

CHURCH.....PLEASE WAKE UP!

Your children are dying; your young men and maidens are becoming no more; dreaming of dreams has become nightmares and visions are failing.

It is everywhere

From Uganda to Uzbekistan, from Turkey to Bangkok, from Saigon to London, we are finding small groups of people struggling to bring help, love and hope into the lives of individual people who are dying. They are dying from a disaster that is wholly able to be stopped, and yet, because it is a human disaster, gathers apace because our human natures will not accept that the solution lies within ourselves as nations and people groups.

It is lethal

HIV and AIDS has already claimed the lives of 18.8 million people of whom 3.8 million are under the age of 15 years. Another 34.3 million people are living with the reality that they are HIV positive and will be dying sooner rather than later.

It is devastating the young

Young people are being faced with two devastating risks and many are exposed to both. The first is the risk of HIV from sexual activity. The second is the escalating risk arising from the upsurge in injecting drug use, particularly amongst the young in the West. Sexually transmitted diseases that foster the spread of HIV are climbing at alarming rates.

There is no cure

No one has a cure. There is a course of triple therapy that will postpone the onset of AIDS but so far has not produced a cure. It is prohibitively expensive, \$1500 per month (£10,000 per annum) per patient. It can have serious side effects. Once on it, one has to continue without let up for the rest of your life.

It can be stopped

HIV is spread by particular forms of human behaviour, sexual and drugs related in the main. These are forms of behaviour that are able to be changed individually in many instances, but social deprivation, lack of human rights and behavioural patterns over the centuries make change at an effective level very difficult. Entire

nations, with full governmental support and funding, need to make changes in the national life style.

Because the type of change in life style that is needed is related to ethical and moral issues, and in various societies, religious issues, the role of the major faiths is critical. In particular, the role of

‘Christianity is good for your health’

Christianity is vital because no other faith has developed the moral and ethical way of life that enables one to counter the risk of HIV and AIDS. In a very real way Christianity is good for your health.

Where is the church?

From those of us working in this field, there is an increasingly powerful cry going up, a cry full of bewilderment that others seem not to understand that we are helping dying people, that we are trying to get drugs to relieve pain; that we are trying to find people to help teach about the realities of HIV and AIDS; that we are asking for support in prayer; for encouragement; for real help and not platitudes. That cry is going up all over the world.

‘Church - where ARE you?’

This is not a cry that is hollow. Ask any individual pastor or church man in Africa about the truth that he is facing daily. Where is the help for him?

Ask the leaders of the little ministries about how many babies they have nursed and had die in their arms in the past few weeks. Ask the children who are orphans, approaching 10 million just from HIV and AIDS alone. Ask the

mothers who see their children getting sick and then realise that they themselves are HIV positive and that their husband or partner is also HIV positive. Ask yourselves how you assure a mother that her other children will be cared for. And answer it honestly if you dare!

Called and Serving

We praise and thank God that for over ten years now, He has been speaking into the lives of individuals all over the world to go, not to wait for massive programmes but

to go and start caring and helping right now. We praise God that so many have heard His call and have gone and yes, in some cases have even died as a result of that call. We praise God for the love that has been poured out and lavished upon one tiny child; one gaunt young man; one desiccated young woman. But there are millions in this situation.

Wonder and Glory

We have seen so much love and so much care as we have travelled the world meeting and encouraging individuals and small groups. We have seen the love and glory of Jesus being poured out so lavishly on the sick and the dying, on the widows, the orphans and the aliens. We have seen the love of Jesus in action as a living testimony to the reality of prayer, the reality of the love of the Lord for each and everyone of us. We have wept and laughed together. We have heard the glorious story of old being not only told but lived in real peoples lives today - the story of a God who loves us so much that He sent his only son to die on a cross for us. But the cry is still rising up to God himself, from the dying

‘Church. Where are you?’

This is where I am. Do you want to be here too?

It was alarming to picture Jesus, kneeling down and cradling a dying person with AIDS, to picture Jesus looking up, straight at you, and saying directly to you, "This is where I am. Do you want to be here too?" How can you not respond to such a question?

A life was changed that day and lives have continued to be changed ever since. Active investigation into HIV and AIDS took place and in the course of time there came into being a prayer ministry that is now world wide and, for a time in London, a caring ministry for the dying that cared for 350 patients many of whom were HIV positive.

AIDS Intercessors

AIDS Intercessors is a response by individual Christians worldwide to the devastation caused by HIV and AIDS, and to the clear call of God to do something about it.

From very small beginnings when a group of concerned Christians (9 -10 in all) wanted to get together and pray about HIV / AIDS, it has now grown to an organisation which sends out Prayer Diaries and Newsletters to hundreds of prayer partners in over 40 countries around the world. Contact is now maintained with over 70 different groups of people who are caring and praying for people who are HIV positive.

'Individual intercessors have continued in this work of prayer for over ten years.'

It is a humbling and wondrous experience to realise that individual intercessors have continued in this work of prayer for over ten years and that they are still advising us of their changes in address so that they can keep in touch and continue to pray.

Workers in the Field

So many of the groups of Christians out there on the front line helping those with HIV and AIDS are in what are often

Prayer restores value as a person

We walked in single file through the bush on a soft dirt track to reach Denise. The track was distinct to those who knew the way but I would probably have been lost before we even came to her clearing. Then we came out into an open space with the sunlight streaming down.

I think that I had expected a mud hut but this house was spacious, built in the old colonial style with a verandah and large open windows. We were met by the mother and shown into a light airy room where we found this young woman - barely 24 years old, lying on a bed, very ill, and in pain. She was a newly qualified teacher and her life was ahead of her. Now she was dying with AIDS.

A doctor had seen her and prescribed for pain and for a mouth infection but her mother had no way of getting the prescription to the pharmacist and no way of paying for the medication. Denise's eyes lit up as she saw us, "Thank you for coming to find me. Please will you pray with me?"

Together we prayed for peace and for healing and for provision for this family. We had some things to leave but it seemed little to give them - some disposable rubber gloves, some paracetamol tablets for pain and a few booklets with bible verses about hope in a loving God - but for them, the very fact that we had come and prayed with her gave her back her self esteem and strengthened the knowledge that she too, is loved by God.

We took her prescription to the pharmacist for her, paid her bill and arranged for it to be delivered later that day. Denis may have had a short life but she is remembered in our hearts and wherever people read this, her story will touch hearts around the world.

distressing and seemingly hopeless situations. Many of these people feel isolated and alone, feeling that they have been forgotten by the relatively complacent and wealthy church in the West. AIDS Intercessors has become a life line to many of those caring. They know that there is someone praying for them; that there is someone concerned for them; that there is someone who will get accurate facts about the course of the epidemic for them; that there is someone who will endeavour to come to them and stand alongside them. And yes, who will raise a shout,

'Church, where are you? Wake up!'

Prayer enables access
Sally was a young, affluent follower of Buddha, and was HIV+ve from drugs. She was getting physically exhausted by the daily chanting around her bed. Her family interceded for a Christian team to care for her. The team also prayed. Within hours, Sally had decided to allow the Christian team to care for her.

Prayer leads to witness

John was a member of the professions as well as a member of his church. He asked for us to come and pray with him and for prayer for physical healing, but underneath the key issue was a fear of death.

He had seen the doors in Quito Cathedral which depicted hell and he was terrified because of his past lifestyle. One of those coming to pray with him had been to Quito, had also seen the doors and was able to tell him of the door panels that also depicted heaven and to speak of the love of Jesus and the power of the forgiveness of Jesus.

He wanted us to work through Psalm 91 with him. We were visiting daily as he became more ill and he would let us know on a scale of 1-10 how fearful he was. His fear started at 9 and fell to the point where he was no longer afraid of dying. From this point he witnessed to all who came to see him, including his minister and his professional colleagues, about the power of Jesus to change lives and life styles. He died peacefully and at peace with his Lord.

Women's Rights

HIV and AIDS are challenging our global assumptions relating to freedom of the individual, a theme close to the heart of Jesus, who recognised the outcast and the marginalised. For example, the recent UNAIDS Report has this to say about a situation in Pune, India.

"The virus is firmly embedded in the general population, among women whose only risk behaviour is having sex with their own husbands. In a study of nearly 400 women attending STD clinics in Pune, 93% were married and 91% had never had sex with anyone but their husband. All of these women were infected with a sexually transmitted disease, and a frightening 13.6% of them tested positive for HIV."

In our own travels, we have found that HIV, and the threat of HIV, is causing women to be concerned that they are likely to be given a sentence of death through no fault of their own.

This is particularly so in countries where women's rights are virtually non-existent. The Christian faith teaches men to love and value their wives as the Lord loves and values his church. We have found that teaching about the realities of HIV in a setting of teaching about Jesus, is a powerful way of changing individual life styles from high risk to low risk.

Resourcing

Our travels to the various ministries have shown starkly, the additional stress and strain put on already over-stretched individuals by the need to seek the necessary resources for the task in hand. We have seen how, despite the problems, at the last moment, and in response to the prayer of desperation the Lord has picked up the issue and provided. We are left with the feeling that some of those last minute answers to prayer arise from the Lord's voice to others elsewhere, being ignored for far too long. It is clear that it is just not good enough for someone

Prayer draws those in need

We know a little about how Stephen came to hear about our intercession group in London, and how he travelled from Europe in order to come to us with his young wife. All he knew was that there was a group of people who prayed robustly, who understood what HIV was all about and who cared for him as a person.

He was a worship leader at a Christian drug rehabilitation centre that ran a two-year programme to bring addicts off heroin and onto Jesus - and then HIV struck. Fifteen on the programme were now confronted with testing HIV positive after having come to the Lord. Some of them were married and wanted children. All of them were devastated.

We taught at the centre. We taught at the church. We trained people to pray in ways that were not too burdensome and yet were very effective. We saw Stephen get well and we saw his marriage blossom. We saw him become ill in hospital and we saw him respond to prayer from the prayer chains and be released from hospital. Eventually, we saw him die.

We and the fellowship at the rehabilitation house had to wrestle with just how you advise couples where the man is HIV positive and the woman is not, who dearly want children. We saw great risks and great sacrifices made as these young people worked through the extent of their love for one another and their love for the Lord.

And we saw the amazing way that the Lord drew His people to him, drew them across nations to where prayer and understanding was available without ostracism and isolation.

operating in the back of beyond in a third world country and caring all day for the dying, to have to work all night preparing a financial plan to justify a funding request.

Similarly, there is the need for the right skills. Again and again we are seeing groups finding skill shortages because there is lack of encouragement back in the home situations to honour the call of God and go.

Church, What can you do?

There is a wonderful, and globally consistent, perception amongst the various ministries, that the Church can, and will, move in all its power to help. And the help needed is not overwhelming. (In one city, over 25,000 school children have been educated about the risks of HIV for the cost of an overhead projector, a packet of overheads and an old vehicle).

We believe from our own experience of meeting so many people and so many small organisations around the world who are trying to do something in the face of an overwhelming disaster, that the church can do the

following:-

1. Acknowledge the scale of the disaster as being something that the church organisations should be concerned with on a global scale.
2. Acknowledge the calling on the lives of those individuals who are responding to this disaster, as true vocations under God, and be willing to see that God is truly at work in their lives.
3. Acknowledge that support, even only to the extent of recognising a person as a person and a creature made in the likeness of God and not a budget item, is often all that is needed to enable a ministry of caring to flourish.
4. Look beyond the local issues and see that solutions derived locally might be transportable elsewhere in the world.
5. Accept that resources are needed and be willing to provide them.
6. Mobilise powerful Christian prayer. It is effective.

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