

How Can Churches in the UK Respond to the HIV Pandemic?

In 2007 a survey was commissioned into British church congregations and their attitudes to HIV and AIDS. 84% of the church leaders surveyed felt that their response to the HIV pandemic was inadequate and that more could be done. The survey, which was published by the Christian HIV/AIDS Alliance, also found that nearly 50% of churchgoers want to know more about HIV and AIDS, and that approximately 1/3 of these churchgoers are interested in resources on HIV and would like to know more about ways to engage directly with the issue.¹

To find appropriate and meaningful ways for congregations and church leaders to respond to HIV can be both challenging and complex for churches. There is a need to understand what HIV is and how it is transmitted. There is also a need to understand how daily life can be affected. As well as the impact of living with the virus, people also need to develop an understanding of the kinds of services and responses that already exist. Responses to HIV include:

- **Providing practical care and support, not just for HIV related issues but for other needs such as housing and immigration.**
- **Engagement in HIV awareness and prevention.**
- **Challenging HIV and AIDS related stigma and discrimination.**
- **Championing reproductive and family rights for people who are HIV positive.**
- **Campaigning on travel and migration issues for positive people, and**
- **Protecting the human rights of people who are living with the virus.**

It goes without saying, that unlike other medical conditions, HIV is a virus with a deeply complex social dimension. In the UK the majority of other chronic medical conditions call forth a compassionate response from society. Sexually transmitted diseases and in particular HIV do not automatically evoke this same response. Societal attitudes to HIV show that there is still much ignorance about the virus and this ignorance is compounded by myths and taboos, stigma, discrimination and silence.

Although there are many campaigns and organisations specialising in advocacy, research and support, HIV is still regarded by large sectors of society as something that happens to others. This attitude is true of society in general and is also true of the church. HIV presents a challenge for churches everywhere, and developing a compassionate response is key for the ministry and mission of the church, not just in terms of the care of people with HIV, but also in terms of the message of the

¹ Attitudes and Responses to HIV and AIDS - Summary of Survey Results
http://www.chaa.info/index.php?option=com_content&view=category&layout=blog&id=41&Itemid=76
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Gospel to all. The struggle against HIV is one of life against death. It prevents human flourishing in so many different ways. In Africa it leaves the care of young families to grandparents, many of whom struggle to provide for these young children. In the UK it diminishes life through stigma and discrimination, inducing both fear of disclosure and silence. At its root it challenges the notion of a God who is love and a God who is good.

Globally, although Christian organisations have been at the forefront of HIV care and support they have struggled with the issue of HIV prevention. In the UK it can be unclear whether and indeed how churches are involved in addressing the pandemic. Some churches are involved by supporting work done by charities working in countries in Africa, Asia, Latin America and other areas. Whilst there is nothing wrong with this and it is indeed commendable, in the UK the church could do more. We do not have to ignore what is happening abroad, but we can embrace a wider agenda and consider how to engage with HIV in the UK.

Since HIV appeared in the 1980's the church in some ways has lost an opportunity to be recognised by wider society as a provider of succour and support for people living with the virus or affected by it. There are Christians living with HIV who find that they are not able to be freely open in our churches about their status for fear of being stigmatised. In the UK, that support has largely been filled by secular organisations that have risen to meet the challenges of advocacy, campaigning and providing a safe space for people living with HIV to speak about the challenges they go through. Christians living with HIV have set up support groups without the recognition of their churches, in order to respond to the virus as HIV positive people of faith. It seems to me that this work is not acknowledged or given voice in our churches. These are of course very broad generalisations, there are some churches that are involved in supporting people living with HIV in the UK but how can we broaden and develop church engagement in a way that is meaningful?

Responding to HIV through Ministry

Ministry involves the life and heart of the church. It includes prayer life, worship, bible studies, fellowship, education and other dimensions. Ministry therefore is a key way of involving congregations in a response to the pandemic. Congregational prayer is a very good place to begin. When people begin to pray over issues and for others they begin to be open to the needs of others and develop a deeper awareness of the world around them. Although HIV is not an easy issue to engage with, prayer is a stable place to start. In prayer we are able to stand alongside other people even when we don't fully understand what they are going through. It can also act as a catalyst for questions. This is a very practical way of educating people about HIV.

The issue of HIV can easily be introduced in sermons especially in the run up to World AIDS Day. Church participation in World AIDS Day is another way of beginning to involve people in responding to HIV. This could also involve inviting a positive person to speak about their experiences and give personal testimony. Hearing such stories can move people into a deeper engagement. Tear Fund, Christian Aid and World Vision all have resources and ideas that can be used to engage congregations, but any focus on HIV abroad should also embrace the needs of those living with HIV in the UK.

Responding to HIV through Mission

Mission has been defined as the movement of God to the world. The church becomes the means through which God reaches out to the world. As the church participates in mission activities it takes part in this movement of God's love for others. At the heart of mission is a God who loves and cares for the world.² Mission activity can involve a range of practical responses including volunteering for HIV charities and organisations, providing practical support such as respite care, allowing HIV positive groups to use church premises for meetings and getting church members to help with these meetings, providing mentors to people living with HIV, engaging in fundraising activities for HIV charities, letter writing campaigns etc. As churches begin to think through what they can do and engage in these activities, the challenge of stigma and discrimination will begin to be addressed. Another key way of being involved is through volunteering opportunities. There are many HIV organisations that require all kinds of volunteers for all kinds of activities.

If we as a church fail to respond to HIV then as a church we will be missing opportunities to invite excluded people into the life of the church. We will therefore find ourselves marginalising or ignoring people in need and we deny ourselves their giftedness. As people live with the challenges of HIV and embrace their faith and look to the Lord, they are singing the Lord's song in a very strange land. As they sing this song all of us both HIV positive and negative begin to understand even more deeply how Christ reigns even in the midst of the most tremendous difficulty. This does not by any means excuse the difficulties of life with HIV, but makes us aware of the sacred. We begin to see positive people not as helpless victims, failures or deserving of their fate, but we begin to see them as us. Within the areas of mission and ministry, churches need to remember that it is not an HIV-negative church reaching out to HIV-positive outsiders. It is the Church that is HIV positive recognising the truth of its status. That the Church is living with HIV.

² Bosch D.J., *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission* (Orbis Books New York 2005) p390

The Christian HIV/AIDS Alliance through their Covenant to Care recommend that churches:

- **be informed**
- **be involved**
- **pray**
- **give and**
- **influence others.**³

Tear Fund recommends that churches:

- **be welcoming**
- **provide pastoral guidance and support**
- **provide information and awareness building**
- **engage in outreach and education, and**
- **develop care ministries and partnering with HIV organisations.**⁴

In all this, what is really vital is that churches think through what they can do, commit to it and do it. In responding to the challenge of HIV and AIDS, we do not have to do everything, but everyone should do at least one thing.

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Download or order the complete book free from

<http://www.e-alliance.ch/en/s/hivaids/publications/theological-conversation/>

Tear Fund, *Right Here Right Now – How Your Church Can Take Action to Help People Living with HIV*, www.tearfund.org enquiries@tearfund.org

³ http://www.chaa.info/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=50&Itemid=54 [Accessed 21/10/09]

⁴ Tear Fund, *Right Here Right Now – How Your Church Can Take Action to Help* p14-15