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THE AIDS PANDEMIC: *Any Solution?*

An AJET Editorial

The lead article in this issue is a brilliant prognosis of the church in Africa in the 21st century. No such portrayal could be given without consideration of the AIDS pandemic of unprecedented magnitude which is sweeping across Africa and the world.

The statistics are mind boggling, especially when one realises that the true dimensions of the epidemic are unknown. The reported cases of AIDS are far fewer than the reality. Many deaths are reportedly due to TB, malaria or other diseases when, in fact, the HIV infection has destroyed their immune system. Furthermore, HIV infections are frequently not known by the infected persons, for they may live many years without any visible symptoms.

At the start of the 21st century, some 23.3 million Africans south of the Sahara are estimated by UNAIDS/WHO to have HIV infection or AIDS which is almost 70% of the world's total. Whereas life expectancy at birth in southern Africa rose from 44 years in 1950 to 59 in 1990, life expectancy is set to decline to just 45 years between 2005 and 2010. In Zimbabwe life expectancy is projected to drop from 61 to 33 years. 80% of those dying with AIDS are workers between the productive ages of 20-50. AIDS is thus slowly strangling businesses and placing an extreme burden on the economies of Africa. 13 million children have been orphaned by AIDS who must then be cared for by their ageing grandparents or become street children. This only increases the social burden of poverty, crime, illiteracy and disease.

Is there any solution to this pandemic? The solution exported from western democracies, alienated from God, is *safe sex*. Plastered on the walls of market places are invitations to play sex, albeit, with the alleged safety of a condom. A man talks intimately with a woman, 'Let's talk,' promoting the sale of *Trust* condoms.

But this solution has not proved effective. Neither is it moral. Western medicine is firmly rooted in the Enlightenment paradigm of natural sciences which reduces health and disease to natural cause and effect. But AIDS cannot be treated like other past epidemics. One cannot ignore the socio-cultural aspect in the transmission of AIDS. There is a religious and moral dimension in the spread of AIDS. God has ordained that only in the intimacy of marriage may there be sexual relations with God's blessing. There have always been painful consequences for premarital and extra marital sex. AIDS is only the latest manifestation of these tragic consequences. Information and condoms are not sufficient to tackle the AIDS epidemic. 90% of Kenyans know about AIDS and its transmission, and condoms have been advertised *ad nauseam* without any change in behaviour.

Herein lies the failure of this western scientific approach to AIDS. Knowledge alone cannot stop the spread of AIDS. What is needed is a change in life style, a change in patterns of sexual behaviour. By the testimony of many, the condom advertisements only promote immorality. The use of condoms is neither safe nor moral. Only the Christian Church has the answer in the transforming work of God in the lives of believers. Only through biblical instruction and the empowering of the Holy Spirit can life styles be changed and the transmission of the HIV virus cease.

The Christian Church, like a sleeping giant, is beginning to awaken and to assert her moral influence in society to eliminate the dread disease of AIDS. Gradually, the Christian Church is showing compassion on those who have contracted HIV and manifesting courage to teach a biblical lifestyle to prevent the spread of AIDS.

Instructional materials are being prepared for teaching the subject of AIDS and biblical morality. A four year curriculum with 100 lessons entitled, *Why Wait?*, has been developed for secondary schools. 80% of Secondary Schools in Malawi now use this in their curriculum and it is now being introduced in certain secondary schools in Kenya. There is hope, not in talking about safe sex but in the transformation which comes from conversion and biblical teaching. It is time for the Christian Church to become proactive and lead the way in moral reformation through biblical teaching.