Reading the Bible in the Light of HIV/AIDS in South Africa

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"I Would Rather Come to Bible Study than Go to Church"

"I would rather come to Bible study than go to church," she said. She is one of the many, mainly women, who participate in the solidarity programme for people living with HIV/AIDS of the Institute for the Study of the Bible and Worker Ministry Project (ISB&WM). This programme is one of a number of programmes within the Project (a community development and research project which is located within the school of theology at the University of Natal, South Africa). The primary aim of the solidarity programme is to journey with people living with HIV/AIDS from diagnosis until death, but with a predominant emphasis on living positively and with dignity.

The main goal is to facilitate the development of sustainable community-based support groups, which would provide support and enhance motivation and encouragement to people living with HIV/AIDS as they struggle towards positive living, by enabling them to reach out to their communities, spreading the message of hope and life in spite of being HIV-positive.

But this is not all. The projects also aims to train trainers from among the support group members and to develop a basic legal "literacy" within the group, "thus empowering the support groups to know and safeguard their basic rights, which are normally violated". A full list of the aspects that constitute the support groups would include the following: knowledge about HIV/AIDS, dealing with one's HIV-positive status, support of family and friends, medical support and healthy nutrition, sexuality and relationships, spiritual care, job creation, counselling and local church support.

In this article, I attempt a preliminary analysis of one aspect of the work of this programme: their reading of the Bible. Most of my analysis is based on an interview with and materials given to me by Bongi Zengele-Nzimande, the coordinator of the solidarity programme and a colleague with whom I work on a regular basis in the ISB&WM project. I have also drawn on the honours dissertation by Andreas Stooss, an
exchange student visiting the school of theology from Switzerland, who conducted research on the solidarity programme.

The core purpose of the ISB&WM is to work with biblical and theological resources in collaboration and solidarity with the poor, the working class, and the marginalized, and so my interest is in how the Bible is a resource for social transformation among people living with HIV/AIDS. My focus on the Bible takes on added importance given the prevailing pejorative view within the church of people who are HIV-positive. In what ways, I ask, can the Bible be a resource for dignity, healing and wholeness when the church is clearly not (yet)?

**Returning dignity to the dead**

"I died when I was diagnosed." This, Zengele-Nzimande tells me, is a common refrain among those who attend the various regional groups of the solidarity programme in the KwaZulu-Natal province. Begun three years ago to meet the need of those, mainly young, women who were going for voluntary testing to the Edendale hospital in Pietermaritzburg, the solidarity programme has grown in its self-understanding and focus.

Among the myriad of HIV/AIDS activities in the province, there was a need for an initiative with a theological thrust. We in the ISB&WM project entered the HIV/AIDS aid industry cautiously, reluctant to have donors dictate to us from an agenda driven by and derived from European understandings of this "African" disease. And yet our own context demanded that we become engaged, and so we did, offering what was in our capacity to offer: biblical and theological resources for social transformation.

Word of mouth brings people to the solidarity groups, and so those who come do so because they believe the groups will be of benefit to them. The objectives of the groups are to break the silence surrounding HIV/AIDS, to proclaim that there is life and dignity after the death of being diagnosed as HIV-positive, and to journey in solidarity with people living with HIV/AIDS. The primary, though not exclusive, resources for doing each of these are biblical and theological.

The unrelenting stigma of being HIV-positive in South Africa – where the prevailing response from the churches and local communities is a hostile silence and where, when the silence is broken, it is only by the denigrating preaching of pastors in denial – damages and destroys the fragile human dignity of people usually already debilitated by the ravages of global capitalism and our own governments’ economic policies and their criminally tardy treatment campaign. In the words of Nelson Mandela, "Many who suffer from HIV and AIDS are not killed by the virus, but by stigma."

In the midst of the destruction of so much human dignity, in a province where the infection rate is between 11.7 and 33.5 percent, the solidarity programme makes a small contribution, journeying alongside participants wherever they may be on the journey from diagnosis to death. If diagnosis heralds social and ecclesiological death, then Bible study brings life for those who participate.

**Bible study in solidarity**

"I would rather come to Bible Study than go to church," they say. Going to church for many young people who are HIV-positive means being preached at and preached against. Coming to Bible study in the solidarity programme means finding a different
theological perspective, one that resuscitates dignity and affirms the presence of God among those living positively.

The format of the Bible study, which forms the focus of every second solidarity meeting, is quite simple. The person responsible for that week's Bible study chooses the text and then formulates four questions which follow a similar format. The text is read twice in Zulu (the local indigenous language) and the questions are then posed:

1. What is happening in the text?
2. Can you relate to what is happening in the text? How does what is happening in the text relate to you?
3. What is Jesus saying and/or doing?
4. What will we do in response to this Bible study?

The Bible study is, of course, framed by prayer, with prayer being a way of gathering together all the news and personal stories that have been shared at the beginning of the meeting. The Bible study begins, in other words, with an act or ritual of solidarity. It must be remembered that the Bible study takes place only every second week. The weeks either side of the Bible study are full of other resources, including counselling, life skills training, information on how the virus operates in the body, guidance on nutrition and the sharing of food, and much else. The Bible study is only one resource, but an important one.

The form of the Bible study has evolved from the fuller form of contextual Bible study used by the ISB&WM Project. Zengele-Nzimande has developed this shorter and less scholar-dependant version out of her commitment to delegation and training. The contextual Bible study process, briefly, draws on the critical resources of biblical studies and local resources of ordinary black working class "readers" (whether literate or not) of the Bible. The contextual Bible study format begins and ends with "community consciousness" questions - questions that immediately draw on the life experiences and neo-indigenous interpretative resources of the participants. Questions like "What is the text about?" and "Are there women like Tamar in your community?" and "What will you do in response to this text?" are good examples of this kind of question. In between these sets of community consciousness questions are a series of what might be called "critical consciousness" questions - questions that draw on the resources of biblical studies in order to give voice to the distinctiveness of the text. Though simple on the surface, critical consciousness questions do require some familiarity with tools and techniques of biblical studies. A question like "Who are the major characters in the story and what do we know about them?" and "What is the relationship between the male characters in this text?" are good examples of the kind of question I am referring to here.

The version of the contextual Bible study process devised by Zengele-Nzimande retains both types of question, but in an integrated form. Question 1 mirrors exactly the usual opening question of the contextual Bible study group, and is designed to create space for any understanding of the text that a participant might want to share, whether an orthodox interpretation readily available in the public realm or an interpretation that reflects some aspect of the more hidden and less commonly articulated "working" theology of the participant.

Question 2 invites some in-depth engagement with the text, but shifts quickly to the reader's apprehension of the text. This question does encourage another look at the text, though not the close and careful repeated return to the text that critical conscious-
ness questions on their own elicit. The emphasis, in line with the entire ethos of the solidar-
darity programme, is on the perspective of the participants.

Question 3 seems to shift the weighting. Here the return to the text is more marked
through a clear focus on character, but because the emphasis is on Jesus, a character
with considerable "baggage", there is still a place for the perspective of the partici-
pants. What they hear Jesus saying and what they see Jesus doing will be shaped as
much by their own understandings of Jesus and contextual contours of the solidarity
group as it will by the text. And this is deliberate. The Bible study Zengele-Nzimande
has designed, while acknowledging and allowing for the text to have some autonomy,
draws on and addresses the lived reality of the participants.

An important innovation in this format is the direct engagement with and privi-
leging of texts in which Jesus features as a character. This is a feature that is peculiar
to this form of the contextual Bible study methodology, because typically our empha-
sis has been on reading a whole range of texts from every part of the canon, including
texts that would be well known and texts that are almost entirely unknown to ordinary
"readers". When I probed Zengele-Nzimande on how this emphasis came about, she
answered that it came about spontaneously. These tended to be the kind of texts group
members chose. She acknowledged that the choice of New Testament texts probably
had something to do with the small New Testaments that made up the Bibles that most
members carried with them (to Bible study). But she felt that the focus on Jesus prob-
ably signalled something more profound. The group usually chose texts in which Jesus
was speaking and/or acting over against the prevailing views of society. In other
words, the texts chosen for Bible study tended to be those texts in which socially nor-
mative views victimized certain people, who were then affirmed and dignified and
reinserted into a reconstituted society by Jesus. Question 2 would therefore allow the
group to identify with these victims of society's norms, and question 3 would provide
them with another way of seeing themselves - as Jesus saw them.

Question 4, the final question, would then take the group into some kind of action.
This is always the final phase of the contextual Bible study process; Bible study must
lead to action, to change. The kind of actions undertaken vary from corporate actions
to more personal acts. Not only does the decision to act return a sense of urgency to
solidarity members, it also provides an impetus to leave the group and go into the less
supportive world, but with some hope that their action would lead to some transfor-
mation.

Jesus in solidarity with us

This particular form of Bible study has evolved, Zengele-Nzimande argues,
because it can be passed on relatively easily. We in the ISB&WM project have often
worried about developing a sense of dependency in those with whom we work. We
have no doubt that our Bible reading methodology does work, but we recognize that it
does require fairly careful preparation and design if community consciousness and
critical consciousness questions are to feed off each other. Our commitment to tackle
forgotten, neglected and problematic texts and to provide unfamiliar ways of inter-
preting familiar texts means that there is quite a heavy dependency on critical biblical
resources. This does not deny the wide-ranging resources that ordinary "readers"
themselves have access to, but it does acknowledge the importance of the formidable
resources critical biblical scholarship does have to offer. Our commitment is to bring
these different sets of resources into dialogue with each other as we struggle to bring forth healing and transforming interpretations of the Bible.

The early Bible studies used by Zengele-Nzimande in the solidarity programme follow fairly closely the format devised by the ISB&WM project over the years, a format which integrates community consciousness questions and critical consciousness questions. In fact, many of the Bible studies used by Zengele-Nzimande have been used by other ISB&WM facilitators. But there has been this significant shift, as I have indicated, and the major reason for this shift has been the desire to delegate the responsibility for facilitating the Bible study each fortnight to members of the solidarity group. What we see emerging is a revised form, retaining elements of the "mother" method, but showing clear signs of innovation.

The factors that appear to have driven the innovations are the following. First, group members seem to have prolonged the initial community consciousness period of engagement with the text by reiterating the general opening question in specifically personal terms. This is a common feature in a variety of participatory and emancipatory Bible study formats, with the Bible study starting with a prolonged exploration of the local context. The Bible study method pioneered by Carlos Mesters and the see-judge-act method of the Young Christian Workers (and other groups) are good examples of this practice. Intuitively, the members of the solidarity programme have moved in a similar direction.

Second, the weighting given to critical consciousness questions has changed. As indicated, critical consciousness, in terms of a return to the text in a structured and systematic manner, remains a constituent element of the interpretative process. However, there is only one question (question 3) with this focus, and the form the question takes is quite specific; it has to do with Jesus.

This brings me to the third factor. The group members work with texts in which Jesus stands overtly over against the prevailing views of society. Clearly their experience is that society, whether it be their families, their church or society generally, rails against them. This is why the group is so important; for a moment they are with people that stand with them, not against them. That Jesus regularly appears to take a stand with those who are discriminated against by their families, their religious institutions, and society generally, has been recognized and embraced by the members. Zengele-Nzimande emphasized to me that the group members do not deny their reality, nor do they deny their responsibility for contracting the virus (given that most of the group members are young people who have probably contracted the virus through sexual intercourse of one kind or another). What they will not accept is the denigration of the dignity – being treated as less than human. The loss of immunity does not mean loss of humanity! Their deep desire is for an alternative theological perspective that grants them dignity, given that the predominant theology they encounter from the church is extremely damaging to people like them.

Zengele-Nzimande points out that most of the young people in the groups do not attend church on a regular basis, either having been driven out of the church by a perverted theology of HIV/AIDS or having left the church for some other reason. But they do encounter the church at funerals. Funerals are a very important part of their lives, as they are for most members of the black African community from which all the group members come. Unfortunately, however, because most of the funerals they attend are for young people like themselves, young people who are estranged from the church,
the minister who conducts the funeral has to be hired by the family for the funeral. The minister of the church which the family attends will often not conduct the funeral of a young person who is suspected of dying of HIV/AIDS related illnesses who has not been a regular member of the church. The hired minister therefore does not have specific ties to the deceased and so feels free to use the opportunity to preach and rail against the evils of HIV/AIDS (and those living with HIV/AIDS), though this is usually done euphemistically and by innuendo, it being culturally and theologically taboo to talk about such things publicly.12 Given this rejection, the acceptance of Jesus is profound. Being alienated from the church places special significance on the Bible as another site in which they might encounter God. Bible study reminds them of a Jesus who returns them to God and so to their dignity and humanity.

Having listened to a story similar to the stones of the young women in the solidarity programme, Pitika Ntuli of the African Renaissance Development Institute was so moved that he borrowed paper and wrote the following poem, which captures in poetic form many of the points I have discussed:

I am a war zone walking on corpses of beloved ones around my house. My spirit wall has the graffiti of insults where I emerge as a pariah – the untouchable. God’s wrath is invoked against me by the upholders of the faith who fail to walk in the footsteps of the paschal lamb – Jesus Christ. Diagnosed positive, I’m expected to drop dead anytime, anywhere. I spend my Saturdays burying victims of taxi wars, murders and those who die of “natural” causes. I am here alive! Positive! Being positive is no death sentence. I’m savouring every minute of every day. I live! With your support and understanding I will rise.13

The fourth factor behind the innovations in the Bible study format is the portability of the process. The simple method can be appropriated by anyone, and this is particularly important as the pandemic grows and more and more support groups develop. Ordinary group members must be able to take leadership, and this has been happening under the facilitation of Zengele-Nzimande. An even more important impetus to having a method that is easily appropriated is the goal of the project to eventually run Bible studies in the family. More than anything else, the members want to be embraced by their families. They can live with the rejection of society at large and even of the church, but the rejection of their families literally kills them. And so the groups prepare and plan for the day when they will be able to conduct Bible studies in their family homes, thereby introducing their families to the Jesus whom they have come to know.

Having provided a preliminary analysis of the contours of the contextual Bible method that has evolved in the practice of the solidarity programme, I now want to examine three elements of its biblical pedagogy in more detail.
We choose our own texts

As I have indicated, Zengele-Nzimande allows the group to choose its own texts. This commitment to ordinary people owning the Bible is an important element of our work in the ISB&WM. However, in much of our work, while we do encourage the groups we read the Bible with to engage with biblical texts that are meaningful, powerful and true for them, we also see our contribution to the reading process as including an engagement with unfamiliar and neglected texts. So much of the Bible comes with pre-packaged "missionary" interpretations, particularly in a context like ours. Because black Africans were confronted, converted and catechized with particular parts and peculiar interpretations of Bible, it is these that have constituted the raw material of their interpretative and appropriative acts. In our work with these communities, the resources of socially engaged biblical scholars and theologians open up, through the contextual Bible study process, additional parts of and perspectives on the Bible. Neglected and forgotten texts become available; those parts of the canon ignored by the missionaries and colonialists are now read; alternative forms of access to the very edges of the tradition are found; and the received readings of well worn texts are disrupted and deconstructed. Familiar texts are read in unfamiliar ways and unfamiliar texts are read!

In the beginning of her work with support groups, Zengele-Nzimande read a whole range of familiar and unfamiliar texts with them. However, as the Bible study has evolved in this context, the texts chosen, initially by her and then by the group, have been determined by specific needs of the group to hear good news directly from Jesus. In a situation where the predominant message they hear proclaimed from the churches concerning people like them is bad news, their hope is that this is not all there is to the Christian message. Indeed, their own personal and corporate experience and lived theology affirm otherwise; they know that God is with them. So they dare to believe that what they hear from the churches is not the full gospel and turn in hope and trust to the Bible to hear the good news of Jesus Christ.

The texts they choose are those texts where the good news is clearest; texts in which Jesus takes a clear stand against prevailing social perspectives and dominant theologies in favour of those who have been pushed to the margins by these perspectives and theologies. In declaring another perspective and another theology, the texts they choose articulate their incipient sense of God's presence with them.

The gospels are not, of course, the only place in the Bible where there are contending theologies, but they are the most obvious. Given the solidarity programme's commitment to empowerment through capacity building, the gospels provide a readily accessible source of texts in which the dominant theology is clearly identified as destructive and wrong by the authoritative voice of Jesus.

God with us

Remarkably, despite the almost constant assault from the church, these young women remain resolute in their belief that God is with them. Their "working theology", though inchoate and incipient, is that God is on their side. Their God is God who hears the cries of the displaced. Bible study in the solidarity programme provides a safe place in which, and the resources with which, they are able to articulate and give voice to their "working theology". But what about those millions of others in South Africa who do not have access to such a place and resources? What toll will the dom-
Dominant theology that HIV/AIDS is a punishment from God take on those living with HIV/AIDS? What damage will the church's rejection inflict on the "working theology" of Christians living with the virus? We do not know the answers to such questions, but we can perhaps learn from the experiences of a similar project in another context.

In the "people's seminary", a project which works among peasant immigrants from southern Mexico who are drawn to Skagit County (Washington State, USA) by the abundance of seasonal labour harvesting strawberries, raspberries, blueberries, cucumbers, apples and other fruit and vegetables, a similar Bible reading methodology has evolved. Facilitated by Bob Ekblad, a biblical scholar and social activist, Bible study takes place in the local jail, in immigration detention centres, in the crowded apartments and migrant labour camps in which the workers live, and on the premises of the people's seminary in Burlington. The basic interpretative methodology is almost identical with that found in the solidarity programme, with two notable differences. The most significant difference is that most of the migrant workers have a negative image of God: "People's experience of being judged, discriminated against and excluded by the dominant culture [in the USA and in their countries] is often interpreted as synonymous with punishment and rejection by God." This is not the case with those in the solidarity programme, who retain a positive image of God, despite being discriminated against in the name of that God. The second difference is that owing to the constraints of his context, for example, doing Bible study in the local jail, Ekblad usually chooses the texts himself. Because he is a biblical scholar, Ekblad is also able to work with a wider range of texts, including texts from the Old Testament, in which it is possible to detect a liberating counter voice to the dominant destructive theology.

What we can learn from the experience of the US people's seminary is twofold. First, even those who have given up on a God who is in solidarity with them have the capacity to rediscover this God through creative contextual Bible study. In Ekblad's analysis, the prevailing view among Hispanic immigrants, "a high view of providence combined with a low anthropology, typifies street-level images of God and humans. God is envisioned as a distant, judging force who is both nowhere helpful and everywhere troublesome." What compounds this view of God is their view of the Bible. "The Bible is viewed as containing the laws by which God and his law-enforcement agents judge the world. The scriptures are often feared and avoided for the 'bad news' they are expected to contain rather than welcomed as words of comfort." And yet Ekblad's experiences of reading the Bible with those who believe they are damned is that they do have profound moments of recognition of another Bible and another God. There are moments when they do hear the good news that Jesus came to bring. So, and I hope it will not come to this, even if our churches and our society refuse to change, and even if people living with HIV/AIDS are further brutalized and crushed, there is still hope as long as we are willing to read the Bible differently.

The second important lesson we can learn from the experience of the people's seminary is their determination to read the Bible as good news for the poor and marginalized. No text is left to terrorize and to destroy; all texts are wrestled with until they bestow their blessing. Ekblad and his co-workers know the damage that the Bible can do in care-less hands, and so the Bible must remain a site of struggle. We must continue to contend for its good news. We dare not ignore what is done with the Bible.
Personal and structural dimensions

Fortunately, for those in the support groups of the solidarity programme, God is on their side and the Bible is a source of good news. Knowing that Jesus stands in solidarity with them is fundamental to their well-being. While they wait for their families to believe differently, their fortnightly Bible studies sustain them, providing a therapeutic environment in which to wait for the world around them to change. As a trained counsellor, Zengele-Nzimande has come to recognize that Bible study is a form of therapy in a profound sense. Giving the example of a Bible study on John 8:1-11, a text where religious leaders gang up against a woman allegedly caught in adultery, Zengele-Nzimande explained to me how the Bible study had imparted forgiveness to group members whom she herself had not had the capacity to forgive in her own counselling sessions. The Jesus of this text had entered into and reconstituted the counselling encounter, bringing forgiveness, healing and acceptance. At the personal level, it can be said, the Bible study nurtures a spirituality of affirmation and acceptance.

At the social level, the Bible studies breed the spiritual resilience necessary to survive in an HIV-hostile world. They take courage from Jesus who so often has to walk against the theological grain of his context. Their encounters with different theologies in the Bible helps them to understand the different theologies they meet in the street. Besides the Bible, they also draw sustenance from the collaborative work of the ISB&WM. We in the ISB&WM are not content to work only at the personal dimension of the HIV/AIDS pandemic. While HIV/AIDS has a human face it also has structural dimensions. With Julius Nyerere (though using more inclusive language) we recognize that unless we participate in the rebellion against those social structures and economic organizations which condemn men to poverty, humiliation and degradation, then the church will become irrelevant to man and the Christian religion will degenerate into a set of superstitions accepted by the fearful. Unless the church, its members and its organizations express God’s love for man by involvement and leadership in constructive protest against the present conditions of man, then it will become identified with injustice and persecution. If this happens, it will die – and humanly speaking deserve to die – because it will then serve no purpose comprehensible to modern man.

Important as it is to have a safe site like the solidarity programme, it is not enough to set up and sustain places of safety and support. We must change the world so that people infected and affected by HIV/AIDS have life and have it abundantly. Death is not preordained for people living with HIV/AIDS; treatment and adequate nutrition can provide for a full and long life. For this reason the solidarity programme is integrated with the other programmes of the ISB&WM, programmes like the economic justice programme which work for changes in our government’s economic policy and which campaign with the Treatment Action Campaign for adequate access to life-sustaining medication and with many other organizations for a Basic Income Grant (BIG) of R100 a month for the poorest.

Participation in collaborations of this kind provide important opportunities for networking, information sharing and agency. Just as the challenge is not only to read the Bible, but to read the Bible “positively”, so too the challenge is not only to live, but to live “positively”.

Conclusion

No matter where the group members are in their journey with HIV/AIDS, the Bible study seems to provide a safe and healing theological environment. In his inter-
view with two group members, Fikile Mahaye and Sibongile Shabane, Andreas Stooss asked what they considered to be the most important part of the solidarity programme. “Both of them answered at once and without hesitating that Bible reading in the support group helps them the most.”

Bible study is only one element in the solidarity programme, but clearly a vital one — in every sense of the word.

NOTES

1 Bongi Zengele-Nzimande in Andreas Stooss, “Spreading Hope within the Outcasts of Society: How Contextual Bible Study Can Make a Powerful Contribution to the Struggle against HIV/AIDS and Possible Consequences for the Swiss Context.” Honours, School of Theology, University of Natal, Pietermaritzburg, p.41.

2 Stooss, “Spreading Hope”, p.42.

3 Young men are more reluctant both to go for testing and to declare their status.


5 The difference probably reflects the incidence of HIV/AIDS in rural and urban areas respectively (see Mail and Guardian, 6-12 Dec. 2002: 8 and The Natal Witness, 6 Dec. 2002: 1).


7 Gerald O. West, “Indigenous Exegesis: Exploring the Interface between Missionary Methods and the Rhetorical Rhythms of Africa; Locating Local Reading Resources in the Academy.” Neotestamentica.


11 Sexual transmission, while the dominant form of transmission in South Africa, is not the only form of transmission.

12 The solidarity programme has begun to rehabilitate the funeral of people who have died from AIDS-related illnesses. When one of their members dies, they approach the family and the church in order to plan an alternative type of funeral, a funeral in which the status of the deceased is recognized and honoured rather than hidden and shamed. During such a funeral, other members of the solidarity programme bear testimony to living “positively”, and so the funeral becomes educative as well as a service of remembrance.


15 Ekblad, “Reading for Good News”, pp.3-4.


18 Other examples of texts used are Mark 10:46-52 and Matt. 8:23-27 (see Stooss, “Spreading the Hope”, pp.45-46).


20 Launched in 1998, the aims of the Treatment Action Campaign (TAC) include “ensuring access to proper, affordable treatment for AIDS sufferers, preventing and eliminating new HIV infections and fostering HIV/AIDS treatment literacy” (Mail and Guardian, 31 Jan.-6 Feb. 2003, p.8).

21 For further information on the work of the BIG coalition see the fact sheets available on the Web from www.blacksash.org (see “Campaigns” section) or email Masitye at masitye@hotmail.com.

22 Stooss, “Spreading Hope”, p.43.