HIV & AIDS, the Church and Theological Education

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HIV and AIDS is an issue no longer restrained within the confines of medical science. This problem has attracted all human fraternity to gear up to combat the malady in all possible ways. It also challenges the church to come out of her slumber to battle this demon which has come in a new form to destroy the life of God’s people. It is a disease found almost in all countries and easily spread in the community. It is therefore a global issue needing a multi-sectoral approach for its prevention. In the words of Musa Wenkosi Dube, “It thus demands the attention of all disciplines, departments, governments, Non-Governmental Organizations, the private sector, Faith Based Organisations and Community Based Organisations”. Experts have predicted that this problem can create a great havoc in 20 years time if not tamed now. It is a disease, which has no cure or vaccination at present, but it is a preventable disease. This aspect must be properly communicated.

Every human fraternity has a decisive role to play in the effort to restrain this pandemic, which has already taken the status of a “crisis”. It is a crisis because it is not only a “disease” in itself but it further marginalises, discriminates, ostracises and stigmatises people unlike any other disease. As Bishop Felton E. May puts it, “Churches cannot conquer AIDS alone, but it will not happen without us.” But the church’s initiative in this campaign has not been very encouraging so far. The church needs to wake up from her sleep. Who will then wake up this sleeping elephant? Just because the disease is mainly associated with sexual behaviour does not mean that the church should shy away from this crisis. The church can no longer remain a silent spectator in the face of this global threat on moralistic grounds. It is good to know that, “When human well-being and good health are impaired, God is actively involved in the work of restoration, and Christians have the responsibility of sharing in this ministry” (F. Graber & D. Müller).

Role of the Church

Unless the church realises the threat and start addressing the issue it is headed for a serious crisis when it will no longer be possible to contain the problem within the church itself. The church’s reluctance is chiefly due to the disease’s main association with sex but it is also because the, “Churches around the world are not well prepared to make a compassionate and relevant response to this crisis. Some Christians have reacted morally, while others have reacted with silence. Others fortunately, have responded in solidarity with those who suffer and against all forms of discrimination, but they may not know how to provide adequate and efficient pastoral counselling” (Jorge E. Maldonado). This is a good observation. The church is not prepared at present to give a critical and meaningful response to such a threat to human life. But this does not give the church the reason to remain silent. The church must wake up to the harsh reality for which it never was prepared. A disease that would chiefly come through a channel that the church always condemns - sexual immorality - is a new means through which evil strikes the church today. The church is dumbfounded. The church must find its prophetic voice once again. The church exists to be a healing community in the midst of despair, pain and suffering. It exists to console (2 Cor 1:3-5); to reconcile (2 Cor 5:19); to love (1 Cor 13); and to minister (Mt 25:35-27). The church has upheld this mission throughout her history. Men and women of the church have worked for the cause of the poor, the downtrodden, the afflicted, the sick, the discriminated, the ostracised and the lonely. And HIV & AIDS poses a new challenge to Christian mission today. The church must critically evaluate the situation and take necessary steps to rein in this crisis before it is too late. The church cannot afford to continue with its too moralistic attitude.
A look at the case of the woman caught in adultery by the self-righteous leaders of Jesus’ time tells us to have a second thought before we brand people as immoral and leaving them at the mercy of the enemy (Jn 8:2-11). The law permitted that the woman could be stoned to death because she has committed an offence against God (cf. Lev 20:10; Deut 22:13-24). But Jesus did not think that way. For Jesus, life was more precious then a set of rules. He refused to brand the woman immoral on the scale of the Jewish understanding. He corrected them to see that no one is righteous. None is without a fault. Jesus thus rescues the woman caught in adultery. Had Jesus been moralistic like the religious leaders of his time, the woman would have been stoned to death with no chance for her to carry out the Lord’s exhortative command, “Go and sin no more” (Jn 8:11). HIV and AIDS is not a disease created only for those whom the church coins as immoral. This disease knows no morality or immorality. Innocent people, even new born babies and even the so called righteous people, are exposed to this disease. In his saving act of the woman caught in adultery, Jesus teaches the church not to be too moralistic.

HIV and AIDS is a crisis which has manifested all its ugly tentacles to grip everyone irrespective of religious orientation, caste or creed, rich or poor, men or women, and young or old. It is therefore a disease that levels everyone equal although it is also true that the rich have the means to prolong their life through proper medical care. But all the same they will die as the poor who die faster due to lack of medical facilities or care. The church’s response to this epidemic of HIV and AIDS is as slow as the turtle even as the speed of the epidemic is getting faster. It may not be very long when the church will have many of her members infected and affected with HIV and AIDS. What will the church do then? It is time now for the church to start addressing this crisis in a meaningful way. The church needs to be prepared to handle this crisis before it becomes a serious problem in the community tomorrow. Waiting until the issue becomes blown out of proportion will create havoc in the spiritual arena of the society – the church.

What can the Church do?
- It can start incorporating sex education in Sunday School programmes.
- The youth must be taught to have a responsible sexual behaviour.
- It must also consider having a full time minister to care for this problem. Counsellors with appropriate training on this pandemic management must be appointed to address the issue in the church.
- The church must set aside part of its annual budget to address and rein in this pandemic.
- Healthy sex education must be imparted to all its members.
- Bible study, sermons and teaching material also should address this issue.
- It must start training some experts to handle this crisis meaningfully.
- It must start thinking of a policy to protect the infected and affected from being looked down or stigmatised or ostracised from the church or community.
- It must educate people not to discriminate, ostracise or stigmatise the PLWHA (People Living with HIV and AIDS).

The church must rein in all its resources to address this crisis. No disease can be condoned by the church on any ground. Jesus’ healing example of those who had leprosy teaches us not to disregard even the worst of disease for it ostracises people. Jesus never neglected those who had leprosy of his time. He healed them. He accepted them. The Bible does not record of a disease called HIV and AIDS. But then the biblical times was also confronted with a heinous disease that ostracised people from the society or community. This is seen in the dreaded skin disease recorded in the Bible which is known as leprosy or Henson’s disease. People suffering from such disease were ostracised from human habitat and they had to live outside of the camp. They were
duty bound to shout “Unclean, unclean” (Lev 13:45-46) to let people stay away from them. Everything they touched was considered defiled or unclean. Their own family had no choice but to disown them and send them out of human habitat into their own designated camp. They lived the rest of their life isolated, in loneliness, in tears, in pain and in shame until they died. Jesus never hesitated to help these unfortunate people. He reached out to them, touched them and healed them and showed to people that these people too need our compassion and that we need to empathise with them on their unfortunate condition. In those days, there were simply no means to know how the disease was spread or how to control its spread. So, in this sense we can understand the peoples’ attitude towards them. But today, when it comes to HIV and AIDS we know how it is caused and what should be done to prevent its spread. Despite this knowledge, indiscrimination and ostracisation of the infected is still taking place making it a disease more difficult to manage. This attitude must be corrected and the disease properly addressed.

The concept of purity in the Bible also tells that Jesus should not touch anybody with leprosy, or dead body or any woman with blood flow (Mk 5:35-43; Mk 5:24-34; cf. Num 5:2; 19:11 etc). But we see Jesus breaking all these taboos mainly to identify himself with the unfortunate. These people are healed and reinstated into the community. This gives us a clear direction of how the church must function today (cf. Mt 10:8; Mk 16:18 etc). The church must fight the physical battle to overcome diseases and any other form of oppression or discrimination or ostracisation. If the church becomes too churchy with only holy-holy people who distance themselves from those whom they coin as immoral; the whole purpose of the church will be defeated. The church needs to care for all people who suffer any form of suffering.

Role of Theological Colleges
One thing needs to be stated here. Most of the churches are manned by theological graduates of yesteryears who have never even heard of HIV and AIDS in their days as Seminarians, leave alone an efficient handling of the problem. This is where theological institutions come into the picture today. Theological institutions must put their heads together and work out some means to educate the church leaders and prepare the church of tomorrow so that the new batch of leaders are trained and equipped to address this issue in a meaningful way. Theological institutions must therefore now take a realistic look at the scenario. They must realise that the church looks for theological interpretation of any new issue that confronts humanity. For example, liberation theology, contextual theologies, ecological crisis, women issues etc., all had received their theological interpretation and now many churches have started taking these issues seriously. Now comes the HIV and AIDS crisis and theological institutions must take the leading role once again to address this problem biblically, relevantly and meaningfully.

Theological education must incorporate this crisis in its curricula to prepare the students to be informed and equipped to address this crisis meaningfully when they enter into fulltime ministry. In a recent and significant gathering of theological colleges in NEI (North East India) an important curriculum was proposed. Eleven theological colleges in the region came together for a consultation under the banner, Theological Educators’ Consultation on HIV/AIDS in North East India, organized by Eastern Theological College, Jorhat in November 2005 (the college has been offering an interdisciplinary course on HIV and AIDS since 2004). The gathering observed the unenviable point that the region is no longer free from this crisis. At the same time, it was also felt that the time for basics and theories have passed. The time now is to get into action. Therefore, the participants put their resources together in the four-day consultation to come out with a curriculum suitable for the NEI context. A well-thought-of curriculum was minutely drafted, discussed and approved and the august gathering resolved to circulate the same to all theological institutions in the region with a strong recommendation to all concerned to start
offering the subject by the next academic session. The vision statement of the course, which has been named as Ministerial Formation and HIV and AIDS is, Creating awareness of the crisis of HIV and AIDS, preventing its spread and eradicating it for the wholeness of life in the Church and Society. And it bears five main objectives:

1. To create awareness among the students and alert them of the crisis of HIV and AIDS to humanity;
2. To equip them with appropriate knowledge, skills and techniques, and to help them cultivate positive attitude in dealing with PLWHA
3. To make them understand the moral and ethical issues in relation to HIV and AIDS;
4. To provide biblical and theological perspectives on health, healing and wholeness of life;
5. To enable the students to impart positive attitude to the church and society.

The outcome of this consultation indicates a positive sign that theological institutions have noticed that this crisis has penetrated our society, even the churches, and that something must be done at the earliest to rein in this crisis. All theological institutions must seriously get down to business to train and equip the church leaders of tomorrow to handle and manage this crisis effectively. On the other hand, the church must also start addressing this crisis from all possible angles. Otherwise, ostracisation, discrimination, stigmatisation and injustice, will all creep into the church and society making the crisis very difficult to manage. Let it be remembered that Jesus said in the course of his ministry on earth, “I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly” (Jn 10:10). This saying is not restricted to some group of people. It refers to all God’s people. May everyone have life and a bountiful one at that in Jesus!

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