relate to women and men who are regarded as less valuable than others in the parish?



Luke 8: 43–48

The woman who suffered from bleeding

This account may well be familiar to all of us, but there are very interesting gender dynamics to it. We know that Jewish purity laws determine that a woman cannot be touched while she is menstruating. In some way the blood flow (which is seen as life) makes her unclean. This woman is bleeding, and so by definition if Jesus touches her he becomes ritually unclean. But Jesus, knowing he has been touched, seeks her out not to challenge her, but rather to embrace her—deliberately and publicly, even though she tells him that she has been bleeding.

How would you feel if you had been considered unclean for 12 years?

Can we compare this story to the story of a HIV positive person? How?

This woman takes the initiative to reach out for healing. How could we encourage people to reach out without fear of rejection? What kind of healing do we talk about?

Can you give examples of how you or others in your community can stigmatize people?

How is the woman healed?

How does the public way in which Jesus embraces this woman, despite the cultural and religious taboos against him associating with her, challenge the church to gender equality?

What kind of relationship does she have with Jesus?

How should each of us relate to others?

How do we deal with ethical issues in relation to women and men? Do women and men abide by the same ethical standards?

Women were given equal value in Christ. What can we do to change inequalities in our daily life, in our families and in our communities?

Jesus seems to minister equality and forgiveness quite easily to this woman.

What do we do in relation to people who are looked down upon?

What can we learn in our parish structures from this story?

A close-up photograph of a person's skin, focusing on a mole. The mole is a dark, raised, oval-shaped lesion on the skin. The surrounding skin is light brown and has a slightly textured appearance. The lighting is soft, highlighting the texture of the skin and the mole.

**Including
Young Pe**



people

Young

Young people are in the process of developing their identity, often being flexible, open-minded, creative and quick to adjust. Most youths are still dependent upon their parents or other adults and often not in a position to decide everything for themselves. They are in the midst of a learning process, questioning the ideas and perceptions of their close relatives, culture and society. There are great differences between young women and young men.

Around the world, the voices of young people are often not heard. Since young people are often the leading agents of change in a society, young men and women must to a

Confusing vulnerability with sin can easily cause youth to be marginalized in the Church and the community.

greater extent be encouraged to participate in and lead discussions and to voice their needs and ideas in all contexts relevant to them. Young people are valuable and independent persons, and should be cherished and included as whole human beings and as creative, resourceful contributors.

Young women and young men are often treated differently, given different opportunities and valued differently. It is important that all young people, despite their gender and social situation, are considered equal human beings, full of resources, potential and strength. It is up to the older generations to nourish young people in a way that develops their potential for growth as human beings, recognizing their inherent human dignity, a God-given source of life. The Church has a huge responsibility to acknowledge and take this into account.

When young women and men are not acknowledged as valuable contributors in church and society, they are often left struggling in their daily life. At the same time, they find themselves faced with uncertain employment prospects and financial insecurity. This puts their possibilities for establishing stable personal relationships at risk.

Our first close or intimate relationships often develop when we are young adults. Relationships are a blessing, and God has created us to live in fellowship. But these same relationships make us vulnerable. We risk rejection, or even abuse. The experience of rejection and neglect can potentially be very harsh and possibly destroy our self-esteem.

Vulnerability, sin and shame are very close to each other. In the absence of a livelihood, a young person might get involved in destructive activities such as drugs, violence

People

or crime. Vulnerability can cause isolation and withdrawal, making stigmas stronger and hindering the young person from accepting advice and guidance. Uncertainty and inexperience can lead a young woman or a young man to practise unsafe sex, exposing her- or himself and others to danger.

Young people, women and men, find themselves in a crucial development process. It is very important that they learn about sexuality sexual identity early in their lives. It is important that the Church faces the challenge of creating a safe environment in which young people can discern and discuss the development of their sexuality. How can we create a safe space in which sexuality can be discussed?

Confusing vulnerability with sin can easily cause youth to be marginalized in the Church and the community. Although many young women and men are sexually active, the Church and the older generation find it difficult to talk openly, truthfully and realistically about sexuality. When such questions are marginalized, young people are left without guidance, making exposure to risk stronger. Instead of being “the gatekeeper”, the Church should affirm the resources of young people, acknowledging the tremendous qualities and creativity developed by young women and men as part of their identity. Essentially, young women and men should be treated with respect for their inherent human dignity and be given equal value and equal rights.



How can the concept of human dignity change or widen our thinking about young women and men?

What kind of abuses and threats to human dignity are especially valid in relation to young women and men?

Discuss how this is seen in practice in society, in the Church and in families. Give examples related to both young women and young men.

Reflect upon the different challenges for young women and men in relation to HIV and AIDS.

Mention and discuss other major challenges that young women and men face today. Share stories that exemplify these challenges.

Can you give examples from the Bible of how young people make a difference?

Which values can positively transform the challenges that the young women and men face today?

Stories of young women and men

Encounter on the street A story from Lesotho

One evening after work I saw a boy quietly sitting under a bridge warming himself next to a fire. I walked over and spoke to him. He told me that he came from one of the surrounding areas. His parents had died quite some time previously, and as a result his schooling and upbringing were very badly disturbed,

He felt a sense of belonging and felt at home there.

At the time of his parent's death he was at primary school, doing class five. Fortunately his mother's sister came to his rescue and gave him a home with herself.

Unfortunately, after some time, his aunt left for South Africa to seek employment and never returned. He now had nobody to care for him, so he left his aunt's home and came to the streets in the city where he hoped he could find a better life.

He joined his age mates in the city streets in guiding cars to park along the highway. They also washed cars to make money for survival. He felt a sense of belonging and felt at home there and as a result he never went back to the village.

On the streets he had suffered from colds, hunger, trauma, bullying from the older boys who would come and forcefully grab whatever money or food he had raised by guiding cars for parking and washing them. In order to have food, he would go to the nearest restaurant with his friends to be fed by the owner of that restaurant who was a foreigner who cared about them.

He indicated that he was willing to go back home and to further his education but the problem was that there was no one to take care of and support him. He emphasized that he was now not comfortable with the kind of life he was living, he feared for his life but there was nothing he could do besides staying on the streets.



How did the boy end up in the city on his own?

What should be done to give this boy a better life?

How does this story affect you?

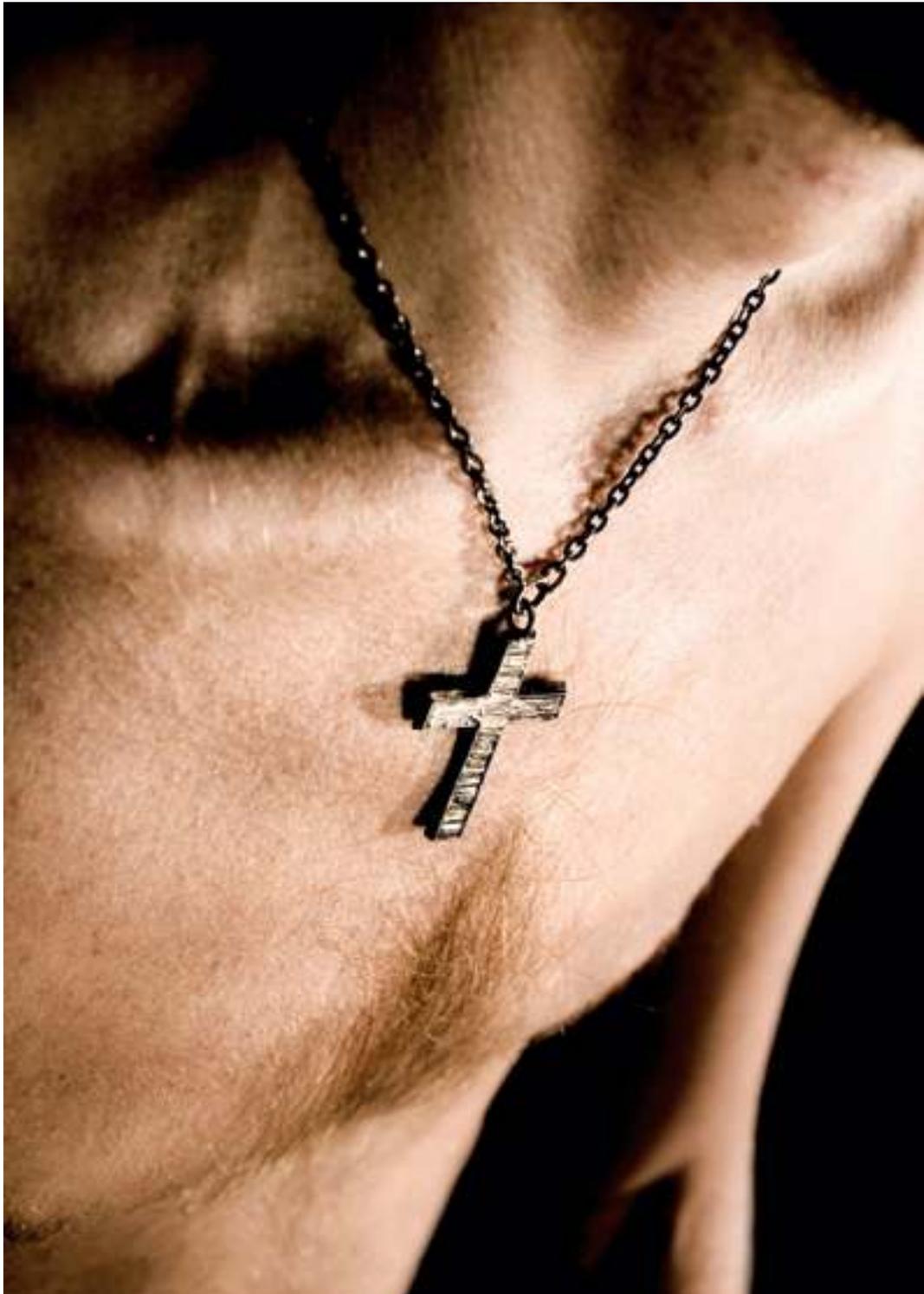
What risks girls and boys face when social structures collapse? How is poverty affecting your community? Be specific for each gender.

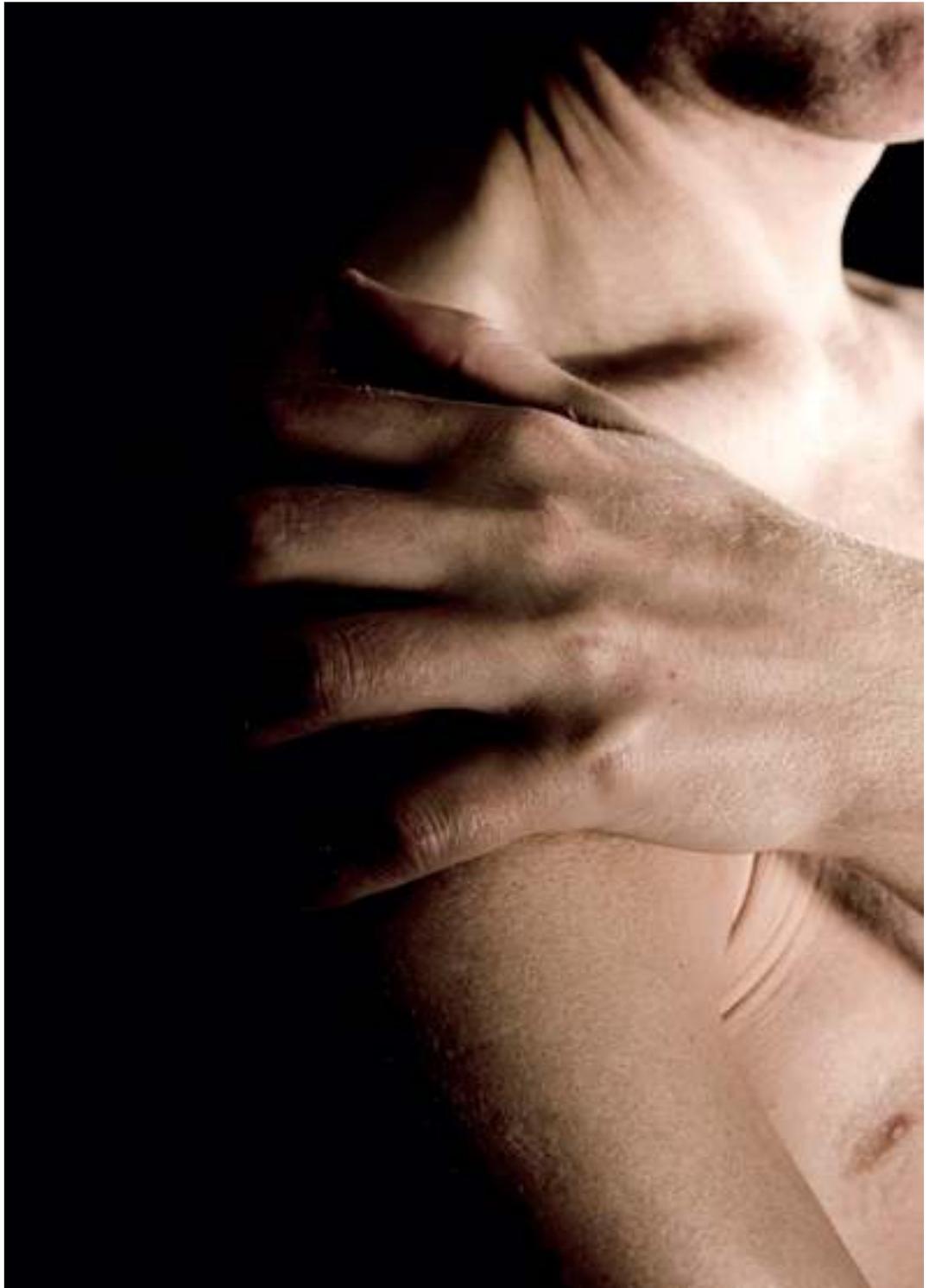
What role should the state play?

Who can we hold accountable?

Does your faith community engage in outreach to young people living on the streets?

In what ways should faith communities respond?





The woman would give me drugs A Story from Zimbabwe

My village where I stayed with my grandparents was poverty-stricken. I was only 4 years old when I had to walk 2 miles from my grandmother's home to the borehole carrying water back home. My grandmother was very old.

My mother died when I was only nine months old. My father had already married another woman, so he decided to take me to stay with my stepmother. It was very difficult for me. My stepmother made me do a great deal of the work in the house. My father was driving trucks for his work and spent long periods away from home. My stepmother did not allow me to go to school. My father was only home during holidays, often for just a week or less.

There were other children from the stepmother, one older than I and all the other were younger than me. These children attended school while I had to do the house work. When I was twelve I decided to run away from home to the nearby city. I was taken in by this other woman who sold me out for sex with men at night. I was raped repeatedly but I cannot remember all of this because the woman would give me drugs not to resist.

After a while news everywhere around the neighborhood began to spread suspecting that I was lost and my father was looking for me. When my master found that my father was looking for me, I was stripped naked, raped and left unconscious and half dead alongside the road.

The other children, when they were on their way home from school, saw me. They quickly went home to inform my step mother of my situation. My stepmother fetched me - and then beat me up, worsening the wounds that I had incurred. My stepmother decided to take me to my father's relatives, framing up some false story about me that I had become a prostitute that she could not care for any longer. By this time I was HIV-positive.

I decided to run away from home.



How would you, your community and your church respond to a story like this?

What does the use of the title "my master" tell you about this child?

How did the girl end up in this situation?

Would people react differently if it happened to a boy and not a girl? If yes, why?

What is the difference between a sex slave and a sex worker? What about the difference between girls and boys in this respect?

What are the areas of vulnerability in this story? Would a boy have faced the same risks?

What protections can we build into our societies to prevent this sort of abuse? For boys? And for girls?

What would the reaction have been if it was a church leader or a pastor who was the perpetrator?

Will I be alone? A story from Sweden

Johanna is a young woman who was infected with HIV when she was 20. Her first reaction was: will I be alone now? The idea of being isolated is more difficult to stand than the fact that you have a serious disease. The feeling of an abysmal darkness that frightens and causes deep anxiety is a “normal feeling” when you learn about being HIV positive.

Johanna says that she met others with HIV and her fear of being alone left her. But she stresses how difficult it is to approach young men and to tell anybody about her situation. She has a close male friend and she thinks that he understands that she has a secret. Soon she will tell him about the secret ... soon.

It takes a lot of energy not to tell about your situation. It is energy-consuming to pay attention to your feelings whether you have the courage and the strength to tell or not. That makes you sad and sorrowful deep into the bottom of your heart. For many it is a big step to tell the closest family and friends. The fear to be rejected is there. So is the fear to scare anyone that is dear to you. The uncertainty may make you refrain from telling about your situation.

Anyhow, we are all individuals and there are different ways to handle the situation.

She has a close male friend and she thinks that he understands that she has a secret.



How easy is it for you to talk about issues relating to sex and sexuality?

How do you see signs of guilt, shame and stigma in this story?

Millions of young people are living with HIV. Should they ever be allowed to have sex? And if not, what is the alternative?

How do we equip them for a fulfilling sexual life? Is there a difference between women and men?

What are the tools we need in order to help young woman and men living with HIV to have positive and safe sexual lives?

In which way is the challenge different for young girls and boys?

How should faith communities engage in questions related to sexuality and youth?

Mosotho child

A story from Lesotho

I grew up in a warm Christian family and that gave me my Christian faith. I grew up thinking that my grandparents were my parents, and did not know my mother until much later. When I was nine I started my primary school in neighboring South Africa. Two years later I had to quit studying because my grandfather did not buy me a school uniform. I came home to look after his cattle, and it was then that my uncle first told me the truth about my biological parents.

It was hard for me to accept and understand because of my age at that time. My life was so hard to bear and I attempted suicide twice, but I did not succeed.

In 2002, a year later, I went back to study in South Africa and found out that my mother's health was poor. I went to school but with much fear that I would lose her.

In 2003, during Easter holidays, she had to come back home because she had been diagnosed with HIV. In June 2003 I started using and selling drugs at night to make money. I would go to town to sell drugs and sex, and that was the way I was living. August 2003 I was sent to a juvenile correctional center for 3 months for helping burglars to steal from my school.

2004 was so difficult that I had to go to school hungry because there was no food in the shack. I went and sat for level 4 and I managed to pass. Two days before the honoring of best students I was told that my mother had died. My grandfather told me that he could not afford my transport to Lesotho for the burial ceremony. My teachers helped by contributing for me to get transport money to attend the funeral.

I managed well until June 2005. I had to quit studying again and come home because I was back on drugs.

In 2006, I went to study at High School. I was told that the department of education

and training would pay for my fees but in early 2008 I was told that this did not happen. I tried to sell sex again until I had to go to a loan shark to borrow the money to go to school.

In 2009 I was a destitute because I had no money. God made it possible for me to get a reliable donor who managed my fees for me to continue my education. But my grandfather still wants me to look after his cattle.

I grew up thinking that my grandparents were my parents.



How has poverty increased vulnerability for this girl?

How would you judge the situation for this young person?

How does your faith community respond to drug abuse and sex work?

Do the circumstances matter?

If this was a story from the time of Jesus, how do you think Jesus would have reacted?

How should the faith community respond?



My father seduced me A story from Swaziland

My father was a herbalist – a healer in our local context. In 2010 my mother fell sick and was admitted at our local hospital and died of an unknown sickness. My brother and I were left with our father.

After my mother's death, my father began to have sex with me. I was assisting my father in his work as a herbalist, and I was attending school in our area. When I was eleven my father fell sick and was admitted at our local hospital. I had to drop out of school in order to take care of my brother and father. My father died and the two of us were left as orphans.

The nurses at the hospital searched out for relatives in our parents' files. They found our mother's next of kin that she registered as her father. Our grandfather was called to come to our rescue. At this time I was already sick and was then diagnosed with HIV. I was put on antiretroviral (ARVs – Medication used for treating HIV).

Our grandfather took us to his home and we started schooling at the local primary school. After a few months our grandfather complained that my brother and I were a bur-

den to him and that we were not his responsibility. He then took us to our mother's family where our mother grew up.

Our mother's family was poverty-stricken and we at times went to sleep at night hungry because there was no food. It was tough for me as I was taking ARVs and I should not take the medicines on an empty stomach. In most cases I was getting food from school or from my class teacher who gave me something to eat before class. When I did not have food I would have a rash and sores on my body. When I had the rash and sores the other kids did not want me to touch their things.

I had to drop out of school in order to take care of my brother and father.



Is it normal to need to have sex, even with your child/daughter?

How do you define pedophilia?

Was it Zola's responsibility to take care of her father and brother?

How has poverty increased vulnerability? For boys, for girls? How do you see it?

What does our culture demand in terms of looking after children? Is it different for girls and for boys? What are the children's rights in this situation?

How has HIV affected this?

In which way do you see stigma appear in this story?

How can our faith communities address or prevent such situations?

The obstacles to development

An article from **Namibia**

Our country has been hailed as having advanced and progressive legislation protecting the rights of children, but no one is yet convinced that the same laws include adolescents poised to take over from the current generation and take the country to new heights.

Without the necessary assistance from the family or the state, the future remains a pipe-dream for many. Parents, teachers and the church could assist the youth to go through various stages to adulthood, but unfortunately few are so fortunate to have an inclusive support system.

Young women and men face numerous obstacles to their development, including dropping out of school, teenage pregnancy, sexual abuse and exploitation. After completing high school, the fortunate youth get employment or proceed to tertiary institutions for further studies, and those who cannot afford this are left to their own devices to survive. Due to poverty, and as a result of a lack of after-school facilities for extra-curricular activities and welfare support, many are forced into anti-social activities as can be attested to by cases of murder, rape and theft, in which youth between the age of 15 and 22 years are involved.

Despite constitutional provisions, children, particularly the youth, are not guaranteed shelter, food, welfare or a dignified educational development to live a normal life and contribute to the country's prosperity. Many have not made it to high school as their parents cannot afford it. Where they end up is anybody's guess. Beyond primary school, young women and men depend solely on the

status of their parents. There are currently no social or welfare programmes for unemployed youth from poor families to access education or welfare programmes.

The situation has brewed a storm of crime, drug abuse and sexual crimes, which the law enforcement agencies and government institutions are unable to contain, let alone mitigate.

Therefore, there is a need to devise concrete plans to rescue Namibian youth from the clutches of poverty, recycling and futility.



Do you recognize the situation described here in your own country?

How is the situation in your context?

What are the rights of young people in your country?

In which ways do you see differences between young men and women?

How should the faith communities respond?



Psalm 139: 1–18, 23–24

Created in the hands of God

The psalms have long been used in praise and worship. The psalms are generally attributed to King David, and this psalm is no exception. David became king of all Israel and Judah at the age of 30. At a very early age he was anointed to become King, and he lived his life very close to God. This does not mean that David was perfect; he fell many times; spectacularly! What stands out though is his deep knowledge of the omnipotence (all-powerfulness) of God and his praise of God as his creator.

The wonderful knowledge, power and love of God is here shown as a support for every person who has struggled to find himself or herself.

How does this text reveal the image of God?

What do you feel when you read the text? Does it give new insights into God's being —and your own?

Are there any limitations to God's love?

How can this text be used to support young people who struggle with their identity?

In which way is this text useful for the faith communities?

“I am only a boy”

Jeremiah 1: 6

Jeremiah's call

The prophet Jeremiah lived and worked in the Kingdom of Judah from about 627BC until the Babylonian exile in 586BC. He is regarded as one of the great prophets, and yet we read in verse six of the first chapter of the book of Jeremiah that he says to God, “I am only a boy”. God makes it very clear to Jeremiah that it is He who has formed him. God knew him even before he was conceived, and God anointed him for this task even before he was born.

Jeremiah's call was one which shows us just how deeply God is involved in our lives. It is a call which gives each of us courage and the knowledge that if God is for us, no one can stand against us.

How does this text relate to Psalm 139?

What is Jeremiah being called to?

How does he react as a young person?

How can he fulfill his calling?

What does Jeremiah's call teach you about your own importance to God?

How is God calling you?

Are you, like Jeremiah, giving God reasons why you cannot follow?

Do you think following God's call is difficult? And why?

Are young women and men included in decision-making structures in your parish so they can follow their calling?

Genesis 37: 12-36

Joseph and his brothers

The story of Joseph and his brothers is a well-loved Bible story. It contains many elements which could be discussed. When Jacob is mourning Joseph's death, the Bible tells us that all his sons and all his daughters tried to comfort him. Have you ever heard about Jacob's daughters? In the same way the story also tells us how Joseph's brothers sold him into slavery. In our language, we call it human trafficking. Above all, Joseph is a young man, beloved by his father, who had brothers who were strongly jealous of him. Despite his difficulties, Joseph responded to the dreams God gave him.

What is Joseph's dream?

How do his brothers react?

Do you see any abuse in the story?

What happens to Joseph?

How does he feel in the midst of the dramatic events?

How does he eventually fulfill his calling?

How do you respond when dealing with someone you find difficult?

How do we look for God's will in these situations?



Luke 15: 11–32

The Prodigal Son

Jesus uses stories or parables to teach His disciples. We refer to this story as the “Prodigal Son”. The word prodigal means wasteful or extravagant. The story could as easily be called the forgiving father, or the bitter

brother. Nowhere in the early part of the parable is there a reference to a promiscuous life style, but the older brother makes this accusation.

The father in this story is standing and waiting, always hopeful that his younger son will return. The older son tries to apportion guilt even where it is only speculation.

Why did the son leave his home?

What if the demand to have the inheritance came from a girl? Would the answer from the father have been different?

What happened to the son while he was away?

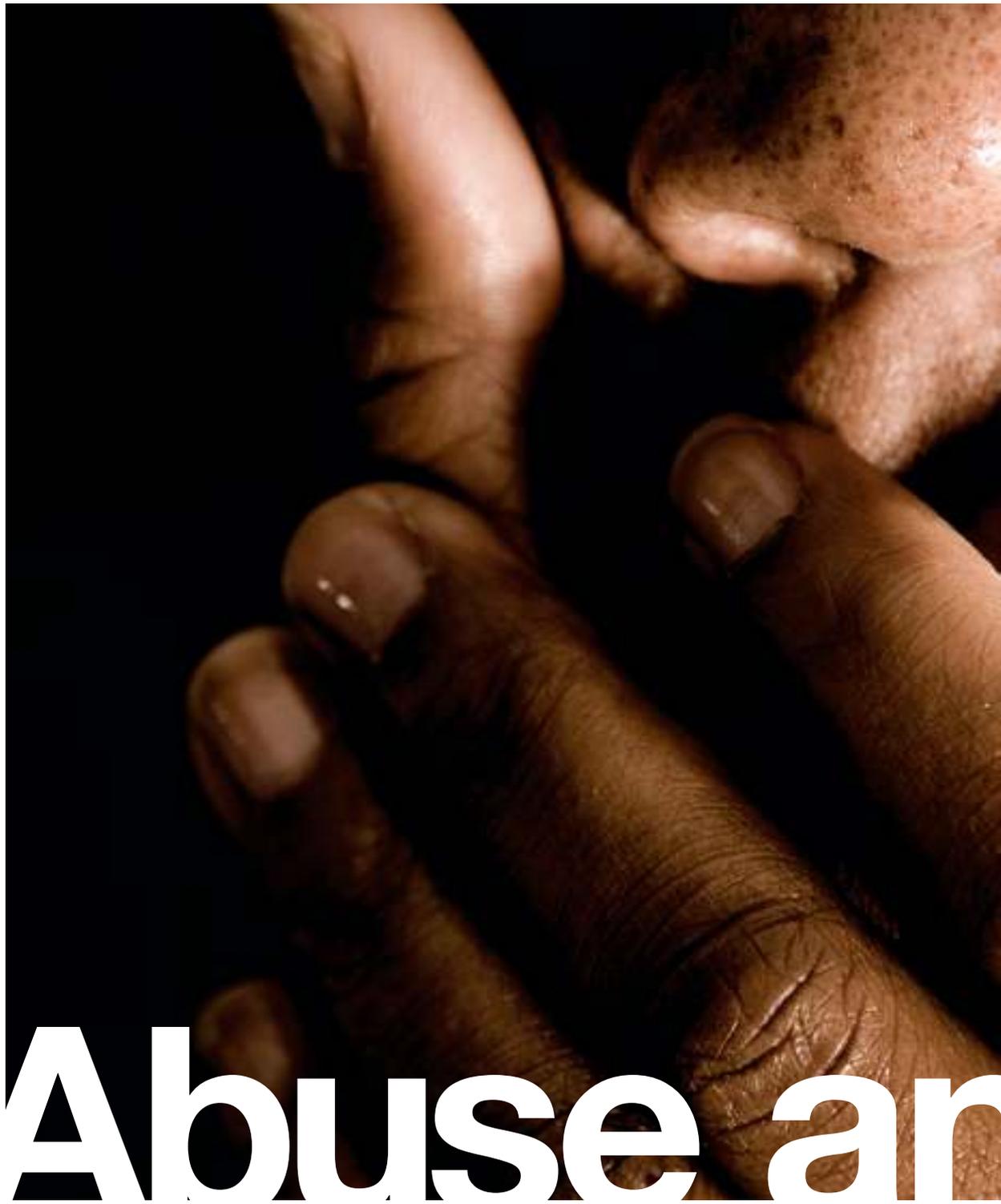
In this story, what are the key issues that distort dignity?

Does the father’s answer influence our understanding of human dignity?

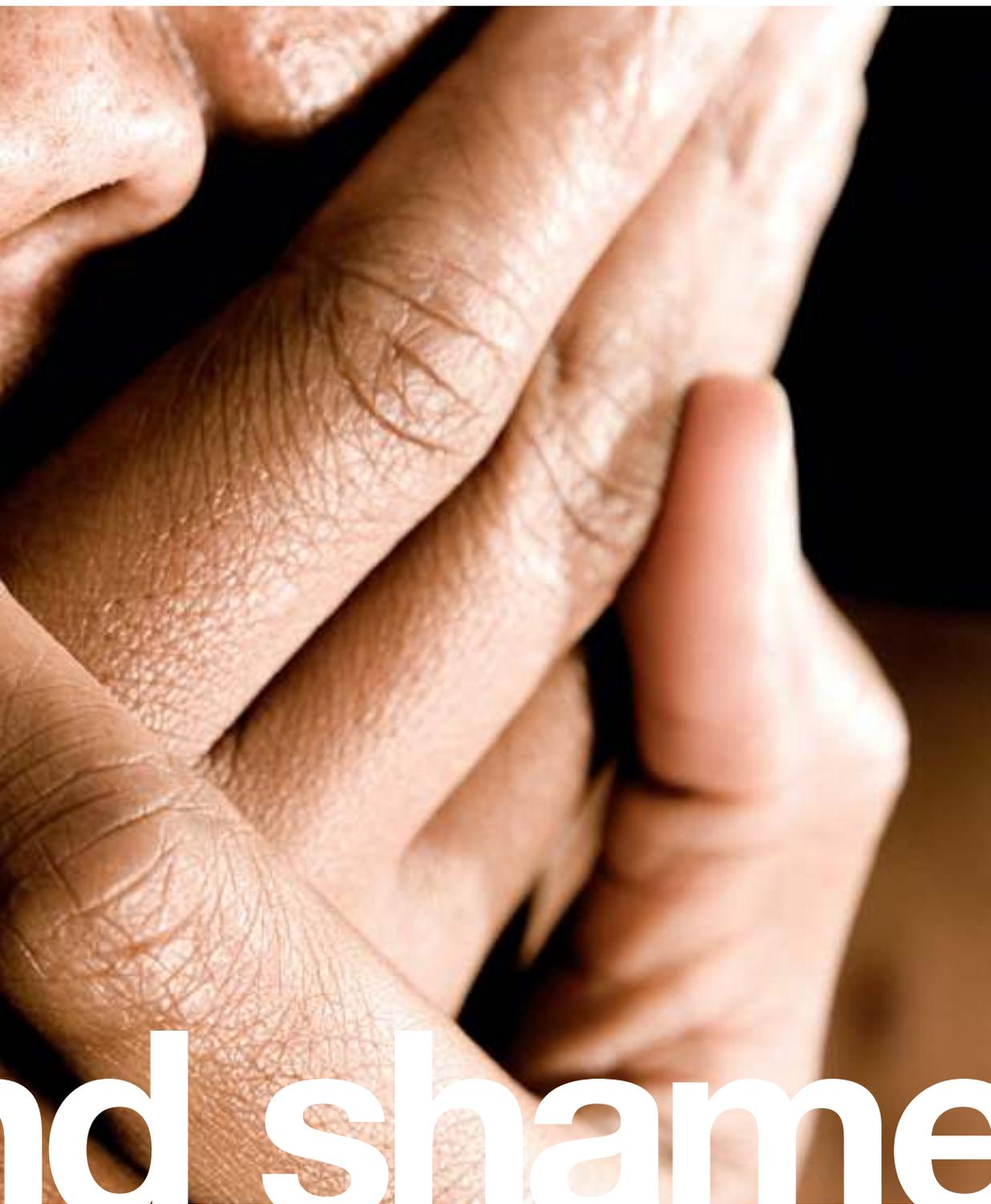
Why did his father receive him so eagerly?

What was the reaction of the older brother?

What does this story tell us about young women and men of today?



Abuse an



nd shame

The silenced stories

Abuse ignores the fundamental principles of human dignity, respect and love, but is extremely common in human relationships. It cuts across the spectrum of gender, race, culture, nationality and age. Abuse is often hidden in silence, and people being abused do not dare to talk about their experiences, due to feelings of shame and guilt and due to fear of the consequence for themselves. Abuse is found in all societies and cultures, both within and outside the churches, and within and outside families.

Abuse can take different forms; it can be visible or invisible. But at the deeper level, abuse leaves scars in our bodies and souls, and strips us of our self-esteem. Abuse hurts us physically, psychologically, emotionally and mentally, and can cripple the way we function in our daily lives. Studies show that abuse is often carried out by people who have been abused themselves. To stop the vicious circle of abuse, we believe that the most effective tool is to talk openly about it.

Abuse is connected to stigmatization, as

the survivors of abuse—especially the women—are often blamed for having an active, yielding role and are therefore disregarded in their community; there is something wrong with the survivor of the abuse (tempting, sexy clothes, etc)! When abuse is happening within the family, experience shows that the family will most likely try to keep it secret. Anyone speaking openly about it risks being punished by the family structure or even expelled. When abuse happens within the Church (for example between a pastor and a member of his/her parish), experience shows that it can take years to be uncovered. In this way abuse is a taboo and uncovering it is dangerous, because the exposure threatens the power-structure upholding abuse and will backlash on the abused. Experience shows that if necessary the abuser will try to put the responsibility for the act upon the abused.

The main causes and consequences of abuse are:

- Abuse is a way of emphasizing power, and this is why it is often hidden. To speak openly

about abuse is the first step towards breaking the vicious circle of misuse of power.

- Abuse is the violation of the integrity and dignity of another human being.
- Abuse is crossing borders that should not be crossed. In an unbalanced power relationship, i.e. between pastor and member or teacher and pupil or adult and child. Here, a sexual relationship is an abuse even if the child, church-member or pupil consents.
- Abuse causes loss of self-worth and is also caused by lack of self-worth within the abuser.

There are many ways that abuse can manifest itself. It happens on all levels – physical, psychological, emotional and spiritual.

Physical abuse: using physical or sexual violence against another person in one way or another, through beating, sexual harassment, rape, seduction of persons with less power etc.

Psychological abuse: destroying the self-esteem and self-assertiveness of a human being, driving the person into depression or other forms of mental imbalance.

Emotional abuse: manipulating a person's emotional responses, creating dependency. This can be crippling for an individual and even for a whole congregation or community.

Spiritual abuse: destroying the healthy relationship to God, denying the awakening spirituality and the inherent human dignity of the individual. Or simply explaining that the abuser is doing the will of God and condemning the abused as sinful.

The physical abuse is in a way the “easiest” to discover, as it is visible and concrete, but it is often caused – or followed – by other forms of abuse. Within the abusive relationship, the abuse is followed by threats to not disclose what is happening. The abuser uses his or her control over the abused to manifest a certain sense of power. Often, there is a symbiosis going on (between power and inferiority, abuse and shame), which has to be broken in order to disclose the vulnerability hidden within the abuse. This can take years to uncover. Being abused is often looked upon as a shameful position to be in, and the survivors can even struggle with guilt and fear.

In no way must we blame the abused for the abuse! Otherwise, we uphold the stigma that makes many people silent about the abuses they have experienced. Even though most of the abuse is directed towards women and children we see an increase of abuse being directed towards boys and men.

Some definitions of abuse

transitive verb

a·bused, a·bus·ing, a·bus·es

1. To use wrongly or improperly; misuse: abuse alcohol; abuse a privilege.
2. To hurt or injure by maltreatment; ill-use.
3. To force sexual activity on; rape or molest.
4. To assail with contemptuous, coarse, or insulting words; revile.
5. Obsolete To deceive or trick.

noun

1. Improper use or handling; misuse: abuse of authority; drug abuse.
2. Physical maltreatment: spousal abuse.
3. Sexual abuse.
4. An unjust or wrongful practice: a government that commits abuses against its citizens.
5. Insulting or coarse language: verbal abuse.

(From the free online dictionary)

It is very easy to misinterpret the relationship between shame, sin and guilt.

Abuse, shame, sin and guilt

People who are abused can experience being utterly abandoned by God when being abused. (Why didn't the almighty God who sees all—Psalm 139—see me and protect me?) Often, →

→ the abused can feel deep shame for something they are not guilty of. Instead, they need to be relieved from the shameful, and the feeling of being sinful. It is very easy to misinterpret the relationship between shame, sin and guilt.

For an abused person, these three words are often mixed up i.e. regarded as identical. One feels guilty, shameful and sinful at the same time, since it is not easy to distinguish between the three.

The mixed feelings of the person being abused make it easier for the abuser to exert power. The abused often assumes responsibility for the abuse, because of the shame connected to it. This creates the feeling that one is sinful, and the feeling that one somehow deserves the abuse, as a form of justice/punishment from God. Self-worth is completely absent, and it all forms a vicious circle, difficult to break.

The churches need to develop an inclusive and understanding language which will embrace people who experience abuse, shame, sin and guilt. This applies both in pastoral counseling and in the parish liturgy.

Sin

Sin is whatever separates us from God. It is basically understood as breaking the two great commandments—that of loving God and

loving our neighbor as ourselves. All people struggle with sin. No one is ever completely “clean”. “All have sinned and come short of the glory of God”. Sin is something we do against our conviction and faith!

Shame

Shame, when destructive, can often be connected to abuse. It makes a person feel a loss of honor as well as a loss of worth. Shame can be defined as a feeling of unworthiness, of being unlovable, of not deserving love. Shame influences the self-respect and the perceived human dignity of the individual. The burden of shame can be crippling, preventing us from going ahead with our life in a positive way. Shame is related to our being human, our identity, my image of myself. (There is, however, a constructive form of shame that protects us and our intimacy!)

Guilt

The feeling of guilt can be a result of society’s teachings, expectations and demands. Most of us have an inbuilt concept of right and wrong, and if we trespass according to that inbuilt concept we will feel guilty. Often, we project guilt onto each other, apportioning or trying to spread the blame. Guilt is closely connected to something we have done (actions and incidents) and that we regard as wrongful.



Can the feelings of shame and guilt oppress the abused?

Who among us has gone through these feelings of guilt and shame?

How do we promote respect, love and gentleness in our relationships?

How do we affirm the human dignity of a person traumatized by abuse?

What are the specific vulnerabilities of women and men, girls and boys in the midst of abuse?

How can we prevent abuse at different levels?

How should the faith communities respond in order to help survivors of abuse?

How should the faith communities respond in cases where the abuse happens within their own ranks, perpetrated by their own leaders and members?



Stories of Abuse



He silenced me with gifts **A story from Zimbabwe**

My father had two wives and nine children and I was the only girl born from the second wife. My name is Paida. When I was about two years of age, my father physically abused me for no apparent reason.

My mother sought help from neighbors and relatives to confront my father on his abusive behavior towards me; however, my father suddenly changed from abusing me physically and began to show love and care to

me like never before. He would give me all the attention I needed. When my mother inquired about the turn of events, my father apologized to my mother for having neglected me as his only daughter.

This show of love and care towards me was deeper than the eyes could see, my father was sexually abusing me and it went on quietly for some time without anyone suspecting anything. My father told me not to tell anyone, not even my mother; I was dying inside with pain and shame. As a child I was trying to please my father by keeping the secret so that in re-

When I was about two years of age, my father physically abused me for no apparent reason.

turn my father would buy me all sorts of gifts. When my mother asked about this abnormal behavior between us, my father replied that he was making up for the lost time when he neglected me as a child.

When I became a teenager I began to bribe my father into buying whatever I demanded. One day during the school holidays, my father arranged for a shopping trip for the two of us to Botswana.

In preparation for the trip, my father had booked a hotel for about five days and bought enough condoms for use during the stay. However all hell broke loose when he forgot the condoms on his dressing table and my mother saw them. When asked, he became furious and went away.

On the day of the journey, I suddenly turned down the offer. This disappointed my father who left alone for Botswana.

I had a boyfriend to whom I had disclosed my situation of abuse. My boyfriend advised me to report the matter to the police but I did not accept the advice. My boyfriend then encouraged me to see my aunt where I disclosed the abusive behavior of my father.

My mother refused to report the matter to the police because she feared my father would be arrested and the family would, in consequence lose a bread winner.

When my father came back home, he was confronted by my mother and my aunt on his sexual abuse of me. He refused to accept any knowledge of abusing me as his daughter. He even threatened them with death if they said anything to the police. As a result the matter remained unreported.



What kind of abuse do you find here? Please highlight.

Why is it so difficult for Paida to talk about her situation?

How are the feelings of guilt and shame involved?

How would you help Paida to come out of the shame and guilt of being abused by her father?

What enables Paida finally to disclose the situation?

What are the feelings of the mother when she realizes what has happened to her daughter?

How could Paida have been helped earlier?

Why was the relationship to her father so delicate and difficult to break?

If Paida had been a boy and had been abused, would the reactions have been different?

How would you have reacted in a similar situation? If you were a girl? Or if you were a boy?

Do you personally know of other stories like this?

How should the faith communities respond?

One day as she went for her night shift I was left alone with my brother in law.

My sister refused to believe me A story from Botswana

When I was nine years old I was taken to stay with my sister who was married with no kids. I was supposed to help them with chores in the house while at the same time attending school. My sister works as a nurse in a hospital nearby and had different working shifts.

One day as she went for her night shift I was left alone with my brother in law. When I was asleep in my room he came and slept next to me. I was fearful because it was awkward for me. After some time he began fondling and touching parts of my body to arouse me without any respect for me. I kept moving away from him but he kept moving towards me. That night he did not have sex with me and I thought to myself that it was going to be the last time.

He became very caring and calling me his child. I remember my sister telling her friend that her husband took me as his own child. I could not even face him.

One night whilst my sister was asleep he came and knelt beside me and started to touch me. As I jumped he faced me and showed me a sign that I should keep quiet. I struggled

until I stood and resisted his touching. The next week my sister went for her night shift again and I remember asking her if she could not work day shifts only. She said I should not be afraid of anything because her husband is around and if I was too terrified I could sleep next to the bed in their room. Little did she know it was her husband I feared.

At midnight I heard his footsteps as he drew near to my bed. He started what he normally did and went even further. This was the night he started to rape me.

Every time my sister went for night shift he would come and rape me. He continuously threatened me not to tell anyone about his abuse, otherwise he would kill both me and my sister. I told my sister about the sexual abuse I suffered from her husband but she just dismissed it and accused me of wanting to break her marriage.

Only when I was seventeen did I tell my teacher at school about how I was sexually abused by my brother in law. She wasted no time and reported the matter to the police. The police arrested the man and he was sentenced for fifteen years.

I am traumatized as if this had happened yesterday.



Where does the sexual abuse actually start in this story?

How have cultural traditions and practices made this girl vulnerable?

What might be some of the reasons this girl's sister did not act on the abuse?

When should we involve the authorities? Does the legal

framework have something to say for the answer you give?

How should we approach abuse from our faith communities?

Church leader murdered A Story from South Africa

I heard the news that Jason had been killed when I was sitting with a group of friends at my home in Pretoria around the middle of December 2011. One of his best friends called me to say that Jason had been stabbed in his home, after first being beaten to death. His wallet was left conspicuously next to his body, nothing was stolen.

Jason was not called Jason when I first met him as a skinny kid from Soweto who was volunteering in the field of HIV. He was also not HIV positive then (or if he was he didn't know or was not open about it). His passion and enthusiasm for life, and an interest in getting stuck in, was already evident. He went by the name David then, and over the years he reverted to one of his other born names, Jason.

While the motivation for these changes was never revealed to me, it seems that they mirrored an inner journey of exploration, a desire to find an identity, purpose and place in a society which was not only homophobic and stigmatizing of people living with HIV, but which challenged all South Africans around questions of roots, identity and belonging.

So we were friends for many years, and I watched Jason grow into a media star, taking on a key role in the "Siyayinqoba—Beat It!" series with aplomb. As a young, gay, confident black man who was 'out' about being HIV positive, Jason's contribution to building a more inclusive South Africa should not be underestimated. For many people, he symbolized hope, survival, success and self assurance. He had truly transcended internalized stigma.

Jason made a profound impression on everyone, even if his enthusiasm sometimes saw him rub some people up the wrong way. Prickly and proud at times, I saw these as important defences against being exploited, Jason always won people over with his warmth, kindness, broad and toothy smile, and sense of humor.

In love, Jason was not as successful as he would have liked, but there was always enough to go around for his friends and family. He truly cared about people, and if he was on your side,

then you got his 100% support. In everything he did, a zest and love for life was evident. His church was very important to him, and while his characteristic dogged sense of purpose brought him into conflict with people, his dedication and deep faith were never questioned.

Jason, ever flamboyant in his entertaining and parties, loved flowers and candles. As we prepared for his funeral conflict arose. It was difficult for some of his family to allow his sexuality to be acknowledged and even celebrated. We were told: "No flowers, no candles, no instruments during the funeral." As the faith community he belonged to gathered to pay respect to him and cook for his funeral again we were told: "Why are you doing this? This is not a wedding!" Even in death Jason caused a stir!

I, as the pastor who buried him, must say that Jason will be missed by all who cared for and loved him—he was unforgettable in life and will be unforgettable in death.



How does this story affect you?

How would you classify this kind of abuse?

Does Jason's sexuality affect his humanity? Is it all right to eliminate somebody because the person is "different"?

Does sexual orientation remove our God-given human dignity?

Is there a relationship between human dignity and sexuality?

How should our faith communities respond to an incident like this?



I felt I had come home **A story from Norway**

When I first got in touch with the Night Shelter my life had turned in a direction I didn't see coming. I had been addicted to illegal drugs for quite a while, but I hadn't really lost control. At least I still had my apartment, my finances were okay and this made me somehow feel part of society.

During the following half year everything had been falling apart and I no longer saw any possibility for change. Feeling this kind of hopelessness I increased my drug consumption and this again made the situation worse. The drug abuse took me to the bottom. Eventually, it robbed me of my human dignity. I even lost touch with my three children.

I never thought this would happen to me – I guess nobody really thinks they would end up like this and the road back seemed far too long.

But then, around Christmas time last year, a girlfriend took me to the Night Shelter, a

house for women struggling with drug addiction in the Church City Mission in Oslo. Something happened to me when I walked in the door; I felt I had come home.

I had never experienced this kind of reception in any of the other places with similar target groups—for people in my situation. It actually felt quite surreal! I thought, does a place like this really exist? A place where they accept me just as I am? A place without any demands that I should change my habits and my way of living?

This experience made me feel the wish to change! Nobody told me to change anything! But to be treated as a 'normal person' made me somehow feel 'normal' despite my situation.

I felt I was worth something for the first time in many years and this created in me an urge to fight my addiction to drugs. Not because anyone gave me an ultimatum, or forced a solution on to me, but simply because I myself felt I deserved a better life.

Now I even volunteer at the Night Shelter



and contribute 5 days a week in practical matters and even do some night watch duties on weekends.

To be part of this house keeps me away from drug use and at the same time it gives me a feeling of being good enough as I am.

Now I am in touch with my children again. But the road back to life as I want it is still long and winding, but it is of great help to have the people—the women, the staff and the volunteers—at the Night Shelter as support. I am really thankful for this.



What was Emma's situation to begin with?

What do you think makes people use drugs?

Why was Emma not able to break the vicious circle?

What happened when she found her way to the Night Shelter in Oslo?

What did it mean to her identity as a person?

How did she overcome the abuse she had been through?

Where did she get her strength from?

How was she able to start a new life?

Do you recognize this story in your context?

Could it have happened where you live?

What made her feel at home?

How can we learn from this?

How should the faith communities respond?

The policemen humiliate us in all sorts of ways, and we have no right to complain.

If you arrest us, please don't rape us A story from Malawi

Sex work is illegal in our country, but some of us resort to this work in order to earn a living. Often, we find ourselves in confrontation with the police. We are arrested during the night, and interrogated. After that, we are charged according to the law.

While arrested, many of us are raped by the police. This creates great frustration and anxiety, especially since we are in a very vulnerable position. The policemen humiliate us in all sorts of ways, and we have no right to complain. Rape exposes us to the risk of HIV transmission. We feel dehumanized.

When we meet with our customers, at least we are being paid. The policemen who rape us do not pay. We feel violated, worthless, with no rights and no one to protect us.

We have tried to protest against these violations by marching in the streets. We have been carrying posters saying: "Police, if you arrest us, please do not rape us!" We ask them to just charge us due to the constitutional mandate. Just to treat us as human beings.

We have now formed our own association, trying to stop the police from doing these atrocities. We have hired our own lawyers and set up a hotline. People can call and share the incidents that they experience while being arrested.

It is our lawyers receiving the calls, and making accounts of them. By this, we hope to document the atrocities happening all over the country.

Hopefully, in the end, the rapes are going to stop. Uniting in this fight allows us to rise up, become dignified, share our stories, and shine a light on the atrocities.



Why are some women and men involved in selling sex?

What can the church do to help women who sell sex?

What does this mean for the dignity of a person who is involved in selling sex?



The hidden abuse

An article from **Lesotho**

Abuse is defined as anything that is harmful, injurious, or offensive.

There are several major types of abuse: physical, verbal and sexual abuse of a child or an adult, substance abuse, elderly abuse, emotional abuse, and so forth.

Verbal abuse is often more difficult to see since there are rarely any visible scars unless physical abuse has taken place. But it is often

less visible simply because the abuse often takes place in private. The victim of verbal abuse lives in a gradually increasing confusing realm.

Indicators of domestic and gender based violence

Here are some of the possible indicators of abuse:



- • Stress-related illness such as insomnia and hallucinations.
- Withdrawal from social interaction with others outside the family.
- Depression.
- Family problems.
- Alcohol and other drug addiction.
- Lack of personal grooming – visible injuries.

Consequences of domestic violence

Domestic violence has a negative impact on the family as well as on each individual family member. The family becomes disrupted because of violence, and this also affects the community. Eventually the whole world is affected, whether economically or morally. Family values are compromised in homes where domestic violence is a feature, since they are characterized by a lack of respect and interpersonal communication.

Women become direct victims, and because of their relative physical powerlessness and their economic disadvantage they remain in violent homes in order to survive. Their inability to stop abuse results in an inability to protect their children, and they thus remain helpless.

Children also suffer a great deal in violent homes. They grow up in an environment that is violent and shapes their future negatively. The consequences of growing up in domestically violent homes lead children to escape from reality by indulging in alcohol or other forms of juvenile delinquency.

Some children feel a little better if they leave violent homes and go onto the streets, while others feel trapped in the violence and are unable to do anything. Children subjected to domestic violence also learn from example that violence is the only way to resolve conflicts.

Lack of a legal framework

Lesotho has no legal protection against domestic violence and issues of violence are handled within the family, and forwarded to chiefs (community leaders) if problems persist. The police are mostly notified in cases of

rape and assault and charges are laid against the perpetrators. Violence is under-reported, and this is perpetuated by inadequate handling of domestic violence cases. Domestic violence is still a pressing issue that needs to be addressed specifically by law.

In Lesotho, a Domestic Violence Act, which could protect women and children from abuse, is currently at the consultation and advocacy stage. The absence of a Domestic Violence Act has dire consequences for women and children, since other domestic violence incidents, which are not seen as a crime, cannot be sentenced or charged as unlawful. Cases such as negligence, economical abuse, and emotional abuse are still not protected under the law and thus have a negative impact on the victims.



What is the difference between verbal and physical violence? How can verbal violence in itself humiliate a person?

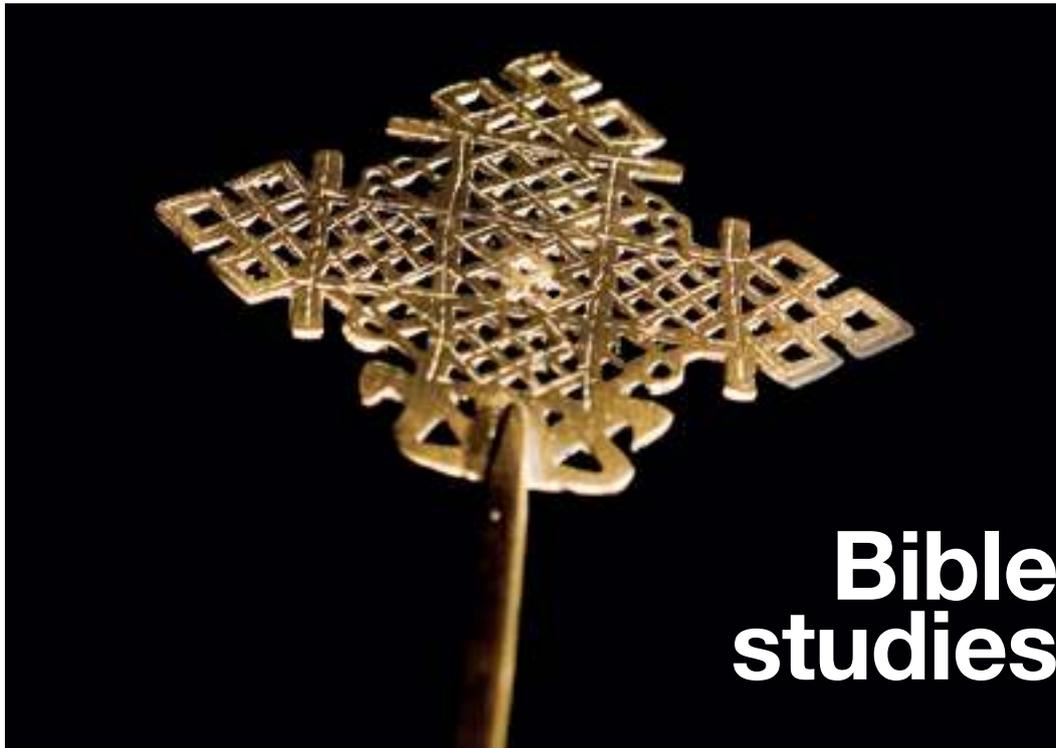
How do you detect the signs of violence, verbal as well as physical?

How would men and women react differently to violence?

Why is it important to have a legal framework to protect the victims of violence?

How could faith communities advocate for a better legal framework?

How could faith communities assist the victims of violence to speak out?



Bible studies



Genesis 34: 1–31

The Rape of Dinah

Reading the account of Dinah being raped makes it clear to us that our society and that in which Jacob and his family lived, are very different. But there are many things that remain the same. In Jacob's time men used strength to overpower women against their will. The same remains true today.

In this account we hear of a price which needs to be paid for Dinah's defilement; many cultures in Africa also have a price which must be paid if a woman is defiled before marriage. In this story culture and religion are mixed up, and in many of our societies it is also difficult to draw the line between culture and religion. What remains constant, though, is that forcing another person to have sex can never be justified, neither within nor outside marriage.

What causes Shechem to rape Dinah?

What do you think of the reaction of her brothers?

Is it morally correct to exact revenge like they do?

Are they in their right to kill Shechem's family?

Define the many levels of abuse in this story.

Are any of these abuses justified?

Can we translate such a story directly into our society today?

“Are you ready to let go? Are you ready to be really free?”

First Corinthians 3: 16–17

The Body as the
Temple of God

Chapter three of St. Paul’s first Letter to the Corinthians starts with an admonishment for division.

St. Paul makes it clear that if we are in Christ, we must behave as if we are in Christ and not be caught up in petty divisions and passions related to our humanness. Verses 16 and 17 take this argument to a whole new level, and St. Paul states that our bodies are temples of God; they are holy places, places to be revered.

Anyone who abuses another person denies the holiness of that person’s body, denies the inherent human dignity with which we are created.

What can we learn about human dignity from this text?

How can we in our daily lives show the respect for each other that this text implies?

How can this text help people who have been abused?

How can it help us restore the dignity of the abused?

How can our faith community use a text like this to bring healing?

Luke 15

The lost sheep

This passage in St. Luke’s gospel is a good example of how people whom God loves can be excluded simply because of the category which we, or our society, or the church place them in.

It is the “othering” of people because they do not meet our standards, our rules; do not fit into our club. The only problem is that Jesus went to those who were excluded, and did not mix with the “in crowd”. In answering the scribes and Pharisees Jesus again affirms the inherent value and dignity of every human being.

Why would Jesus choose to eat with sinners and tax-collectors?

What implication does this text have when considering people who have been abused?

Does it mean he would also choose to be with the abused?

What can the Church do to include the abused in all aspects of ministry?

Is there anybody that Jesus would not eat with?

Matthew 12: 9-14

Is it lawful to heal on the Sabbath?

This passage is preceded by Jesus’ disciples plucking and eating grain on the Sabbath. Jesus is challenged by the Pharisees about the way His disciples broke the Sabbath law.

Jesus enters the nearby synagogue, and is challenged again as to whether it is lawful to heal on the Sabbath. The words Jesus responds with are a constant affirmation of how deeply we are loved and cared for by God, we are of great value to God! Doing good is always good, regardless of when or where. How does it make you feel to know how much God values you?

Matthew 11: 28–30

My yoke is easy

Jesus does not say *no yoke!* Jesus says His yoke is easy. A farmer who places the yoke carelessly on the oxen will hurt them, and negatively affect the way they can carry a load, both now and in the future.

Not all burdens we carry are from God. Burdens can cripple us, drag us into depression, and even drive us away from God. The burden Jesus gives us is placed with care, and strengthens us rather than damages us. Abuse is never a yoke given from God. It is a yoke of this world.

Jesus says; “take off the yoke of this world, replace it with my yoke. It will build you up. It is selected with care, placed with infinite love.”

How can we let Christ remove or carry our burdens in this world?

How is this text helpful in our outreach to the abused?

How does it console us?

How do we use this as an inspiration in our daily lives?

How can we differentiate between the yoke of this world and the yoke Jesus gives us?

What is the brokenness which Jesus desires to heal in your life?

How can the laws of the Church become barriers for being fully accepted both in the Church and in our communities?

What do you believe God is saying to us through this passage about reaching out in love to all?

Why does Jesus choose to break the law?

What would Church leaders do today in a similar situation?

How can the law be an obstacle to compassion?

Do we recognize similar situations in our own life?

John 5: 1–15

The man healed at the Pool of Bethesda

This passage relates one of only six miracles recorded in St. John’s gospel. Each of them has a very specific purpose. In this miracle St. John tells us that Jesus not only has authority over our physical world, but that He has authority over the Sabbath and every other day.

Having found the man at the pool of Bethesda, Jesus asks him a question which seems rather obvious. The man has been at the pool for 38 years, but Jesus asks him, “Do you want to be made well?”

Sometimes our afflictions, the abuses we have suffered, have become a necessary part of who we have become. Jesus asks, “Are you ready to let go? Are you ready to be really free?”

Was it the man’s own fault that he had been waiting at the pool for 38 years?

Did he not believe that he deserved to be healed?

What does this tell us about abuse? Is it our own fault if we are not healed?

How is Jesus breaking the life-long pattern of the man?

What pattern in your life does Jesus want to break?

The role of the Church

In all of this material, the emphasis has been on human dignity. How can we as a church and as individuals, work to protect human dignity at all levels of society? How can we work to ensure the rights of every person, globally as well as locally, especially those being marginalized and stigmatized?

As the Body of Christ, we are called to live in unity, and called to live together in mutual reconciliation. This call was given to us directly by Jesus himself, as a testimony shared with his disciples, on the night he went to the Garden of Gethsemane, before he went on to die on the cross. On the cross - and through the humiliations before that - he himself was stigmatized because of his radical commitment to raise up all people.

“As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you; abide in my love. If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love, just as I have kept my Father’s commandments and abide in his love. I have said these things to you so that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be complete.

“This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. No one has greater love than this, to lay down one’s life for one’s friends. You are

my friends if you do what I command you. I do not call you servants any longer, because the servant does not know what the master is doing; but I have called you friends, because I have made known to you everything that I have heard from my Father. You did not choose me but I chose you. And I appointed you to go and bear fruit, fruit that will last, so that the Father will give you whatever you ask him in my name. I am giving you these commands so that you may love one another.”

John 15, 9-17,

www.devotions.net/bible/00bible.htm

What does this text say about the role of the Church and each individual as part of the community of Christ?

First of all, it tells us that we are called to live in friendship with each other, in mutual love and respect. From this comes the deep notion of human dignity, as we are given to each other as God’s blessed gifts. Each human being, woman or man, girl or boy, was created in the image of God and thereby carries the respect and dignity which was part of this original blessing, as an integral part of her or his very being.

As a part of creation, we bear the imprint

that God gave us, a sort of signature of God's original, creative love. It could be called "the signature of Christ", since Christ was the one to affirm this original blessing in all that he said and did, in the whole of his life as the incarnate Son of God.

The purpose of this material is to emphasize the need for the churches to combat any form of abuse, whether it be inside or outside of church structures.

We have therefore tried to emphasize the importance of observing, understanding and nurturing inherent human dignity, in all circumstances and in all instances of life.

Having worked for more than three decades to fight the stigma caused by HIV and aids, we have learned a lot. We have learned that all people who are stigmatized should be included in the Church, as the Church is the body of Christ.

The stories we have shared are examples of how abuse and gender imbalance can distort life and cause great difficulties for people who experience the trauma of being abused, or of just being part of a society where patriarchy is the dominant feature. Some of the stories concern HIV and others do not. Regardless of the context, each story sheds light on important existential questions.

The hierarchy of the churches has a tendency to produce abuse and to reaffirm a culture in which gender imbalance is re-enforced. As a church, as the body of Christ, we need to work critically with our own structure, examining where abuse takes place and doing all we can to prevent it.

But more than just combating "evil", we also need to affirm positive values. In the dialogues that led to this material, many people voiced the need for better ethical principles and more transparency within church structures; and most of all, the need to develop more positive value-systems, which will sustain healthy communities and congregations.

Values and ethics

Values are principles that function as guiding standards in people's lives. They are the ethics of life, upholding the moral fabric of our

society. They are meant to mould and sharpen our personal and social behavior into positive thinking, attitudes and behavior.

In our churches, we need to be aware of these ethical questions, and find ways to act more prophetically in our faith communities and in society – globally as well as locally. We need to ensure that these questions are always made gender specific, that they describe the situation, outcome and shortcomings as they relate to all people in all layers of society - both women, girls, boys and men. It is important to keep the image of the prophetic vision of the Church strong.

How do we do that?

In our dialogues, simple key-words were identified as guiding principles:

1. Equality between women, men, girls and boys.
2. Equal rights for all.
3. Compassion.
4. Kindness.
5. Freedom.
6. Honesty.
7. Faithfulness.
8. Respect.
9. Wisdom.
10. Love.

Positive values can counteract abusive behavior, as they help us to change our way of life and give us a different view of the world. But changing values and behavior is not an easy process, as we are often stuck in old patterns, traditions, cultural norms, etc.

When we enter into the struggle against gender inequalities, injustices and abuse, we enter into a life-long struggle – even with ourselves. For who is not – somehow – contributing to injustice, shame and inequality? Who is not, somehow, part of the ridiculing that we inflict on each other?

Self-examination needed within the church structures

Many incidents involving abuse and gender inequality occur within our churches. We must examine ourselves first, looking at the →



We should be able to offer support and assistance to vulnerable groups and those who are affected and involved in abuse, violence and injustice

→ structures within church and society that strengthen these tendencies. We must be brave enough to evaluate instances of abuse within our own church structures and to develop ways to combat violence and gender inequality, as well as the more subtle forms of abuse which are also present among us.

This is particularly important when it comes to the way in which the churches treat youth, not least concerning questions about sexuality. How do we make it possible for young people to make informed decisions in their lives? How do we engage in dialogue with young people who feel estranged from the Church? How do we transform ourselves as churches in order to be real agents of change in modern-day life?

As a church concerned about tradition, we should adhere to our roots, and yet be open and flexible in order to be a relevant church in modern society.

Pastoral care

The shame that any person being abused experiences should be talked about openly. As a church, we should not only offer forgiveness, but also sincere pastoral care and personal support from the community and congregation.

It is an important task for the pastor, the counselor, or a friend in the congregation, to help a person offload guilt and shame.

The burden of shame can prevent us from going ahead with our life in a positive way. No other person has the right to inflict shame and guilt on us, and in intimate prayer and dialogue with God, we are able to be relieved of our burdens. We often need the support of other people to help us unload our pains and

inner struggles. How do we form networks that allow this kind of crucial support?

Pastoral caregivers should help people who have been abused and stigmatized to deal with the feelings of shame and guilt – and to disentangle the many levels of emotion. As mentioned, it can be difficult to distinguish between sin, shame and guilt.

In the life and death of Christ, God has reconciled all people with their own humanity. This means that we are all set free to be what we are, in our God-given, human dignity. Whoever we are, whatever happens in our lives, God is with us and loves us.

Pastoral caregivers should help any person being abused to deal with the feelings related to guilt, shame and blame. A genuine sense of guilt leads to a need for forgiveness, a need to be able to live without the guilt overshadowing the rest of one's life. To have a forgiven heart enables one to live life in its full capacity, to live life according to the true calling of God. But reaching this level of inner reconciliation takes time, and will in most cases be a life-long process.

The Church as a caring community

The Church is, by its very nature and teachings, a caring community, and it should intervene to alleviate human need. The Church is – as the Body of Christ - called to be daring and different. The Church is to be a representative of Jesus Christ in encouraging care, love and compassion for the marginalized, taking responsibility, speaking the truth and living as the light of the world (Mathew 5:13–16).

It is important that the Church as a caring Christian community gives moral support to all marginalized groups of people in society. →



→ Every one of us should be helped to see ourselves in the eyes of God, worthy of human dignity.

The need for the community of faith to create an environment where those who are traumatized can find help and healing, is indispensable. The Church must create an environment that protects life and empowers all people to fight all forms of victimization.

The Church as a Christian community should play a vital role for the marginalized groups of people in society. Instead of mocking, avoiding and stigmatizing people, we need to translate the gospel into action. This demands practical solidarity and a genuine affirmation that all people on this earth are part of the community of Christ, invited into the fellowship of love, care and reconciliation.

Unity in Christ

As the Church, as “One Body”, we should be able to offer support and assistance to vulner-

able groups and those who are affected and involved in abuse, violence and injustice. And we should be able to assist each other in struggling against these tendencies, even when they are very much a part of our own heart.

Let us be “One Body”, united in Christ, in this very delicate process!

‘I ask not only on behalf of these, but also on behalf of those who will believe in me through their word, 21that they may all be one. As you, Father, are in me and I am in you, may they also be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me. 22The glory that you have given me I have given them, so that they may be one, as we are one, 23I in them and you in me, that they may become completely one, so that the world may know that you have sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me.*

John.17. 20-23



Editors:
Rev Elisabeth Knox-Seith
and Rev Reuben Daka

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“We are **one body** in 
union with Christ”
Rom 5:8