

ASIAN
HORIZONS

Vol. 13, No. 4, December 2019

Pages: 679-684

New Scholars

HIV AND AIDS AND THE CHALLENGE TO CHRISTIAN MINISTRY: PROPOSING A CHRISTIAN ABC MODEL FOR HIV AND AIDS PREVENTION

Thomas Abraham ♦

University/Institution: Dharmaram Vidya Kshetram (Pontifical Athenaeum of Philosophy, Theology and Canon Law), Bangalore, India

Faculty: Theology

Director: Dr Shaji George Kochuthara, CMI

Year: 2019

This study focuses on the reality and the consequences of Human Immunodeficiency Virus (HIV) and Acquired Immunodeficiency Syndrome (AIDS) and proposes a strategic communication method for preventing HIV and AIDS globally. Perhaps, the number of people infected and affected with this reality is increasing day by day and the situation is becoming more complex every year. It is an established fact that the problem has gone beyond medical confines. HIV and AIDS has permeated all strata of human situations and many people lose their life as the consequences. This study would help people understand the seriousness of this issue, various ethical

♦ **Thomas Abraham** is an ordained priest of the Malankara Syrian Knanaya Jacobite Church. He holds MTh and Doctorate in Theology from Dharmaram Vidya Kshetram, Bangalore. He has served as a faculty member in Malankara Syrian Orthodox Theological Seminary, Mulamthuruthy, Ernakulam. At present he is parish priest of St Mary's Knanaya Church, Sharjah. Email: fatherthomasabraham@yahoo.co.in

issues involved in it, and in particular the issue of justice in relation to HIV and AIDS and the role of the Church to address this situation biblically, theologically, ethically and pastorally. This study also attempts to analyse in depth issues like stigma and discrimination, and meaning and purpose of human sexuality. The main purpose of this study is to propose a new model of ABC, that is, 'Abstinence, Be faithful with one partner and Communicating good sex to people of all age group,' for preventing HIV and AIDS. It is a critique of the existing Ugandan model of ABC, where 'C' stands for Condom use. Since HIV spreads mainly through sexual route, behavioural change is probably the most effective way to control the transmission of HIV. This study is limited to the Christian response to HIV and AIDS on the biblical and theological basis.

Development of the Theme

Apart from the general introduction and general conclusion the dissertation is divided into four chapters. The first chapter deals with the causes and effects of HIV and AIDS. The first part of this chapter will explore into the causes and ways of transmission of HIV and the effects of its spread in the human body. Along with that we also need to look into how the virus acts inside an infected person taking him/her to the stage of AIDS. Though there is no medical cure for HIV and AIDS, there are Anti-Retroviral Therapy drugs that help the patient to improve his/her immune system to combat the viral infection as well as to prolong his/her life.¹ Mostly this part deals with the facts and figures about HIV and AIDS, and it would be a foundation for the rest of the study. The second part of this chapter discusses the issue from divergent perspectives including social, economic and gender justice perspectives. HIV and AIDS is not a medical problem alone; rather, it affects the multiple dimensions of an individual. Stigma, poverty, unemployment, marginalisation, disempowerment and gender discrimination are some of the social problems which are associated with HIV and AIDS.

The second chapter deals with the biblical and theological perspectives on HIV and AIDS. Christianity, throughout its history, has placed the Bible as the most authoritative book of the church, which has guided her in all contexts. Today when the world is facing HIV and AIDS, some Christians initially had read the situation as a punishment for disobedience. This study is mainly to reread the Bible

¹Ronlad Lalthanmawia, "HIV and AIDS: A Medical Problem," in *HIV and AIDS Towards Inclusive Communities: A Theological Reader*, ed. Philip Kuruvilla and Wati Longchar, Delhi: ISPCK, 2013, 13.

to understand sin and suffering in the context of HIV and AIDS today and to find out a theological understanding of the same. The most powerful contribution which the Church can make to combat HIV transmission in this regard is the eradication of stigma and discrimination. It is therefore imperative that the Old Testament understanding of sin and suffering is discussed in this context alongside the prophetic dimensions of justice and healing. This chapter also discusses human sexuality and its spirituality. When we discuss the issue of HIV and AIDS, it is important to analyse the nature, purpose and morality of human sexuality. Jesus' approach to health, life and wholeness would be yet another crucial indicator. The Church therefore needs to go beyond judgementalism and engage in the physical, social, psychological and spiritual healing of the infected and affected people. This chapter mainly aims at reading and re-reading the Bible from the perspective of HIV and AIDS.

The third chapter deals with prevention strategies proposed by major agencies like National AIDS Control Organisation (NACO) and United Nations Programme on HIV and AIDS (UNAIDS). It also discusses the Ugandan model of ABC. While UNAIDS works at a global level, NACO conducts its programme nationally. Both these agencies are in the forefront of making policies and inventing different strategies for addressing HIV and AIDS. They mostly concentrate their mission on High Risk Groups. NACO has introduced an effective and efficient AIDS control programme in different levels. The priority is to prevent new infections and to reduce the number of AIDS-related deaths by early detection and effective treatment for those who are infected.² UNAIDS proposes a zero vision project in which the world should achieve a target of zero new HIV infections, zero discrimination and zero AIDS-related deaths by 2030.³ ABC is another prevention method proposed by Uganda in the late 1980s. This is a revolutionary programme where 'A' stands for 'Abstinence,' 'B' for 'Be faithful with one partner' and 'C' for 'Condom use.' Though UNAIDS, NACO and the Ugandan model gave much emphasis on condom promotion, it has to be considered morally unacceptable because of the following reasons:

1. It may promote prostitution and promiscuity.
2. The condom never assures 100% guarantee of prevention.

² "NACO- Annual Report 2012-2013," http://www.naco.gov.in/upload/Publication/Annual%20Report/Annual%20report%202012-13_English.pdf. Accessed on 7th February 2016.

³David Jamieson and Scott E. Kellerman, "The 90 90 90 Strategy to End the HIV Pandemic by 2030: Can the Supply Chain Handle it?" *Journal of the International AIDS Society* 19, 1 (June 2016) 1.

3. There are some side effects for continuous use of condoms.

4. Besides, women, because of their lower social status, are usually unable to negotiate condom usage with their sexual partners.⁴

The Catholic Church considers condom as a contraceptive which negates one of the inseparable purposes of marital intercourse. Thus, along with Abstinence and marital fidelity, this study proposes communicating good sex to the people of all age groups. This would help them to lead a sound moral life, which would be one of the effective means for preventing HIV through sexual route.

The final chapter critically analyses the present ABC model of prevention, and proposes the relevance of imparting Christian sex education programme for the people of all age groups. Though in the beginning governments and other agencies all over the world propagated the message of condom use for HIV prevention, later they realised that the model of 'condom use' would not be the only solution for this problem. Moreover, from a Christian ethical point of view it is difficult to accept the model of 'condom use.' Thus, the main focus of this chapter is to have a critique of the 'Condom use' of the present model and it proposes 'C' for 'Communicating Good Sex,' in which a Christian sex education model would be proposed.

In India, most of the cultures have a negative approach towards human sexuality and unknowingly they communicate a message that sex is something improper and something one ought not to talk about. The topic 'sex' is a taboo in most cultures. Thus, the vast majority of the population is not being educated about good sex and we are not taking initiatives to communicate the meaning and purpose of human sexuality. As a result, the information which is available leads to misconception about human sexuality and this, in turn, culminates in perverted forms of sexuality and becomes one of the main reasons for the spread of HIV today. This has mostly increased risky behaviours in pre-marital, live-in and extra-marital relationships as well as among sex workers. We need to realize that obtaining accurate information about sexuality can help us to prevent many sexual problems. Here the Church should not be afraid of addressing the topic of sexuality because God created it and the Bible gives clear and helpful understanding of healthy sexuality.⁵ Thus, a

⁴Stephen Muoki Joshua, "The Dowling Controversy, the 'Message of Hope' and the Principle of Oikonomia: A Historical-Critical Reflection on the South Africa Catholic Church's Stance on the Use of Condoms in HIV Prevention between 2000 and 2005," *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa* 137 (July 2010) 9.

⁵Harry N. Hollis, "The Church Helping the Family in Sex Education," *Review and Expositor* 75, 1 (February 1978) 89.

systematic Christian sex education curriculum is proposed in this chapter that addresses people of different age groups.

Findings of the Study

1. This study arrives at an understanding of the role of the Church in addressing the issue of HIV and AIDS. The stigma and discrimination associated with HIV and AIDS deny the fundamental rights of the people. Thus, People who are living with HIV and AIDS (PLWHA) are not willing to reveal their HIV status and many do not want to go for HIV test. In fact, early detection would definitely help the infected to seek earlier treatment which helps them to lead long and healthy life.

2. If the Church is bold enough to proclaim a 'theology of life' in the midst of PLWHA, there will be no space for stigma, shame and condemnation. The mission of the Church is not only to provide the means to sustain quality life to those who are infected and affected but also to actively participate in the prevention strategies. Since it is a life-threatening disease, a complete eradication of this deadly disease from the face of the earth must be the primary responsibility of the Church. This is what is meant when Jesus said, "I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly" (Jn 10:10b). Thus, it is the mission of the Church to participate in God's mission in which all are enriched with this life in its fullness.

3. Though the Bible and the traditions of the Church speak about the goodness of human sexuality, majority of the common people consider it as something bad. Thus, while addressing the issue of HIV and AIDS, the Church has to seriously take up the goodness of human sexuality. It demands every person to follow a behaviour which is consistent with the image and likeness of God.

4. Along with family, the Church and the society have to play an integral role to equip people of different age groups to deal with sexuality and sexual experience constructively. Though childhood is the period in which a person's character is formed, sexuality and sexual experience can vary from stage to stage. Thus, each stage of development is important for sexual maturation.

5. The main intention of imparting sex education in childhood is to make them have a positive attitude towards human sexuality. It also helps them to save themselves from child sexual abuse and provides them with a feeling of security, especially with their parents.

6. Adolescence is a period during which they try to cope up with their sexuality by learning how to deal with their changing sexual

feelings. It is also a time of discovery and awakening, a time when intellectual and emotional maturation combine with physical development to create increasing freedom and excitement to experience reality of life. To address the above said issues in adolescent sexuality we have to consider both the biological process of puberty and the psychological aspects of the teenage years. True sexual maturation helps the children to lead a modest life, which would help them to keep themselves away from the dangers of the era.

7. Adulthood sexuality and sex within marriage have also to be given priority. Perhaps sex within marriage and sexual pleasure within marriage have to be dealt with seriously. In fact, many studies indicate that a good number of women are not able to experience orgasm within marital relationship. Absence of orgasm in marital intimacy becomes a barrier for leading an intimate marital relationship. Here one of the purposes of this study is to make married people more comfortable with their sexual partner and educate them to a level where they can feel that sex with their marital partner is one of the most effective means of communication for leading an intimate marital relationship.

8. The term chastity, abstinence and marital fidelity are also important terms in relation to sexual morality. It demands every individual to have a healthy sexual behaviour. Thus, behaviour changes are the main means to control the transmission of HIV. Introducing a value based sex education programme would help us to lead a better moral life.

9. Prevention strategies introduced by NACO and UNAIDS mostly concentrate on the high risk groups of the society who are only 1% of the total population. The majority of the people in our society who are also prone to HIV infection do not get adequate information about HIV and AIDS. Hence, this study mainly focuses on the common public.

10. Breaking the conspiracy of silence about human sexuality is the need of the day. Christian spirituality has a key role to play to educate the faithful to develop a positive attitude towards sexuality. Indeed, a Christian ABC model will definitely help every individual to develop a healthy sexuality which can be used as one of the effective means of communication for preventing HIV and AIDS globally.