

CHRISTIAN YOUTH CONFERENCE

ADDRESS ON THE PANDEMIC OF HIV/AIDS AND ITS CONSEQUENCES FOR YOUTH AND OUR SOCIETY

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I regard it as a great privilege and opportunity to be given by the Reverend Stegen this slot to have some dialogue with you, as Christian young people on what I regard as the biggest challenge that we face as youth, and as people of this country. I refer here to the problem of the scourge of HIV/AIDS. It is not an exaggeration that this is possibly the biggest challenge for us as committed Christians ever since the Christian gospel was brought to our Continent of Africa. This disease is not curable. Modern science is doing everything they can to find a cure but so far there is no cure for it. Even the medication that medical science has produced so far, only helps those who are affected to prolong their lives and enables them to live with HIV. But once it has developed to full blown aids, it cannot be reversed. I speak to you today as someone who had the misfortune to lose two of our children last year. On the 28th of April 2004, my 43 year old son Prince Nelisuzulu Benedict died of Aids. I cannot tell you how many hospitals I took him to and how many doctors I sent him to including quacks who deceived my son with bogus quick-fix cures. My son suffered for a long time and his mother and I were extremely affected by his suffering until he passed away. Then a few months after that, on the 4th of August 2004, my 48 year old daughter Princess Mandisi Sibukakonke died of Aids. Our daughter had been sick on and off for a very long time. In her case it was even a bit difficult because she was in denial for the greater part of her illness. It was only towards the end that she acknowledged that she was dying of Aids.

I mention these sad stories of my own family in order for you to understand that I am not talking about HIV/AIDS as something of just academic interest to me. My family has both been affected and affected with HIV/AIDS. I feel certain that in this very room there are some of you who may be in the same boat as us. They may not be infected with HIV/AIDS but have some of their loved ones, who are infected whether it is family members or just friends. So HIV/AIDS is our problem. All of us. It is killing people as I am speaking here to you at this very moment. That is why I thank Rev Stegen for asking me to share these experiences with you.

I would however like to make it clear that my concern about this pandemic was not created by only my family losses but as a leader I had always been deeply concerned about this pandemic. This was long before I knew that it would affect my family. As AMAKHOSI of the Kingdom of KwaZulu Natal we launched our HIV/AIDS Task Team a few years ago, in 2002.

This year in March I have been to Brussels, in Belgium where I spoke on the pandemic of HIV/AIDS in South Africa. I also went to Oxford University to speak on the subject and also addressed a prestigious forum in London known as Chatham House on this pandemic.

I am grateful to have been afforded the opportunity to come and speak to you this evening about the challenges presented by the HIV/AIDS pandemic which is sweeping across our nation. If there was ever a time that our nation needed the providence and mercy of God Almighty so much, it is now.

The devastation wreaked by HIV/AIDS is of biblical proportions, not unlike the plagues in Egypt. The sheer scale of the pandemic is such that people living with HIV/AIDS are at risk of being swallowed up in the anonymity of numbers.

One in ten is infected. For most people, understandably, the scale of the pandemic is still almost impossible to humanly comprehend. We will not reach the plateau of this pandemic and feel its full impact for another decade or so. We have observed how almost unhindered, HIV and Aids is decimating our people, tearing apart our families, and uprooting our communities throughout the nation.

We live in a time young adults are dying before they are able to pass on their knowledge to younger generations. With such a high numbers of adult deaths, a society is emerging that comprises of older generations, and very young generations, with very thin threads pulling the two together. In other words, our classical family unit is being wiped out.

How tragic that at the very time our nation needs to pull together, as one, to repair its broken society, this pandemic should strike. It has created brand new categories of orphans, child-headed households, and terminally ill patients, who cannot perform their daily tasks without cumbersome assistance. One in ten people we work with in the office, or sit next to in a taxi, or in a church service like this one, are infected.

Yet as a believer, I know there is hope. The message that shines out through the pages of the Gospels is that every person is made in the sovereign image of God, and is special to Him. Jesus Christ said that even the very hairs on our heads are all numbered. We are fashioned in God's image.

Our Lord died so that we might live and “live abundantly”. And I emphasize the word 'living'. Our Christian faith is rooted in the belief that we should ascribe to others the same values with which we would like to be ascribed to ourselves. We are called by God to reveal His agape love, the kind of love that only comes from God the Father, to His creation. We know that “God is love” and without love His very essence would disintegrate.

The other side of the coin of love is, of course, responsibility. As Christians we must also uphold the teachings of Christ with courage and conviction. We must challenge the moral relativity of our time with the clear guidelines for living that God has provided for our benefit. We need to remind young people afresh that we live in a spiritual as well as a material world. There are times when the Church must speak out crisply and with certainty, no matter how unpopular or unfashionable our cause might seem. There is a great emphasis upon the safe sex preventative message. I believe that we must unashamedly uphold the value of chastity and the belief that sexual relations were designed by our Creator to be held in a loving and committed relationship.

Last December, I had the privilege of visiting the great Lakes country of Uganda, which is an undisputed success story in fighting the HIV/AIDS pandemic. Uganda has much fewer resources to muster than South Africa. Yet the Ugandan people, under the leadership of President Yoweri Museveni, have succeeded in reducing the rate of the pandemic from 30 percent to 5 percent.

How did they do it? And can it be done in South Africa? In 2003, I attended the South African Christian Leadership Assembly (SACLA II) which was addressed by the wife of President Museveni, Mrs Janet Museveni. She told us that the Ugandan people have fought the pandemic primarily by returning to some of the indigenous mores of the Ugandan people, as well as returning to the Scriptural teachings on the importance of chastity before marriage.

At the present time, there is a moral regeneration campaign taking place in our nation. I believe that it is time we moved from mere words about moral regeneration to concrete deeds. Quite simply,

moral regeneration must spell a return to biblical-based morality.

Revealing the agape love of God and upholding His teachings are what it means to be “salt and light” in the world. Most importantly, we must tear down the Jericho Walls of silence which have surrounded this disease for too long. God has called us all alike, be we pastors, students, parents, shop assistants or public representatives, to use our positions to tear down the walls of stigma and silence surrounding the HIV/AIDS pandemic.

We can see clearly the danger of allowing notions of 'them' and 'us' to flourish here. Such a notion is deeply offensive to the Father heart of God. Many millions of people have died unnecessarily. More will be claimed by the disease in the coming years, but many more can and must be saved. Let us go out into the world and use every opportunity to tear down the walls of ignorance and perceptions of 'them' and 'us' between infected and non-infected people.

Despite the tragedy that befell my family last year when my wife and I lost two of our children to HIV/AIDS, we have come far in our walk with God. In our pain, we have, in the words of the psalmist, “sheltered under the wings of the Almighty”. My belief in the glory of the human spirit to rise again, and again, is stronger than ever.

May God bless you and shine His light upon each person here tonight. May God bless everyone here today. May God bless South Africa.