

Have you heard me today?

The World Health Organisation declared the first World AIDS Day in 1988. The day, 1 December, quickly became established as one of the world's most successful commemorative days and is now recognised and celebrated by a diverse range of constituents every year around the globe.

In 1997, recognising the need for year-round campaign activity for HIV and AIDS, UNAIDS launched the first yearlong World AIDS Campaign. Since then UNAIDS has coordinated the World AIDS Campaign as a loose partnership of UN agencies, governments and all sections of civil society campaigning around particular themes.

The international theme for World AIDS Day 2004 is **Women, Girls, HIV and AIDS – "Have you heard me today?"** Diakonia Council of Churches offers these suggestions towards worship services to be held on or around World AIDS Day in the hope that they will encourage many churches to mark this day.



Why a focus on women & girls?

Women and girls are particularly vulnerable to HIV infection and to the impact of AIDS. Around half of all people living with HIV in the world are female.

The rate of HIV infection among young people worldwide is growing rapidly – 67% of newly infected individuals in the developing world are young people aged between 15 and 24 years. The escalating risk is especially evident among young women and girls (15-24 years), who make up 64% of the young people in developing countries living with HIV or AIDS.

Globally, young women and girls are more susceptible to HIV than men and boys. Women are more than four times more vulnerable to HIV infection than men, and women less than 20 years old are up to ten times more vulnerable. In sub-Saharan Africa, girls and young women are twice as likely to be HIV-infected as young men, with up to six times the infection rate of their male peers in parts of the sub-region. In parts of eastern and southern Africa, more than one-third of teenage girls are infected with HIV. Coupled with their greater vulnerability to becoming infected, women are significantly more likely than men to experience AIDS-related discrimination after infection.

Women are twice as likely as men to contract HIV from a single act of unprotected sex, but they remain dependent on male cooperation to protect them from infection. In addition, all over the world women are expected to take the lead in domestic work and provide care to family members. HIV and AIDS have significantly increased the burden of care for many women. Poverty and poor public services have also combined with AIDS to turn the care burden for women into a crisis with far-reaching social, health and economic consequences.

AIDS intensifies the feminisation of poverty, particularly in hard-hit countries, and disempowers women. Entire families are also affected as vulnerability increases when women's time caring for the sick is taken away from other productive tasks within the household.

In high prevalence countries, girls' enrolment in school has decreased in the past decade. Girls are the first to be pulled out of school to care for sick relatives or to look after younger siblings. HIV and AIDS is threatening recent positive gains in basic education and disproportionately affecting girls' primary school enrolments. Going to school is protective. Education is one of the key defences against the spread of HIV and the impact of AIDS and the evidence for this is growing.

The response to HIV and AIDS to date has failed to address adequately women's inability to prevent themselves from becoming infected, resulting in a thriving epidemic and huge populations of HIV-positive women who live in unsafe and undignified conditions.

This year's World AIDS Day Campaign explores how gender inequality fuels the AIDS epidemic, and seeks to raise awareness about, and help address, the many issues around HIV and AIDS that are affecting women and girls.

Overview:

- ⌘ Many women and girls are vulnerable to HIV because of the high-risk behaviour of others
- ⌘ Women hold families and communities together and are a source of great strength in the face of HIV and AIDS.
- ⌘ Women leaders should speak out about HIV and AIDS.
- ⌘ Men, boys, and wider communities have a vital role to play and will also benefit from a focus on women and girls.
- ⌘ Women can, with the help of various organisations, fight HIV-related stigma and discrimination.
- ⌘ HIV-positive women have a unique and valuable role to play, both in society and in fighting HIV and AIDS.

- ⌘ Women-friendly health services improve access to care for women and children.
- ⌘ Protecting property rights of women keeps families together.
- ⌘ Education of young girls reduces their vulnerability to HIV.
- ⌘ A wider range of prevention options can empower women to protect themselves.
- ⌘ Violence against women can accelerate the spread of HIV. Violence must not be tolerated.
- ⌘ Half of all people receiving antiretroviral drugs should be women.

The Problem:

HIV prevention efforts are failing women and girls as they continue to be infected with HIV: across the world many women infected through heterosexual sex were infected by their husbands or long-term partners.

Marriage is no protection against HIV. Across the developing world, the majority of women will be married by age 20 and have higher rates of HIV than their unmarried, sexually active peers.

The "ABC" slogan – abstain, be faithful, consistently use a condom – is the mainstay of many HIV prevention programmes. But for too many women and girls, this message holds no weight. Where sexual violence is widespread, abstinence or insisting on condom use is not a realistic option. Because of their lack of social and economic power, many women and girls are unable to negotiate relationships based on abstinence, faithfulness and use of condoms

Across the world, between one fifth and a half of all girls and young women report that their first sexual encounter was forced. Women are particularly vulnerable to HIV, with about half of all HIV infections worldwide occurring among women. This vulnerability is primarily due to inadequate knowledge about AIDS, insufficient access to HIV prevention services, inability to negotiate safer sex, and a lack of female-controlled HIV prevention methods, such as microbicides.

Women are also biologically more vulnerable to infection; male-to-female HIV transmission is estimated to be twice as likely as female-to-male.

In some of the regions worst-affected by AIDS, more than half of girls aged 15 to 19 have either never heard about AIDS or have at least one major misconception about how HIV is transmitted.

Women comprise about half of all people living with HIV/AIDS. In Sub-Saharan Africa, 58 percent of those living with HIV were women as of end 2003 and

young women aged 15 to 24 were 2.5 times more likely to be infected than young men.

The escalating global struggle against AIDS cannot afford to neglect women, and special efforts will be needed to ensure it is not allowed to. The call to empower women is not new, but AIDS makes it more urgent. Millions of women around the world were already facing a lifetime of hard labour. AIDS has turned it into a death sentence.

The skills, knowledge, and resources to relieve women of the devastating burden of AIDS already exist. What is needed now is the political will to see that they are applied.



Liturgical Resources:

- ⌘ At all services say a few words remembering those affected by HIV and AIDS;
- ⌘ Light a special candle;
- ⌘ Place a red ribbon on the altar or in some other prominent place, or provide red ribbons for the congregation. The red ribbon is the international symbol of compassion for people affected by HIV and AIDS;
- ⌘ Choose hymns and prayers that are relevant to HIV and AIDS;
- ⌘ Have a special sermon on an AIDS-related topic;
- ⌘ Display posters about AIDS in your church, and have information available that people can take away with them;
- ⌘ Invite someone who is HIV-positive or has AIDS, or someone who is working in this field to address your congregation during a service;
- ⌘ Include information about AIDS programmes and resources in your church pew leaflet or on the notice board;
- ⌘ Develop an AIDS ministry in your parish - for ideas about this contact Tracey Semple or Thuli Thabethe at the Diakonia Council of Churches.

Bible Readings:

- ⌘ Luke 5: 12 - 16 - The compassion of Jesus toward the outcast leper.
- ⌘ Luke 8: 40 - 56 – The suffering women and Jairus' daughter are healed.
- ⌘ Luke 10: 25 - 37 - The parable of the Good Samaritan.
- ⌘ John 3: 16 – The love of God.
- ⌘ John 20: 21 – The mission of Christians.

- ✠ 1 John 4: 8 – 21 – God is love.
- ✠ Psalm 103: 8 - 18 – God’s love is wider and deeper than any sin.
- ✠ Lamentations 3: 17 - 24 - The Lord's unfailing hope and mercy.
- ✠ 2 Kings 5 - Naaman, a powerful man, was not spared from the disease of leprosy. Illness knows no boundaries.
- ✠ Psalm 85: 1 - 13 - God's promises to his people.
- ✠ Proverbs 31: 10-31 – The celebration of the good wife.
- ✠ Matthew 15:21-28 – The healing of the Canaanite woman.
- ✠ 1 Corinthians 13 – All our actions need to be based on love.

Prayers:

Prayer for World AIDS Day

Lord God, during this World AIDS Day:

We repent of our denial, complacency and failure towards the HIV and AIDS epidemic.

We are re-committing ourselves to communicating God’s grace to the world; To ministering, responding to and identifying with those in need.

We give up our feelings of self – righteousness, our judgmental attitudes and our faulty beliefs about HIV and AIDS and the people living with it.

Open our hearts for change and for forgiveness.

Provide power to those who will bring change at individual, family, institutional, local community, national and global level.

Enable us to promote positive examples of righteous, safe and healthy living in our cultural, social, sexual, reproductive, political and spiritual lives.

Strengthen our families, communities, and nations by removing neglect, conflict and individualism.

Amen

A Prayer for Women

Loving God, we pray in a special way today with and for all women living with HIV or AIDS. We pray that they may be freed of all pain – physical, emotional, and spiritual. May we all experience Your steadfast love. We give thanks for the witness of so many women, living with HIV, caring for partners and children. We praise You for their strength and vitality, even in the midst of suffering and their nurturing ministry when many of us would falter. We rejoice in the gifts of women exercised in ministry amongst all Your people, particularly those who suffer. Lead us all to look upon You, O God, where all death is vanquished in a place of glory forever and ever.

Amen

For women and children

We pray for all women and children living with HIV and AIDS.

In their pain deliver them,

In their wondering why, give them courage.

Help them to receive care, love and support in their coping;
May they never forget Your constant strength in all things.
We pray for all those who will be left behind – families, friends, partners and colleagues.
In this great loss Lord comfort them.
In this great crisis let us give thanks for their lives, for all they have given to their communities.
We offer their pain and their sorrow to your greater glory.
Amen.

Prayer of confession by men

God Almighty,
We thank you for the gift of women
We praise you for their industry, tenderness and care
We give you glory, God most high!

Forgive us, Lord, when we exploit women
Forgive the times when we selfishly expose them to diseases.
Forgive us, Lord, when we take them for granted.

Strengthen us to acknowledge their humanity.
Help us to banish gender inequalities and violence.
We have gone wrong, gone astray.
By trivialising the status of women;
By not counting women's activities as valuable work;
By leaving all the care for the sick to women.

Living God, hear our prayers,
Through Jesus Christ.
Amen.

Prayer for Awareness

We pray for greater awareness of HIV and AIDS, for greater dignity and rights of people living with HIV and AIDS,
For more compassion and care, for the rejection of discrimination and stigmatisation, for wider prevention activities that address root causes of vulnerability,
For efficient mobilisation of resources and treatments and care,
For support for those left behind who grieve the loss of their loved ones,
For trust and hope in our God.
Amen.

Prayer for Churches to respond

Walk with those affected by HIV and AIDS

Stand with them before our God.
Weep with the grieving, walk with the lonely,
Stand with the depressed and the despised.
Where there is blindness and fear
Preach understanding and healing.
Denounce intolerance and bigotry
Offer reconciliation and peace.
Pour out your love and your commitment without reserve,
Pour out your kindness and your time today.
Go beyond the boundaries of dogma and tradition,
And listen to Christ's Gospel message:
When I needed you were you there?
Advocate justice and mercy, acceptance and love
To all those who live with HIV and AIDS.
God's kingdom is among us, let us make it so.
Amen

Living example of a loving community

We pray for the Church throughout the world that she may be a living example of a loving community, and a voice for those who are hungry for justice.

Lord in your mercy.

Hear our prayer.

We pray for the world's leaders, that they may work to overcome the barriers between peoples and foster a spirit of global community.

Lord in your mercy.

Hear our prayer.

We pray for our own local community here in ...

We pray for those who feel excluded from our local community, through poverty, disability or illness.

We pray for people affected by HIV and AIDS, and especially for those excluded from our communities through discrimination and prejudice.

Lord in your mercy.

Hear our prayer.

Responsorial Prayer:

God of healing and hope,

We bring before You now all who live with HIV and AIDS,
Families and communities broken and struggling to survive.

Give them the strength and courage of Your peace.

In the power of the Spirit,

Bless all who offer loving care and who work to sustain and rebuild communities.

God of healing, God of hope,
Save us and help us.

God of knowledge and understanding,
We bring before You now all those deceived by ignorance and rumour;
All those possessed by prejudice and fear;
All who act harshly and oppressively.
Give them freedom of Your redeeming truth.

In the power of the Spirit,
Bless all who work in AIDS prevention and education,
And who seek to raise awareness;
All who are searching for new forms of treatment.
God of knowledge, God of understanding
Save us and help us.

God of love and faith,
We bring before You now all who are shunned and condemned by their
neighbours;
All who find themselves isolated and alone;
All who fear for their children's future without them;
All who are denied treatment;
All who are abused.
Give them the assurance of Your unfailing love.

In the power of the Spirit,
Bless all who welcome, support, befriend,
All who respect and value the dignity of fellow human beings,
All who take action on their behalf.
God of love, God of faith,
Save us and help us.
Amen

For ourselves:

We are all affected by HIV and AIDS.
We are the body of Christ.

We have lost close relatives.
Heal our bodies.

We have lost close friends and neighbours;
Heal our hearts.

We have lost church and work mates.

Heal our spirits.

We have lost our hope
Heal our minds.

We put our trust in you,
You are Emmanuel, God with us.
You will never leave us or forsake us.
You will be with us to the end of the ages.
Amen.

Intercessory Prayer:

Leader:

We hold in the light of Christ's love each person here,
And the circle of lives linked to each one at home and at work;
That with these immediate contacts we may open the way for God to act
By becoming channels of His peace and His redemptive love.

All:

May our prayers rise like incense and our hands like an evening offering.

Leader:

Loving God,
You show Yourself in those who are vulnerable,
And make Your home with the poor and weak of this world;
Warm our hearts with the fire of Your Spirit.
Help us to accept the challenge of HIV and AIDS.
We pray for those who have to contend with illness as well as drought and
famine
And we pray too for the many orphans who are left behind by those who have
died from AIDS.

All:

May our prayers rise like incense and our hands like an evening offering.

Leader:

Protect the healthy, calm the frightened,
Give courage to those in pain,
Comfort the dying and give to the dead eternal life;
Console the bereaved, strengthen those who care for the sick.

All:

May our prayers rise like incense and our hands like an evening offering.

Leader:

Into Your hands, O Lord,
We place all who are victims of prejudice, oppression, or neglect,
Especially the frail and unwanted.
May everyone be cherished from conception to the grave.

All:

May our prayers rise like incense and our hands like an evening offering.

Leader:

May we Your people, using our energy and imagination,
And trusting in Your steadfast love,
Be united with one another in conquering all disease and fear.

All:

We make this prayer in the name of the one who has borne all our wounds
And whose Spirit strengthens and guides us,
Now and forever.
Amen.

Benediction:

Now may the blessing of God the Father,
Who made from one every nation that occupies the earth;
Of God the Son who bought us for God
From every tribe and language and people and nations;
And of God the Spirit who brings us together in unity,
Be with us and remain with us always.
Amen.

xxxXXXXxx

May the healing power of God surround you all the days of your life. May you
pass on the power of healing to your home and community. May others
experience the healing power of God through your actions and presence.
Amen

Hymns:

- ⌘ We are one in the Spirit
- ⌘ I, the Lord of Sea and Sky (Here I Am Lord)
- ⌘ Brother (Sister) let me be Your Servant
- ⌘ Be still and know that I am God
- ⌘ Were you there when they crucified my Lord?
- ⌘ When I needed a neighbour

- ⌘ The Lord's my Shepherd
- ⌘ Abide with me
- ⌘ Amazing Grace
- ⌘ There is a Redeemer
- ⌘ O for a thousand tongues
- ⌘ When I survey the Wondrous Cross
- ⌘ For the healing of the nation.

Sermons:

Empowerment of Women

Ezra Chitando

Introduction

The status of women in contemporary African societies has generated a lot of debate. Some activists maintain that women are oppressed by patriarchy, while others consider gender equity a foreign ideology. However, it is clear that married women are particularly vulnerable to HIV infection. Thus, what it means to be a virtuous woman requires radical interpretation in the light of the number of women infected by their husbands.

Despite being at the receiving end of the HIV and AIDS pandemic, women have done a sterling job in providing care. Many wives have nursed their husbands, sons, daughters and relatives, often neglecting their own health. It is important that a new theology that does not offer women as sacrificial victims be developed. In the era of HIV and AIDS, married women need to be empowered to protect themselves. They are made in God's image. They should not surrender their lives in order to be deemed good wives. Factors such as culture and religion, lack of education and economic dependence have increased the vulnerability of women to HIV and AIDS. These oppressive structures need to be revisited and marriage needs to be reconceptualised as partnership.

We listen to the Word of God – Proverbs 31:10-31

The passage is a celebration of the good wife. It highlights the value of married women, outlining their centrality to the well-being of the household. Through devotion to her husband and accomplishing her chores, the good wife is an asset to her family and society. Being far more precious than jewels, a good wife appears to be measured by the amount of work that she accomplishes rather than for her intrinsic value.

We apply the Word of God to ourselves

WHAT CAN WE LEARN?

- Married women play a key role in their families
- Cultural factors may force women to sacrifice themselves
- Numerous tasks undertaken by housewives are often ignored

- Housewives are exhausted, they need help from their husbands.

WHAT DO WE HAVE TO CONFESS?

- Exposing married women to HIV
- Refusing to recognise work done by women
- Abandoning care of those affected by HIV and AIDS to women
- That as men and husbands we often neglect housework.

WHAT CAN WE BE THANKFUL FOR?

- Women provide care for the infected
- Mothers continue to work for their families amidst poverty, pain and oppression
- Most wives have remained faithful despite their husband's promiscuity
- That men can make a difference in the spread of HIV and AIDS through faithfulness.

WHAT CAN WE PRAY FOR?

- Husbands should be sensitive and appreciate their wives
- Family members especially men should participate in giving care in situations of HIV and AIDS
- Wives should be empowered to protect themselves against HIV infection.

Conclusion: Word on the Society

Society needs to overhaul its theory that women are long-sufferers. Despite progress that has been made in raising awareness of gender issues in Africa, married women continue to suffocate, particularly in this era of HIV/AIDS. Cultural, religious, economic and other factors that increase the vulnerability of women should be overcome. The church must take a lead to empower women for we were all created in God's image.

Poem: Daughters of Ethiopia

Groaning in faith,
Rejoicing in hope,
Effaced from official statistics,
Written in the Book of Life.

Feeding the hungry,
Comforting the lonely,
Nursing the sick,
Loving the outcasts.

Victims of patriarchy and vicious systems,
Bearing eloquent scars of torture,
Used and discarded,
Brutalised and squeezed.

Your spirit is unbroken.
The Spirit urges you on,
Daughters of Ethiopia,
We salute your courage and tenacity,
May the Lord of Justice and Mercy,
Reward your efforts a hundred fold!

Reject choking systems,
Overthrow stifling ideologies,
Embrace liberation,
Cherish freedom,
Daughters of faith,
YOUR HOUR HAS COME!!

Healing, Power & Women:

Based on the work of Musa Dube in *African Women, HIV/AIDS and Faith Communities*, Cluster Publications 2003, adapted and expanded by Sue Britton.

Mark 5:21-43

At the beginning of September we were all shocked to the core by photographs of almost naked children being rushed out of the school in Beslan, North Ossetia, where they had been held for three days as hostages. The harrowing event fixed itself in the world's heart. The distraught faces of the women of Beslan are etched in our minds. And then the rows of bodies wrapped in plastic . . .

Why? we cried. Why innocent children and women? What have they done to deserve such brutality?

But that was a few months ago. As shocking as those images were to us at the time, life has moved on. Other events, people, stories have intervened to make us forget.

Just now and then we remember the first picture we saw - those terrified eyes, that traumatised face.

The problem with suffering - even the suffering of helpless children and women - is that today there is so much of it that as humans we find we simply can't cope with thinking about it too much, and especially feeling too deeply about it. Even when there is a crisis.

And, as the leader in the Sunday Times of 12th September pointed out:

"We are a country in crisis. Three out of every 100 households in South Africa are headed by children. And that is three too many. Almost a million children have lost their mothers to AIDS and the numbers are rising. The nature of the disease is such that if a child loses one parent to it, he or she is likely to lose the other too.

"A generation will grow up with no one to pass on culture, values, tradition, knowledge and all the qualities that make us rounded human beings.

"Most of the response to the AIDS epidemic has been on prevention and access to drugs to prolong the lives of the infected. This is all well and good, but it is not enough. To expect a 15-year-old to act as both mother and father when they are in dire need of mothering and fathering themselves is a dereliction of our moral duty and constitutional obligation to provide all children with shelter, care and education.

"The vulnerability of AIDS orphans begins from the time they are forced to watch their primary caregivers wither away with the disease, when they have to endure the rejection and social isolation that the stigma of AIDS leaves in its wake. Financially desperate, with no adult guidance or emotional support, they are most at risk of dropping out of school. They are vulnerable to exploitation, be it child labour, prostitution or sexual abuse.

"It is time to act. In the words of the United Nations Children's Fund executive director, Carol Bellamy: 'We need to move beyond feeling beleaguered to feeling outraged by the unacceptable suffering of children.'"

Today we mark World AIDS Day, with its special focus this year on women and girl children, the most vulnerable sectors of society. How can we as Christians focus our outrage at the suffering of those affected by this plague - especially women and children? Where in our faith can we find hope and the courage to act, to do what God calls us to do?

In our gospel story, a man called Jairus, leader of the synagogue, came to Jesus, fell at his feet and begged him repeatedly saying "My daughter is at the point of death. Come lay your hands on her so that she may be made well and live." Jesus agreed to come along with Jairus and a big crowd was following him.

The story tells us that there was a woman who had been suffering from haemorrhages for twelve years. This woman had "endured much under many physicians and had spent all that she had; and she was no better, but rather she grew worse." But when she heard about Jesus, she said to herself: "If I but

touch his clothes, I will be made well." She pushed through the crowds; she stretched her hand and touched the clothes of Jesus. And boom! Her twelve-year bleeding stopped! Jesus also stopped and asked, "Who touched my clothes?" His disciples were surprised by his question and said to him: "You see the crowd pressing on you, how can you say, "Who touched me?" But Jesus, who knew that someone touched him for he felt power going out of him, continued the search. He was looking around and asking, "Who touched my clothes?"

The woman "came in fear and trembling, fell down before him and told him the whole truth." She told Jesus about her search for healing, her experiences with the various physicians and how she came to lose all her money without getting healed. It was a twelve-year-long story. And as Jesus listened, time passed. And just when Jesus said to her, "Daughter, your faith has made you well, go in peace," messengers from Jairus' house came with an announcement. The little girl is dead: do not bother the teacher any more, they said. In response, Jesus said to Jairus: "Do not fear, only believe." And they continued their journey to the house of Jairus.

Upon arrival, they found crowds mourning and Jesus said to them: "Why do you make a commotion and weep? The child is not dead, but sleeping." The people laughed. But Jesus took the parents of the child and his three disciples, Peter, James and John, to the place where the twelve-year-old child was. He took her hand and said to her "talitha cum," which means: "little girl, get up." And immediately she got up and began to walk about.

When we read this story together with the story of HIV and AIDS, we are struck by many similarities. Patients who have been sick for a long time, patients who have spent all they had searching for healing, strike us - but instead of getting better they get worse. We are struck by the presence of physicians, who have attended patients, received their money, but could not heal them. Sick and dying young people strike us. Desperate parents, who are trying to find healing for their children, strike us. Those who are weeping aloud for their dead children strike us. We are struck by women who are sitting at home, silently watching over their sick children and waiting for help to come, until their children die. The story sounds too familiar.

But perhaps what is important is the difference that Jesus brings. Touching Jesus brings healing. Touching Jesus even in the middle of a big crowd makes him stop and want to meet and to listen to the person who touched him. Touching Jesus brings one into a new family, where one is welcomed as a daughter, rather than being stigmatised for their uncleanness. The difference that Jesus brings to a situation of desperation has to do with the fact that he brings hope in hopelessness. That is, while the bleeding woman had searched

for twelve years without any healing, she is suddenly healed and restored to the community as a daughter. Hope is restored as Jesus says to a fearful parent: "Do not fear, only believe." Indeed, hope is restored when Jesus makes those who mourn laugh. Jesus, therefore, makes a big difference by defying death - he calls a dead twelve-year-old girl to life and she rises and starts walking about!.

The challenge here is: how can we as Christians stand in the story of HIV and AIDS, which is happening in our country, our communities, our churches and in our families, and pronounce hope and life in the midst of despair and death? While there is no simple formula to give, what we definitely know is that this is a fitting duty for all of us who call ourselves after the name of Christ. That is, it is a central part of our ministry, life and work - to bring hope, healing and life to a world that is overshadowed by death.

Let us now turn and read this story again with the story of gender construction. In this story, there are men and women. Let us look at these and how they are defined by gender.

To start with men, we meet Jairus who is a synagogue leader. Jesus, on the other hand, is a celebrated teacher, healer and prophet, who is followed by big crowds and whose power defies any disease, including death. Then there are disciples, and three of these are identified as Peter, James and John. They travelled with Jesus and learned from him. Most probably there were many other men amongst the crowds, servants and mourners but they are not named.

Turning to women, we have three women: the bleeding woman, the sick and dying daughter of Jairus and the mother of this girl. Most probably, there were some more women amongst the crowds and mourners.

But an assessment from a gender perspective highlights apparent unequal power distribution based on gender in the story. To take Jairus and the bleeding woman, we note that the woman had no name and no profession. She is identified through her illness. Jairus, however, is named and holds a public position of being the synagogue leader. These two both needed the help of Jesus desperately. But their methods of approaching Jesus highlight their gendered identities. Jairus comes straight to Jesus and falls in front of him, saying: "Come, lay your hands on my daughter so that she may be made well and live." The bleeding woman, on the other hand, comes from behind Jesus. She does not speak and ask him. Instead, she decides that if she secretly touches the clothes of Jesus, she will be healed. Clearly the woman lacks words - rather in a typical gendered manner she speaks in action. It is only after Jesus had searched for her that she comes forward and makes a confession, telling the whole truth.

In fact, her behind-the-scene approach highlights other gender stories of her life. Scholars have underlined that her condition of bleeding made her unclean. She had no right to be walking in public and getting to talk to teachers for she would defile them. Consequently, she decided to come from behind and to silently get healed, so she could disappear unnoticed. In short, her illness was not only physical, but also one that gave her social stigma. Her illness would have meant that she was not allowed in certain places and possibly she could not marry. And given the patriarchal structures of her day, this meant that she had no means of social support outside the security of marriage. This woman was therefore physically ill, but above all, she was also socially ill.

Turning to the other two women, the sick girl has no name of her own. She is identified through her father and her illness. We note also that she does not speak at all. Similarly, her mother is identified through her motherhood role, but she holds no public profession nor does she possess a name of her own. Like the other two women, she does not speak. When compared with her husband, he had a name, a profession and he went out of the home to speak openly to Jesus. She remained in the home nursing the sick child and she never speaks.

In sum, gender disparities are evident in this story. Women are largely nameless, without professions, without verbal communication and the ones who need to be helped. Despite these gender disparities, the vital question is, what are the models of gender empowerment offered to us in this time of HIV and AIDS by the story? Does the story offer us any model of women and men in partnership? There seem to be three models.

First, we are confronted by a *model of abuse of power*, embodied by the physicians. They are powerful people with the knowledge of healing. But when the bleeding woman comes to them, they do not heal her. Instead, they worsen her situation by adding poverty to her illness. This is a good example of the exploitation of the poor by the powerful.

Second, we encounter a *model of using one's power to empower others*. Jairus and Jesus embody this model. Jairus, a synagogue leader, could have sent his servants to go and call Jesus, but rather he chose to go there in person. Upon arrival, we note that he puts away whatever social status he may hold. He falls down and begs Jesus repeatedly saying: "My little daughter is at the point of death. Come and lay hands on her, so that she may be made well and live." Jairus invites Jesus to use his power, to empower a powerless little girl. He invites Jesus to move the situation of this young girl from the point of death to life. Jesus, for all his fame and his power, with so many people pushing against him, could have very well asked Jairus to bring the sick child to him. He could

have chosen to say a word and declare the child to be healed from a distance. Instead, he chose to walk with Jairus in his desperation. When the child is declared dead, Jesus walks with Jairus and gives him hope, saying: "Do not fear, only believe." When they arrive in his house people are mourning and weeping, and Jesus once again, assures them that "The child is not dead, but sleeping."

In all these stages, Jesus refuses to succumb to the shadow of death, by insisting on life and hope. And finally he stands by the side of the dead girl. As a Jewish man, he knows very well that a dead body would defile him. But he fights for the life of this young girl. He takes her hand and calls her back to life saying "Talitha cum," or "Little girl, get up." She hears the voice of Jesus speaking life against the invasion of cultural and physical death. The little girl rises and begins to walk around. Both Jairus and Jesus are powerful men, but they used their power to empower the powerless. This model highlights that the powerful men in our families, churches, and society, do have a role in building gender empowerment and in fighting against the forces of death that HIV and AIDS unleashes against the girl-child of today.

The third model offered by the story is that of *the oppressed becoming agents of their own empowerment*. This approach is best captured by the bleeding woman's search for healing. She is a woman who has been bleeding for twelve years and she has spent all her money in search for healing. Nonetheless, she does not give up, even when she knows she has no money any more to pay the healers. The bleeding woman does not give up, even when she knows that she is religiously unclean and should stay away from teachers. When she hears of Jesus, another healer, and when she sees the number of people following him, she resolves that "If I but touch his clothes, I will be made well." This is hope. She pushes against the religious beliefs that hinder her from touching Jesus. She pushes against the crowds that also hinder her from reaching Jesus. She touches the clothes of Jesus and she gets healed! While in the past she has asked many physicians to heal her, now she reaches out for her own healing without asking Jesus. It is quite possible that many of the physicians that she visited did not want to touch her or allow her to sit in any of their chairs, given her condition of uncleanness. By reaching out and touching Jesus, she becomes an agent of her own empowerment.

Yet even where the oppressed take control of their lives, it demands the willingness of the powerful to relinquish power. The powerful must be willing to feel power going out of them and accept it. They must share power with the powerless. It is not an easy thing. And hence the response of Jesus to a woman who sought to empower herself is important for all of us who are in positions of power. How do we respond when the powerless take power from us without our permission? Jesus stopped and asked: "Who touched my

clothes?" Despite the fact that his disciples thought it was a ridiculous question, he did not give up searching for the person who had taken power from him. It was only after meeting her and listening to her whole story that Jesus said to her: "Daughter, your faith has made you well. Go in peace, and be healed of your disease". By calling her "daughter", Jesus welcomes her into the family of faith, given that she had been socially, economically and physically isolated due to her health.

In closing, we invite you to take your place in this story. Who are you in the story? Are you the powerful physicians who used their power to exploit and worsen the position of the powerless? Are you the powerful Jesus and Jairus, who are nonetheless willing to use their power to empower the powerless? Or, are you the bleeding woman, who is socially stigmatised, but who is willing to break the cultural and physical barriers to get her own healing?

Even as we speak right now, there are many bleeding women suffering from HIV and AIDS who have no more money to pay doctors, but who desperately need healing. Are we sensitive enough to hear them when they stretch their hands to touch our clothes? Even as we speak, there are many young girls who are on the point of death due to HIV and AIDS. Are we willing to walk with their desperate parents towards their houses and beds of suffering and death? Are we willing to take their hands, to speak words of hope against death and hopelessness? Are we willing to lay our hands on them and pronounce life in the face of death?

As people of faith, are we willing to make programmes and projects that resist the forces of death ushered in by HIV and AIDS a priority? Only then will we be able to take action on our righteous outrage at the plague of HIV and AIDS. Only then will we be able to remain sensitive to the suffering of so many. Only then will we be able to truly proclaim Jesus' words of life for children and women and men.

The witness of women

Service from the International AIDS Conference 2004

After each woman says her piece she lights her candle and takes it to one of the tables.

Woman 1: I am Eve, the bone of your bone, and the flesh of your flesh.

Woman 2: I am Sarah, the woman who calls you Lord and master.

Woman 3: I am Hagar your maidservant; your unofficial wife.

Woman 4: I am Leah, the woman you married against your will.

- Woman 5: I am Dinah your only daughter who was raped
Woman 6: I am Tamar, your desperate widow who played the sex worker.
Woman 7: I am Ruth, your widow sleeping at your feet, asking for your cover.
Woman 8: I am Bathsheba, seduced and married by your king.
Woman 9: I am Vashti, your wife, killed so that all women would obey their husbands.
Woman 10: I am the Levite's concubine, without a name, raped by the mob and cut to pieces by my lover.

All Women: We are the broken women of the Hebrew Bible
We are the broken women in a broken world
We are women searching for our own healing.

- Woman 11: I am Mary, the pregnant woman with no place to go.
Woman 12: I am the Samaritan woman, with five husbands and none for her own.
Woman 13: I am Martha, the woman who is cooking while you sit and talk.
Woman 14: I am Mary, the woman who silently anoints your feet with oil.
Woman 15: I am the street woman, washing your feet with my tears.
Woman 16: I am the bent over woman, waiting for your healing touch.
Woman 17: I am the bleeding woman, struggling to touch your garment of power.
Woman 18: I am Anna, the widow praying for liberation in your church.
Woman 19: I am the persistent widow in your courts, crying, "Grant me justice."
Woman 20: I am Jezebel, the demonised woman, blamed for all evil.

All Women: We are women of the New Testament.
We are broken women in a broken world.
We are women searching for our own healing.

- Woman 21: I am the woman in your home, I am your wife.
Woman 22: I am the woman in your house, I am your lover, your live-in girlfriend.
Woman 23: I am the woman in your life, I am your mother.
Woman 24: I am a woman in the workplace, I am your secretary.
Woman 25: I am a woman in your streets, I am your sex worker.
Woman 26: I am a working woman in your house with no property of my own.
Woman 27: I am the woman in your life with no control over my body.
Woman 28: I am the woman in your bed with a blue eye and broken ribs.
Woman 29: I am the woman raped in your house, streets, offices and church.
Woman 30: I am the woman in your church, cooking, cleaning, clapping and dancing.

All Women: We are women of the world.
And we are Christian women.
We are broken women in a broken world
We are women seeking for our own healing.

Scripture reading

Matthew 15:21-28

Jesus left that place and went away to the district of Tyre and Sidon. Just then a Canaanite woman from that region came out and started shouting, 'Have mercy on me, Lord, Son of David; my daughter is tormented by a demon.' But he did not answer her at all. And his disciples came and urged him, saying, 'Send her away, for she keeps shouting after us.' He answered, 'I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel.' But she came and knelt before him, saying, 'Lord, help me.' He answered, 'It is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs.' She said, 'Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters' table.' Then Jesus answered her, 'Woman, great is your faith! Let it be done for you as you wish.' And her daughter was healed instantly.

Response to the Word

Women are often denied access. For whatever reasons they are often left without voice, without resources, without power. But sometimes their cries are heard and they effect change. A Canaanite woman changed Jesus, even when his disciples were urging him to send her away. It is the only story in the Gospels in which Jesus changes his mind. But now it is Jesus, the Christ, who brings the Gospel to us, both women and men, and to our world. It is Jesus, the Christ, who calls us to change.

Jesus reluctantly listened, but he listened. What cry does Jesus need to hear in our time?

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Acknowledgments:

We thank the theologians who wrote items for inclusion in this resource package.

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