



The Doctrine of Retribution and Religious Responses to the HIV and AIDS Pandemic

Anniegrace Mapangisana Hlatywayo (PhD)*
Midlands State University, Zimbabwe

Academic Associate/Research Fellow: Research Institute for Theology and Religion (RITR) in the College of Human Sciences, University of South Africa (UNISA)

Email: hlatywaa@yahoo.co.uk; hlatywayoa@staff.msu.ac.zw

ORCID: <https://orcid.org.0000-0003-0218-2381>

Sophia Chirongoma (PhD).

Midlands State University, Zimbabwe

Academic Associate/Research Fellow: Research Institute for Theology and Religion (RITR), College of Human Sciences, University of South Africa (UNISA)

Email: sochirongoma@gmail.com or sochirongoma@yahoo.com

Orcid: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-8655-7365>



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Abstract

Despite many decades of interfacing with the HIV and AIDS pandemic, religious responses to the plight of the affected and infected still border on the doctrine of retribution. Some religious leaders, particularly from the Christian perspective, are still preaching about the intersection between infection and promiscuity in relation to the HIV and AIDS pandemic. Such a message from the pulpit overlooks people born with HIV infection and partners, more particularly women in long term permanent relationships including marriage, who are unknowingly infected with HIV. Additionally, religious doctrines and religious moral positions embody perceptions that regard the infected as deserving due punishment for their sins. Using desktop research and drawing from the Job narrative, our article seeks to explore the influence of religion on HIV and AIDS. It acknowledges the ambivalent interface between sexuality, gender and HIV and AIDS, taking into account how such interwoven issues affect health seeking behavior of people living with HIV and AIDS (PLWHA). Espousing the Job narrative as wisdom in revolt, the article acknowledges the complexity of HIV infection and negates the doctrine of retribution. It concludes by proffering an alternative, holistic and sensitive theological response in the face of the HIV and AIDS pandemic.

Keywords: doctrine of retribution, gender and sexuality, HIV and AIDS, theological response, wisdom in revolt.

Introduction

Despite many decades of interfacing with the HIV and AIDS pandemic, religious responses to the plight of the HIV and AIDS pandemic are highly polarized with divergent views (Nadar, 2006). On the one hand is the belief that HIV and AIDS is a punishment from God, whilst the conflicting view negates this perception. Makahamadze and Sibanda



(2008) highlighted the diverse responses emanating from different stakeholders inclusive of the church, government, non-governmental organizations as well as individuals. Nevertheless, the overarching dominant view borders on the doctrine of retribution. Some religious leaders, particularly from the Christian perspective, are still preaching about the intersection between infection and promiscuity in relation to HIV and AIDS. Such a message from the pulpit overlooks people born with HIV infection and partners, more particularly women in long term permanent relationships including marriage, who are unknowingly infected with HIV.

This article is a response to the message from the pulpit that was shared by a religious minister during a wedding ceremony. In his sermon, the religious minister remarked that *“mukaita zvekutamba munofa neAIDS”* (if you are not careful, you will die of AIDS). Upon such utterance, a young man sitting in the pews responded audibly, *“ko AIDS ichiri kuuraya here – ndoo mharidzo dzenyu here vafundisi – fambiranai nenguva otherwise muchashaya vanhu mukereke nekuparidza nhema”* (Is AIDS still killing people – are these your sermons pastors – move with the times otherwise you will end up with empty pews because of lies). This young man’s reaction and sentiments to the message from the pulpit were equally shared by another congregant who responded *“Aaah asi havazivi kuti sugar nebpa ndoo zvave kutoouraya kukunda HIV here – ko havasati vaziva mutsauko between HIV and AIDS nanhasi and vanhu vari positive vari kutorarama kukunda those with other chronic illnesses?”* (Aaah, is he not aware that diabetes and hypertension are the current killer diseases more than HIV – even in these contemporary times, is he not aware of the difference between HIV and AIDS? HIV positive people are living normal lives than those with other chronic illnesses).

Whilst the man of the cloth, in his bid to counsel the newlyweds against extra-marital relations within their marital union, the tone of his message was inundated with stigma and particularly against people living with HIV and AIDS (PLWHA). The message from the pulpit evoked the doctrine of retribution. Such a retributory message from the pulpit raises questions as to how do the infected and affected among the congregants feel about such a statement from one who is supposedly viewed as a counselor and a shepherd for the brokenhearted, including PLWHA. The minister’s utterance also overlooked the fact that HIV has moved from being a killer disease to a manageable chronic illness, that if one adheres to antiretroviral therapy, she or he lives a long healthy life with very minimal health complications.

Based on this premise, the paper interrogates the interface between the doctrine of retribution and HIV and AIDS. In many contexts in Africa, since its advent, HIV and AIDS have always been regarded as punishment for immorality and religious and moral positions within communities have reinforced the doctrine of retribution (Banda & Mudzanire 2019; Pantelic et al., 2018; Usadolo 2019). As such, various authors have postulated that both theological and socio-cultural responses to the HIV and AIDS pandemic have always been divergent and very polarized, but chiefly based on the pandemic regarded as punishment for desecrating God’s ordinances of morality (Nadar, 2006; Makahamadze & Sibanda, 2008; West, 2011; Dalmida et al., 2014). As a result, PLWHA tend to be alienated from the society through stigma and discrimination. However, the book of Job brings to the fore, the understanding that not only do the promiscuous suffer from HIV and AIDS, but the innocent and morally upright are equally affected. The Job narrative depicts a new biblical hermeneutic on ‘how not to talk about God in the midst of suffering’ thereby proffering solace for those distraught and aggrieved by HIV and AIDS (Nadar, 2006). Furthermore, the Job narrative represents what is possibly the greatest



critique against the relationship of illness with individual iniquity, hence it demonstrates the complexity that surrounds suffering regardless of the dichotomy between reward and retribution (Nadar, 2003).

Methodology

This study is based on secondary sources of data which were solicited from the Internet, research articles and books related to the nexus between religion and HIV and AIDS. The search words included HIV and AIDS, the doctrine of retribution and religious responses to HIV and AIDS. The authors also drew on their knowledge and expertise acquired through their ongoing research on religion, gender and HIV and AIDS.

The HIV and AIDS Pandemic

Ever since its inception, HIV and AIDS has been identified as the most devastating epidemic that has ravished millions of people, men, women and children. HIV was initially identified in the United States of America among men having sex with men (MSM) in 1981 (Kassaye & Levy, 2009). The mode of HIV transmission was initially identified as unprotected anal intercourse. With the progression of the HIV pandemic, other transmission modes were further identified to include the 'percutaneous or mucous membrane exposure to infected blood', receptive and insertive penile vaginal intercourse, receptive and insertive anal intercourse, receptive and insertive oral intercourse, vertical transmission from mother to infants if proper medical care of prevention is not instituted, blood transfusion and percutaneous needle stick and intravenous drug use (Kassaye & Levy, 2009:39). Since most infections occur through sexual intercourse, there is a widespread religio-cultural belief that immoral people are the ones who get infected. Such mentality indubitably overlooks the fact that infants and spouses can be infected unwillingly and unknowingly.

Global HIV Statistics (2022)

Since the onset of the HIV and AIDS epidemic, a record number of 84.2 million have been infected with HIV and about 40.1 million have died from AIDS-related illness (UNAIDS Fact Sheet, 2022). The global HIV statistics as of the year 2021 indicate that 38.4 million were living with HIV with a record of 1.5 million new infections recorded in 2021. Approximately, 650 000 people have died due to AIDS-related illness (UNAIDS Fact Sheet, 2022). A disproportionate indicator of women and girls comprising 54% of people living with HIV is a reflection of the gendered nature of the pandemic.

Sadly, a press release by UNAIDS on 27 July 2022 indicated the unprecedented increase in HIV infections during the period of the COVID-19 pandemic. This period equally witnessed the lowest percentage of declines in new HIV infections since 2016. Most of the new infections were detected in contexts that had previously recorded significant declines (UNAIDS Press Release, 2022). The recorded faltering progress in the management of HIV and AIDS indicate an approximate 1.5 million new infections in 2021, hence, usurping the global targets by over a million (UNAIDS Press Release, 2022). The drivers of this regression are attributed to global disruptions of key HIV treatment and prevention services due to the COVID-19 pandemic lockdown and containment measures.



An Overview of the Biblical Narrative of Job in Relation to the Challenge of HIV and AIDS

The book of Job teaches us inter-alia, patience, perseverance, and the importance of holding one's tongue, God's faithfulness, restorative power, and goodness. The book centers on the story of Job, an upright and blameless man who was very wealthy, had ten children and was highly honored, and his life was an indication of God's blessings to the righteous (Job 1). However, the greatest misfortunes unimaginable fell upon him. Suddenly, he lost all his wealth, his children, and he was inflicted with a debilitating skin disease. Job initially accepted his fate (Job 1:21), after the intensity of his situation sank in; he protested against such a calamity (Job 3: 1-26; Job 7:11, 20-21 and Job Chapter 29 - 31). Job questioned why God had neglected him, thus accusing God of inflicting him with pain. Job's view was negatively received by his friends (Job 4:7-11; Job 8:1-6), who encompassed the traditional view that the righteous are blessed and the wicked are cursed hence invoking the doctrine of retribution. The book of Job is regarded as wisdom in revolt (Perdue, 1991). In offering a critique of innocent suffering, the book of Job interrogates the traditional tenets of wisdom that good deeds are rewarded and evil deeds are punished (Nadar, 2006). This is a theological truism because the general theological understanding regarding pain and suffering is that doing good invites blessings and wrongdoing invokes punishment, not only for the individual who has acted/misacted, but sometimes the blessings or curses can be passed from one generation to the other. This concept of generational curses emanates from the instruction in Deuteronomy 5: 9, which cautions that, "You shall not bow down to them or serve them; for I the LORD your God am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children to the third and fourth generation of those who hate me."

This biblical injunction seems to suggest that the effects of sin are naturally passed down from one generation to the next. Hence, it presupposes that when a father has a sinful lifestyle, his children are likely to practice the same sinful lifestyle. The same theological thrust is also clearly laid out in Deuteronomy 28: 1-68. Firstly, Deuteronomy 28:1-2 foregrounds that obedience begets blessings "And if you obey the voice of the LORD your God, being careful to do all his commandments which I command you this day, the LORD your God will set you high above all the nations of the earth. ²And all these blessings shall come upon you and overtake you, if you obey the voice of the LORD your God. ³" On the other hand, Deuteronomy 28:15 warns that disobedience elicits punishment, "But if you will not obey the voice of the LORD your God or be careful to do all his commandments and his statutes which I command you this day, then all these curses shall come upon you and overtake you." Whilst this train of thought and understanding is supposed to be our guidebook in our daily lived realities, there are instances whereby this trajectory is often confounded by other factors. For instance, West (2010) highlights the possibility of those who prosper unjustly by exploiting the poor and marginalized.

According to West (2010), this conventional theology overlooks systemic and structural injustices that privilege a particular group of people who are then presumed to have prospered because they lived justly. Such a theology overlooks the systemic privileges, inclusive of the male privilege of patriarchy and the privilege of capitalism (West, 2010), which accords power which ultimately leads to the exploitation and marginalization of the poor and the oppressed. As such, the innocent may suffer unjustly whilst the unjust may prosper at the expense of the poor. Such a scenario negates the doctrine of retribution.



Accordingly, Nadar posits that the book of Job "...argues against poor pastoral care, archaic and tainted interpretations, and the stigma surrounding HIV/AIDS" (2006:91). It is a reflection of unjust suffering that is also evidenced by those innocently inflicted with HIV.

These archaic and tainted biblical interpretations emanate from the church's interpretation of holiness which restrains it from actively responding to HIV and AIDS. According to those who uphold a 'holier than thou' attitude within the Christian tradition, HIV and AIDS are diseases transmitted through illicit sexual practices. This is regarded as a complete departure from upholding sexual purity which is one of the major tenets of holiness from a religious perspective.

'Cursed be the day of my birth' (Job Chapter 3): The Response of HIV Positive Persons to their Calamity

Extreme pain and suffering normally makes one to be deranged. Chapter 3 of the book of Job presents us with a different person from the one who had argued that just as we receive the good from God, so should we also accept the bad. In this chapter, Job curses the day of his birth and he wishes that he had never been born; he could no longer afford to remain silent and accepting of his calamity. Chapter 3 presents Job negating the doctrine of retribution; he fails to understand why God would allow him to suffer so much. He longs for death as he feels that God has forsaken him. Similarly, PLWHA may experience such a feeling of being abandoned by God as well as failing to understand why a loving and compassionate God would allow them to suffer.

HIV positive people have found solace in Job chapter 3 as it relates to their own ordeal. West (2004) points out that some members of Siyaphila (a support group for HIV positive people in KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa) confessed that they identified with Job's feelings and somehow, they felt comforted with the realization that the Bible has some scripture that relate to their own experience of suffering. They further argued that being able to express their anger was comforting. However, they were saddened by the fact that the church denies them the platform to express their anger, such an action is deemed preposterous. Some of the Siyaphila support group members felt that the church also protects God and disassociates God from everything that is not positive (West, 2004). However, the book of Job indicates that it is acceptable to lament, God did not reprimand Job for his protests, but rather, he reprimanded Job's friends for saying what is not right about God (West, 2004).

'Remember now, whoever perished being innocent? Or where were the upright destroyed? (Job 4:7)': The doctrine of retribution, the church and the community's response to the challenge of HIV and AIDS

The doctrine of retribution is the dominant theology in some churches; it is borne from the Old Testament's wisdom tradition. It states that obedience to God is rewarded by a long and fruitful life whilst transgression is punished by misfortunes and an early death. The dominant view of this tradition was that a person reaps what he sows, those who work hard will reap bountifully whilst the lazy would have nothing to harvest. God was also viewed as actively in control of human life, therefore the righteous would 'reap goodness and the bad would reap badness' (West, 2004:114). Some churches have therefore embraced the theology of retribution. PLWHA are seen as reaping the fruits of their bad and immoral life. Sadly, the church has been on the forefront of ostracizing PLWHA.



However, the church is oblivious of the fact that such a theology is retrogressive, defeatist, and hope-sapping. West (2004) gives an example of the centralized monarchic state of Israel whereby the ordinary people had to plough and sow for the state and the harvest belonged to the monarch. The concept of reaping what you had sown was no longer applicable. People were no longer rewarded for their diligent work because other people enjoyed the fruits of their labor. This notion therefore reflects a change in the dominant theology, you sow but others reap (West, 2004). Therefore, with the various modes of transmission, HIV and AIDS is not always a result of sin as evidenced by partners unknowingly infected with the virus and children born with HIV infection. The church believes that virtue is graciously rewarded and vice is extremely punished, the righteous people enjoy a prosperous and healthy life whilst the wicked suffer from poverty, disease and affliction.

The church, like the three friends of Job, believes that the righteous will never perish. The message from the pulpit by the pastor as highlighted in the introductory paragraph is one of the many evidences of the church's failure to embrace the new theology of Job. However, Job stands in contrast to this dominant theology, the innocent and righteous also suffer unjustly. This represents wisdom in revolt because it critiques the dominant or traditional views of wisdom that good deeds are rewarded whilst evil deeds are punished. It invites the reader to embrace the harsh reality of life that oftentimes, when one experiences trials and tribulations in life, it is not to be conceived as a form of punishment of evil actions. Rather, suffering should also be embraced as a process of spiritual pruning and strengthening, akin to placing metal in a burning furnace, not to destroy it but to harden and sharpen it. Hence, the Job narrative critiques innocent suffering, it addresses the intricate and often ambiguous theological debate around the challenge of HIV and AIDS (Nadar, 2006).

Many people are HIV positive, not because they have been promiscuous but they would have been unwittingly infected by their partners or spouses. Similarly, countless children are infected with the virus at birth. The view of Job's friends is therefore refuted, the righteous are at times forsaken and the innocent also perish. The church and society should therefore resist the strong temptation to judge and condemn PLWHA. The church is urged to reject this false theology but instead, to stand as an advocate that offers care and compassion to those infected and affected by HIV and AIDS.

Haddad (2008) mentions that the church has opted to conceal its response to the HIV pandemic, it has chosen to be silent and as a result, the affected people are alienated from the church, especially women who in most cases do not have a voice of their own. In her research on how the church has responded to the plight of the HIV and AIDS pandemic, she points out that women leaders within the church have espoused a positive stance in teaching the younger women about HIV (Haddad, 2008). They also nurture those who are already infected. Haddad (2008) also conducted research which involved the church's male ordained members. She noted that these males did not outrightly condemn the infected; however, they were unable to speak out on sexual issues due to the African tradition which regards such issues as taboo (Haddad, 2008). From the authors' observations and ongoing research within Zimbabwe on the interface of gender, religion and HIV and AIDS, issues pertaining to sex and sexuality are still regarded as taboo. Rarely are such issues openly discussed, most especially within the church. Where concerted efforts are made regarding sex education, euphemisms are used to mask the deep intimate issues related to sex and sexuality. The authors, in agreement with Haddad



(2008) contend that more effort is needed most especially in religious settings to address issues related to HIV and AIDS as well as human sexuality.

This socio-cultural practice led the pastors to preach about morality, thereby evoking the doctrine of retribution in their sermons. This consequently led to discrimination and stigmatization of the affected people. Haddad (2008) further argued that the male leaders of the church have failed to come up with a particular theology to respond to the crisis raised by the HIV and AIDS pandemic. Hence, they have embraced the theology of retribution. This suggests that the infected were immoral and therefore they were being punished for their sins. However, Haddad (2008) notes that the women leaders, like Job, are aware of the invalidity of this myopic theology of retribution as they understand that innocent people may also be infected, especially married women who cannot advocate for safer sex and condom use in their marriages, due to the prevailing socio-cultural constraints.

Nadar (2006:190) concurs with Haddad in her research findings. She argues that families, churches and societies have disassociated themselves from HIV positive persons because they also believe that AIDS is the consequence of denying God and disobeying His commandments (Nadar, 2006). They believe that HIV is not primarily a health problem, but a heart problem which disentangles itself from God and pursues self-gratification which leads to sin (Nadar, 2006:190). As such, Nadar (2006) further posits that from the various research projects that she has undertaken, she discovered that people believe that there is a strong connection between one's actions and well-being. Sickness is therefore regarded as a result of bad actions. The society assumes a similar view and it condemns HIV positive people. Stigmatization is therefore rife, once the family rejects you, the community also rejects you. Job conveys his feelings of despair arising from stigmatization in chapter 19:13-20, a feeling that is equally shared by those infected and affected by HIV and AIDS.

Pastoral Care and Counseling to HIV Positive People

HIV positive people undergo immense suffering. They therefore need pastoral care and counseling to be able to overcome the many problems they encounter in their daily lives. As early as the 1990s, it has been noted that religious institutions have not fully comprehended the impact of HIV and AIDS to the church and the community (Wittenberg, 1994). According to Wittenberg (1994), the devastation of this HIV and AIDS pandemic disrupts families and communities. It tends to create a wall of separation between the infected and non-infected, this intensifies the stigma and discrimination attached to one's HIV positive status. There are also incidences whereby spouses hurl insults at each other because of accusations and counter accusations as they try to identify the one who introduced the virus onto their marital bed. Due to their health-seeking behavior, women are usually the ones who are first to be tested, and when they break the news to their spouse/partner, often, they will be accused of having been the one who first contracted the virus. They are therefore the ones who usually bear the brunt of the burden of the virus, even though they are not always the ones who would have contracted it. It is therefore pertinent for religious ministers to extend their pastoral care and counseling to the infected people. Such disruptions are aptly described by Wittenberg (1994), who argued that PLWHA suffer from three dimensions of pain which are physical, psychic and social. Therefore, this places a heavy burden upon them. This necessitates the intervention of a pastoral caregiver, to offer solidarity and accompaniment. PLWHA are ostracized by the church which, due to the inability to come up with a particular theology



that speaks into their situation, chases them away from their fold. On the other hand, the society is also hostile towards them because they are also accused of promiscuity. Wittenberg (1994) also notes that PLWHA are often ceased with the worry of losing their jobs because of their HIV status. This makes them susceptible to suffering from a total social rejection. The pastoral counselor should therefore be well equipped with skills to offer counseling that speaks to the three dimensions of pain endured by PLWHA. Hence, there is need to mainstream HIV and AIDS in theological programs, and in particular, the church liturgy. Whilst HIV and AIDS features prominently in the curricula of theological institutions, its inclusion in the liturgy will equip religious leaders to be conversant with the needs of PLWHA. A study carried out by Netshapapame and Mothoagae (2023) attribute the challenge of the pastors' failure to adequately respond to the HIV and AIDS pandemic to lack of proper knowledge as well as limited training offered to them. As such, there is need for ecumenical bodies to offer training on HIV and AIDS to all practicing religious leaders.

Religious language also plays a major role in offering pastoral care to the affected people. In most cases, the Bible is used as a resource for counseling. The pastor is urged to select positive biblical scriptures that speak of hope to the hopeless, biblical stories that relate to the experiences of the sufferers. In this respect, the book of Job can serve as a useful resource for counseling because the affected people can relate their ordeal to the suffering endured by Job. The book of Job also instructs the counselor and the counselee on how not to talk of God and on how to talk of God in the midst of pain and suffering (Wittenberg, 1994).

While Job's suffering demonstrates that people can suffer for reasons other than sin, it is clear that also the righteous suffer. God never even explained to Job why he needed to suffer. The last five chapters of Job demonstrate that people are the flock of God (Psalm 95:7), and have no right to question God since He is supremely good and righteous. Nonetheless, the book of Job brings out the importance of lamenting as a way of relieving the emotional turmoil of the affected persons. In most instances, counselors try to calm the affected from venting their frustrations at God, they believe that one should always speak positively about God and therefore they request the sufferer to suppress any negative feelings towards God. Their fears, insecurities and uncertainties about handling the situation paralyses them and the only way they can counsel is to ask the affected to repent of all wrongdoing. (Hopson, 2008). Furthermore, Hopson (2008) mentions that counselors, due to their own fears, shift the entire blame of the calamity on the sufferer. They also struggle between piety and being honest about their own feelings. However, a good counselor should be able to tolerate the outbursts of anger and ranting against God as these feelings are a way of coping with grief.

The stigma and discrimination that is experienced by PLWHA disentangles them from their spiritual life and therefore the need for pastoral care and counseling. PLWHA suffer from spiritual pain which is explained as a 'disjunction between one's view of their spiritual life and the experiences of their life' (Hopson, 2008:87). Hence, the pastoral counselor is tasked with reconciling the spirituality of the affected persons. The church therefore needs to become a beacon of hope by taking a pro-active role to minister to the needs of PLWHA. Chitando elucidates this point as follows:

The church's credibility in Africa is due to its many pro-poor programmes. When it proclaims messages that affect the lives of people, the community takes notice. The church should therefore capitalize on its



credibility in the context of HIV and AIDS. When the church takes a life-affirming stance on HIV and AIDS prevention, treatment and care, communities can be galvanized into action. (Chitando, 2007a:15)

The above excerpt makes it clear that being imitators of God entails journeying with the sick and dying, exercising critical solidarity with those who are lonely and languishing in misery. Chitando (2007b) buttresses the same points as follows:

African churches need *friendly feet* to journey with individuals and communities living with HIV and AIDS, *warm hearts* to demonstrate compassion and *anointed hands* to effect healing. African churches are also called upon to train their voices so that they can speak out and challenge systems of oppression. AIDS competent churches work towards the transformation of death-dealing practices while strengthening life-affirming ones (Chitando, 2007b:1).

The image of the church painted in the above excerpt denotes a warm, loving, compassionate and healing centre. In other words, it must become a place of healing, renewal, and restoration. Madlala & Khanyile (2023) rightly express that the church is an institution of utmost importance and a safe hub for all persons.

The church has a unique role in transforming lives, it can accompany the sick, become the mouthpiece of needy, muffled voices and it can join hands to journey with those who are suffering. The same views are also put forward by Gunda et al., (2019):

Accompaniment means walking together with someone or with others in solidarity. Their journey becomes our journey also. Through accompaniment, we become willing companions. People experiencing the effects of HIV and AIDS are on a journey, and faith communities are invited to accompany them in this journey (Acts 16:1-40)...As believers, we believe that God accompanies us wherever we go and in whatever we do. And since God wants us to imitate God always, we believe that God also wants us to accompany others on their journeys. This is especially true if they are journeys of life and death, journeys that would be scary when undertaken in isolation (Jeremiah 1:7-8) (Gunda et al., 2019:40).

Hence, our churches should become centres of healing, companionship, and solidarity during the era of the HIV pandemic and other life-threatening crises. In the same light, Dube (2015) envisions the era of the HIV and AIDS epidemic as a learning curve, full of life's lessons. She describes it as an apocalyptic text from which we can read and learn the signs of the times. She tenders the following:

The experience of the HIV and AIDS epidemic has been an apocalyptic text, revealing multiple ethical fractures in social structures and institutions, thus underlining the imperative for birthing new ethics, theology, church, nations, and world. The dominance of HIV and AIDS in the African continent gives the African church the identity of an HIV and AIDS positive church, an identity that implicates the whole church worldwide. The ecumenical theology and ethics of an HIV positive church is characterized by a listening, vulnerable, healing, compassionate, woman and child-friendly church that remembers those who died of AIDS and lives positively in the resurrection agenda of birthing and nurturing just societies (Dube, 2015:531).



In concurrence with the theological wisdom shared by the above scholars, our article evokes a theology of a healing, compassionate, all loving and all-knowing God who has plans for us, plans to prosper and not to destroy, plans to give us hope and a future (Jeremiah 29:11).

Study Recommendations

Whilst considerable progress pertaining religio-cultural responses to the challenge of the HIV and AIDS pandemic has been made, there is a continual need for the monitoring and evaluation (M&E) of HIV and AIDS-related responses within religious settings.

1. Our article therefore advocates for specific M&E tools designed for use by religious denominations which will cascade down to individual circuits. Such a move would ultimately ensure a positive and proactive response to the challenge of HIV and AIDS.
2. Continued mainstreaming of HIV and AIDS in religious/church liturgy. Parry (2013) argues that the church should be involved in mainstreaming HIV because people living with HIV are in churches and the church commands a comparative advantage over secular interventions, and most significantly, in fulfillment of its mandate.
3. Constant review of the HIV and AIDS curriculum, including mainstreaming in theological studies as well as conducting timed refresher courses for clergy or religious leaders in active ministry. This necessitates training HIV competent graduates, who will be equipped to holistically minister to congregants infected and affected by the HIV and AIDS pandemic.
4. Inclusion of HIV and AIDS awareness in the various ministries within the church. These are inclusive of children's ministry, youth ministry, men's fellowship and *ruwadzano* or *manyano* (women's fellowship). Such forums are useful for the dissemination of relevant information about HIV and AIDS; conscientization on the importance of antiretroviral treatment (ART) as well as adherence to treatment regimens. These forums also provide a safe space that enables the infected and affected to share their lived experiences with HIV and AIDS. This in turn, will enable religious leaders to be cognizant of the drivers of HIV infection as well as the presenting challenges of PLWHA thereby according the church the relevant information needed to devise positive response strategies.

The HIV and AIDS pandemic remains a menacing threat to the health care sector as new infections are still recorded across the globe. As such, there is no room for complacency. Rather there's need for innovativeness as we continue to work towards eliminating the HIV pandemic and its multifaceted effects on many lives, most especially, that of the vulnerable groups represented by women and girls. It is duly acknowledged that the church and faith-based organizations (FBOs) have assumed a critical stance, since the advent of the pandemic, through the provision of health services, psycho-social and spiritual support. However, it has been equally noted that "their level of response, and the quality and coverage, is no way commensurate with the size of this growing epidemic" (Parry, 2013:15). Hence, concerted efforts are needed to mitigate the devastation caused by HIV and AIDS.



Conclusion

The book of Job offers a new theology that responds to the HIV and AIDS pandemic. It uprightly refutes that suffering is a result of sin. The theology of retribution is negated as it is evident that the innocent also suffer. The church and society are therefore called upon to desist from stigmatizing and discriminating against HIV positive people. Instead, the church is encouraged to journey with PLWHA in their quest for understanding and accepting their illness. The church is also advised to allow PLWHA to lament and protest against God as a way of overcoming their grief. The Job narrative brings forth the notion that the righteous can also suffer unjustly and traditional answers are not always the solution to every crisis. It also highlights that God tolerates honest questions as opposed to false piety, and finally it reflects that sin is not always the cause of evil and suffering in the world. Whilst this study is contributing to the existing literature theologically reflecting on the impact of the HIV and AIDS pandemic and the gendered nature of the pandemic, it is confined within the purview of the Bible and the Christian. Similar research could be conducted within the context of a multifaith approach.

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