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## **Time to Reflect and Act: HIV and AIDS Prevention in the Church**

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Over the last two years the world has focused on one major theme: the economic crisis. Governments have tried to save their countries from financial collapse and Greece, for example, was forced drastically to reduce public spending. Considerable cuts in the Greek health system have led to the deterioration of the population's health. There has been a significant rise in HIV infections and "new infections will rise by 52% in 2011 compared with 2010"<sup>1</sup> due to the fact that intravenous drug users and sex workers no longer have access to medical care projects which provide clean syringes, condoms, medication and the possibility to test for HIV. IV prevention is no longer a priority.

The importance of prevention in the fight against HIV and AIDS is reflected in governments' and churches' campaigns over the past twenty years which have fought against stigmatization and advocated for including HIV-infected persons in society and the church. For the churches mainstreaming was the main focus. "Caring for the neighbor" was the biblical catchphrase and many people living with HIV were enabled to live a better and more dignified life.<sup>2</sup> This work is essential and needs to be continued.

Governmental health programs followed a different strategy.<sup>3</sup> The keyword has been prevention in order to stop new infections and to decrease the number of HIV and AIDS related deaths. The focus was on the socio-cultural and economic backgrounds of different groups and the question of why people were infected and how infection could be prevented. Before judging the merits of the different approaches—caring and prevention—we should ask, What would be a specifically Lutheran perspective on prevention? Do we have any biblical arguments?

Even if, contrary to other diseases such as leprosy, HIV and AIDS did not exist in biblical times and is therefore not directly referred to, the Bible deals with the issue of how to live

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<sup>1</sup> <http://download.thelancet.com/pdfs/journals/lancet/PIIS0140673611615560.pdf>

<sup>2</sup> See [www.lutheranworld.org/lwf/wp-content/uploads/2010/05/HIV-Handbook-web.pdf](http://www.lutheranworld.org/lwf/wp-content/uploads/2010/05/HIV-Handbook-web.pdf)

<sup>3</sup> [www.unaids.org/en/media/unaids/contentassets/dataimport/publications/irc-pub06/jc1165-intensif\\_hiv-newstyle\\_en.pdf](http://www.unaids.org/en/media/unaids/contentassets/dataimport/publications/irc-pub06/jc1165-intensif_hiv-newstyle_en.pdf)

with people suffering from various illnesses (e.g., see Job and the healing stories of Jesus).<sup>4</sup> Medical studies have clearly shown how the virus is transmitted and how best to prevent transmission and most secular institutions promote the use of condoms in order to avoid infection. This approach poses a serious problems for the church for which sexuality has always been a taboo subject. One simply does not speak about sexuality and, if one does, then only within a very strict moral framework. The churches will avoid speaking about condoms as a method of prevention and rather preach abstinence or restricting sexual activity to the marriage bed.

Reality has shown that for many people the ethical demand to be abstinent or to live out their sexuality only within marriage is simply not livable and that this strategy does not help people to protect themselves from being infected by HIV. Over the last years a growing number of married women in Africa have been infected by their husbands. The church has failed to support them in terms of advocating for the use of condoms inside marriage.

The Bible treats sexuality and sexual issues openly and freely. Sexuality is already mentioned in the first chapters of the Bible as being a part of human nature created by God. God gave human beings their sexuality. "Then the Lord God said, 'It is not good that the man should be alone; I will make him a helper as his partner' " (Gen 2:18). And because the woman was made out of the man's rib, they "become one flesh" (Gen 2:24). In other words, the relationship between a man and a woman is not only spiritual but also physical. An entire book of the Old Testament "The Song of Solomon" is dedicated to human love and sexuality and beautifully and poetically describes that sexuality is God given and nothing to be ashamed of. "O that his left hand were under my head, and that his right hand embraced me!" (Song of Salomon 2:6). Also the New Testament speaks about sexuality. The Apostle Paul openly refers to sexuality and is against sexual abstinence in marriage. Paul warns, "Do not deprive one another except perhaps by agreement for a set time, to devote yourselves to prayer, and then come together again, so that Satan may not tempt you" (1 Cor 7:5).

What, however, do we do when the same apostle is cited by churches and believers to emphasize Christian values such as marriage, responsibility and fidelity in relation to a HIV and AIDS prevention strategy? There is absolutely no reason for the churches not to strengthen these values; they are essential and must be included in any church and theological discussion on prevention. Indeed there is nothing to be gained for an effective prevention of HIV and AIDS by merely praising sexuality and practicing prevention simply by distributing condoms.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Interestingly condoms existed already in 3000 BC in Egypt where they were fully accepted in the higher circles of the royal court.

<sup>5</sup> A study in Uganda has shown that only "condom use, in conjunction with delay in age of first sexual intercourse and reduction of sexual partners" has helped to decrease new HIV infections, see [www.unaids.org/en/media/unaids/contentassets/dataimport/pub/basedocument/2009/20090318\\_position\\_paper\\_condoms\\_en.pdf](http://www.unaids.org/en/media/unaids/contentassets/dataimport/pub/basedocument/2009/20090318_position_paper_condoms_en.pdf) (24.05.2012).

In order for a biblically based, contemporary Lutheran prevention strategy to be successful, Christian values need to be underlined while at the same time sexuality must be honored and spoken about openly and without negative connotations. Instead of highlighting values such as fidelity and marriage while tabooing another God-given attribute, these would need to be combined. The churches should enable and empower people to live their lives and their sexuality responsibly, which includes prevention of HIV and AIDS for husbands, wives and beloved partners.

HIV transmission routes include not only unprotected sexual activities but also mother-to-child transmission, transfusion with HIV-infected blood products and drug use.<sup>6</sup> The following verses from the Bible are examples of responsible behavior including sexuality in partnerships and marriages. Ephesians 5 talks about the duties of a household. A couple's responsible relationship is described by using the physical image of the body, "... husbands should love their wives as they do their own bodies. He who loves his wife loves himself. For no one ever hates his own body, but he nourishes and tenderly cares for it, just as Christ does for the church, because we are members of his body. For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two will become one flesh" (Eph 5: 28-31). Referring to Genesis 2:24, this passage emphasizes how a relationship must be lived out responsibly, also in terms of sexual behavior.

That men "should love their wives as their own bodies. He who loves his wife loves himself"<sup>7</sup> can be interpreted as a concrete demand for the prevention of HIV and AIDS within a relationship. I as a partner have the duty to prevent myself and my beloved partner from being infected by HIV. As a consequence of loving my wife, my husband, my partner, like my own body I must avoid any risk. I do not want to become infected, so I do not want to risk my partner being infected. Because I love myself and my partner, I will protect my partner and myself from HIV. In concrete terms this means that I will take the responsibility upon myself to ensure adequate protection. This implies speaking honestly about HIV with my partner, getting tested for HIV and practicing "safe sex" (i.e., using condoms). Fidelity is an effective method of prevention, but only in a faithful partnership where both partners have been tested of HIV. In the case of a preexisting HIV infection the taking of specific medication such as antiretroviral therapy helps to prevent my partner from infection.

These verses in which the image of the body is used and which call for responsible partnership, which includes fidelity as well as the use of condoms and/or testing for HIV, are another way of formulating the biblical core values of loving and taking care of the neighbor. For the churches and theological institutions there is no excuse not to strengthen prevention strategies in parishes and in theological and diaconal work. If they

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<sup>6</sup> For WHO's definition of prevention, see [www.who.int/mediacentre/factsheets/fs360/en/index.html](http://www.who.int/mediacentre/factsheets/fs360/en/index.html)

<sup>7</sup> The emphasis on the man and his calling to love his wife is very unusual for the time when this text was written. The passage applies to both men and women. In our time of gender equality the demand for men to love their wives is of special significance because women are at greater risk of infection; they are more vulnerable both socially and physically.

have not done so yet, they should start to break the taboo of human sexuality and embrace sexual prevention methods without moral postulation or false shame while respecting Christian values of fidelity, responsibility and love for the other. The biblical demand to “love the other like my own body” calls upon church leaders and believers to inform people about HIV and its prevention and to encourage them to take prevention seriously, both as non-HIV infected people as well as HIV infected people. It should be recognized that prevention is a part of the proclamation of the Word of God and therefore a theme in theological conversations in parishes and theological seminaries.

If as churches we want to act responsibly then the time has come to develop a theology of HIV and AIDS prevention and to act accordingly.

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