

Heythrop College, University of London
Roehampton University, London
AIDS: A SIGN OF THE TIMES
A One-day International Conference
9.30 am – 17.00 pm, Saturday 14th November 2009
in collaboration with Progressio and CAFOD

AIDS: A sign of the times?

About 33 million men, women or children are currently living with HIV. For every two people who start antiretroviral treatment, five more are newly infected: the UN estimate for 2007 was around 3 million new infections. In 2007, 2 million people died of HIV-related symptoms. Sub-Saharan Africa remains the most severely affected region, with young women particularly vulnerable. In virtually all regions outside Sub-Saharan Africa, HIV disproportionately affects injecting drug users, men who have sex with men, and sex workers.¹ In the UK, over 77,000 people are known to be living with HIV, the most worrying increase being among young women.²

The epidemic presents a challenge for religions not in terms of outreach but because:

Our tendency to exclude others, our interpretation of the scriptures and our theology of sin have all combined to promote the stigmatisation, exclusion and suffering of people with HIV or AIDS. This has undermined the effectiveness of care, education and prevention efforts and inflicted additional suffering on those already affected by HIV.³ (Consultation of African church leaders, 2001)

In 2003, at a UNAIDS-sponsored workshop for theologians, a young South African priest said, with tears in his eyes: ‘Our theological education and pastoral formation have left us feeling like a cricket team, sent out onto the field only to find that the bats we have been given are broken.’ Following this workshop, the participants agreed the following:

If churches are to engage effectively with local, regional and international responses to the epidemic, then issues of stigma and discrimination have to be confronted, not just at the level of church organization and practice, but also by Christian theology itself: at the level of what is taught in seminaries, what academic theologians lecture, write and think about, what the faithful believe and do, and what values inform the pastoral formation of clergy and lay people.⁴

These and other, associated insights are currently exercising a powerful influence on the direction of theological research, reflection and curriculum development in Sub-Saharan Africa. Their impact has been felt less strongly in Western Europe and North America, where prevalence is lower and the epidemic much more hidden. However, the theological and ethical issues the epidemic spotlights have a global relevance that we cannot hide from. For the world, and not just for some parts of it, AIDS has become a sign of the times.

¹ Figures from UNAIDS 2008 *Report on the Global AIDS Epidemic*,
http://www.unaids.org/en/KnowledgeCentre/HIVData/GlobalReport/2008/2008_Global_report.asp

² <http://www.avert.org/uk-statistics.htm>

³ World Council of Churches, *The Ecumenical Response to HIV/AIDS in Africa: Plan of Action*, Geneva WCC 2001

⁴ http://data.unaids.org/publications/irc-pub06/jc1119_theological_en.pdf

AIMS OF THE CONFERENCE

This conference aims to develop the dialogue between theologians, practitioners and agencies, in an effort to address theological / ethical issues that arise in practice and also, increasingly in theological education. In this, it is following up the exploratory symposium on HIV and AIDS that was held at Roehampton University earlier in the year. The Heythrop conference will be constructed round three major issues that arise repeatedly in theological discussions about HIV and AIDS. These are Stigma, Sin and Hope. The experience should help develop the dialogue initiated at Roehampton and suggest possibilities for future work and collaboration.

DRAFT PROGRAMME

9.30 Arrivals and coffee

10.00 Signs of the Times I: Introductory address

Agbonkhianmeghe E. Orobator, SJ, Jesuit provincial in East Africa

Dr Orobator is a moral theologian who has been closely involved in Jesuit responses to the epidemic

Discussion

11.30 Break

11.45 Signs of the Times II : Sin

Dr Julie Clague, Department of Theology and Religious Studies, University of Glasgow

And others

Discussion

13.00 LUNCH

1.45 Signs of the Times III: Stigma

Revd James Matarazzo, Positive Faith Initiative

And others

Discussion

1500 Signs of the Times IV: Hope

1600 Ecumenical worship

1700 CLOSE

Cost

We are asking participants to pay £12.50 towards the cost of the meeting, which includes lunch, tea, coffee and closing drinks. Advance registration is essential.

Contact, and for registration details:

Dr Gillian Paterson, email: paxworks@aol.com or g.paterson@heythrop.ac.uk; telephone: +44 20 7226 7235. Advance registration is essential, even if you