

The Things We Don't Face Every Day

Isaiah 58:6-11

*A sermon by the Rev. Annie Arnoldy, Associate Minister
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Small meetings of leaders gathered together discussing global health and the response of the church leads into action steps to bring forth at the largest gathering of the United Methodist denomination. At a gathering that usually elicits conflict and disagreement, in 2004, the General Conference of The United Methodist Church passed a piece of legislation starting the Global AIDS Fund. To date, this fund has raised more than \$3 million to support programs and deliver services to people infected with and affected by HIV and AIDS. That is a far cry from the \$8 million goal for the first four years of the fund. Raising \$8 million seems impossible when you think of the little churches around the country trying to do it ... but consider the power of a denomination with 8 million members in the U.S. alone. Eight million members; \$8 million—are you doing the mental math? If each member gave \$1 toward the efforts by the United Methodist Church to eradicate a preventable disease like AIDS, the goal would be reached.

Is it unrealistic to think in terms like these?

Don Messer doesn't think so.

Margo Jacobs doesn't think so.

Pauline Muchina doesn't think so.

Steven Lewis doesn't think so.

Felton May doesn't think so.

Jerri and Bill Savuto don't think so.

Rukang Chikomb doesn't think so.

Who are these people? They are all people working toward the fight against hunger, malaria, and AIDS, mostly within The United Methodist Church.

Imagine this scenario in your mind's eye:

It is a hot day in Grand Junction¹ and you decide to go camping up on the Grand Mesa where it's cooler. Your place to camp is already designated. You are camping, in the middle of July, on a nice patch of ground next to a low area of a valley that has collected standing water after several afternoons of showers. You make your dinner over a fire and then begin to wind down for the night. The catch? You have no tent, so you must sleep under the stars, next to this standing pool of water. What would you have by morning? A whole bunch of mosquito bites! Those pesky little flying bugs would be gathered by the stagnant water and would love the sight of an uncovered person who is too tired to swat them away all night.

This is life in most Sub-Saharan African villages. There are no screens on the windows of small huts, there are no drainage systems to pull water away from houses, there is no protection from mosquitoes at night. One article said people expect to contract malaria there like we expect to get a cold every winter here. The main difference is, they don't often have the money or proximity to get malaria medicine. If children who get malaria do not receive treatment within the first thirty hours, there is a 90 percent likelihood that the child will die.

There is a hospital we visit when we go to Kenya—Maua Methodist Hospital, located in a rural region of the hilly area around Mount Kenya. It is small and in much need of supplies and equipment, but continuing to serve people every day. A United Methodist missionary at the hospital, Jerri



Savuto, said they were admitting forty people per day, with half of them being babies or children suffering from malnutrition or starvation. I am shocked when I hear this because I have been there. I have shared meals with Kenyans in this area. The difference is that I was there after a rainy season, when crops were fully grown and food was available. There are two rainy seasons a year in Kenya, and if the rains don't come, the crops don't grow and the animals die. This is when the people begin to suffer and more than twenty babies and children a day are brought to this small hospital in desperate need.

Have I ever thought of a drought leaving my grocery store shelves empty?

No, I have not. These are things we don't face every day. Even more than the issues of malaria and hunger, I bet there are few of us who ever think about HIV and AIDS. Even if there happen to be a few of our members who have HIV or know someone with HIV, I bet you don't talk about it. AIDS is a four-letter word in our society, and especially, in our churches. Right now, 33 million people are infected by the HIV/AIDS virus, and approximately one million cases are in the United States. This is one reason we are able to go through our days without thinking about AIDS—only one million of the 33 million cases happen here, among people we might know.

But, again, use your imagination to picture this: Imagine living in a place where there is no access to information (no computers, no current magazine, no TV). What would you think if one of your church members contracted a disease that gave them awful symptoms, and then several months later, a woman became sick and gave birth to a sick baby, then two more teenage girls got ill? Would you assume something was contagious? Would you want those sick people to leave your church? The answer, for most of us, would be "yes." Without access to information about what HIV and AIDS is and how it functions, this is a disease that leads to great social isolation and little hope for support.

The Nigerian Catholic bishops declared in this statement: "In today's world, there are only two categories: those infected and those affected by HIV/AIDS" (Messer, 159). Here are some of the statements from The United Methodist *Book of Discipline*:

Persons diagnosed as positive for Human Immune Virus (HIV) and with Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome (AIDS) often face rejection from their families and friends and various communities in which they work and interact. In addition, they are often faced with a lack of adequate health care, especially toward the end of life. We believe all individuals living with HIV and AIDS should be treated with dignity and respect. We affirm the responsibility of the church to minister to and with these individuals and their families regardless of how the disease was contracted. We support their rights to employment, appropriate medical care, full participation in public education, and full participation in the church. We urge the church to be actively involved in the prevention of the spread of AIDS by providing educational opportunities to the congregation and the community. The church should be available to provide counseling to the affected individuals and their families. (Social Principles, paragraph 162)

The scripture reference for all of these statements is in Galatians 6:2, where it says, "Carry each other's burdens, and in this way, you will fulfill the law of Christ."

What is the one thing these three situations have in common? AIDS, malaria, and hunger are preventable, and are largely conditions of poverty.

I had never even thought about this: "Malaria costs the continent of Africa an estimated \$12 billion each year in lost productivity and high medical costs. Imagine how many families those billions could pull out of poverty. In the United States, a long-lasting insecticide treated bed net would cost about \$10; a full course of malaria medication, only \$5. But many people in Africa are living on less than \$2 a day and can't afford to buy these life-saving items. World leaders are calling for an end to the approximately one million deaths caused by malaria each year. A recent United Nations agreement calls for the elimination of malaria deaths by 2015."²

Dr. Pauline Muchina wrote an article called, "Sex and the Church," which discusses the causes of much of the transmission of HIV, especially to women and young girls. "In the nine most heavily affected countries in Africa, females comprise 61 percent of infected adults and nearly 75 percent of infected young people." Young females can be four to six times more likely to be HIV-infected than young men. In the region that is her home, Muchina says, "millions of women and girls are becoming infected with HIV because gender inequality prevents them from accessing adequate information. Gender inequality also denies them equal access to commodities and necessary services. Most important, girls and women are denied the right to choose when, with whom, and under what circumstances they will engage in sex." Dr. Muchina works through the United Methodist Global AIDS Fund, as does Dr. Messer, in efforts to support ministries around the world that are working to prevent HIV/AIDS and bring care and treatment to those infected.

Where does our faith tell us to go on these tough issues?

Our faith tells us to be the people who do something about it. In fact, I chose the Isaiah scripture this morning because it puts forth a call to action, while still taking into account our needs and petitions before God. In true prophetic wisdom, Isaiah calls us out on our selfish desires and then asks us to come to a right relationship with God. The first few verses of Chapter 58 are asking why we do the religious things we do. He brings up the discipline of fasting, but I would add to that, giving financially. Do we do those things for the good it will bring us—for the tax break or the standing in the community?

Isaiah says we will only see the benefits and true riches of these practices when we do them with the right actions and right intentions. He gives a list of those right actions we, as followers of God, should do: share your bread with the hungry, cover the naked, shelter the homeless, stay in good relationship with your family, and satisfy the needs of the afflicted. He says, if you do these things out of your faith in God's goodness and provision, "your light shall rise in the darkness and your gloom be like the noonday. The Lord will guide you continually, and satisfy your needs in parched places and make your bones strong; and you shall be like a watered garden, like a spring of water, whose waters never fail." The point of these verses is to say, we must look beyond ourselves and our own problems if we want to be opened to God's working in our lives. When we decide our problems are so big that we can't focus any attention elsewhere, we are swallowed by self pity. Deciding to educate yourself about an issue in the world you may not know much about allows you to expand the focus of your energies. Most likely, you will read about someone you can relate with, you might find yourself praying for that situation, and you will probably find some empowerment in knowing you can have the active role in your faith of praying for others or reaching out in help to others.

Listen to this story that comes from our own Park Hill UMC in Denver. Park Hill was eager to get involved in ministries that assist HIV/AIDS work, so they started by helping to sponsor two workshops at two seminaries in India, through the connections Don Messer has there. They provided gifts to over 800 forgotten AIDS patients in a public hospital, and sponsored two women living with HIV as community caregivers. People outside the church got interested, and almost an equal number of gifts came from non-members as church members. In a two-year period, they raised nearly \$15,000.

My own "a-ha" moment came in reading the article about women and girls in Africa and the prevailing attitude of discrimination toward women. In my trips to Kenya, I may not solve any huge issues, but I am there as a woman in leadership in the church, helping other women and men see that the church is the place to break stereotypes and move beyond old behaviors.

I know the people watch what we do and how we treat people while we are there, and they take from us lessons of how to think about themselves and how to build up the church there. It is the church that is taking part in ministries with those infected with HIV/AIDS. Bishop Felton May says, "Churches cannot conquer AIDS alone . . . it will not happen without us."

One final image is this—this is also from Don Messer's book *Breaking the Conspiracy of Silence: Christian Churches and the Global AIDS Crisis*—it is the image of the star-thrower.

What is a star-thrower, you may wonder?

Recall the story, told in many different ways, of the young person on the beach casting starfish that had washed ashore back into the ocean. That person knew that even if every starfish wasn't saved, the one that got back to the ocean was saved. Dr. Messer says:

Christian star throwers never accept a vision of defeat and death, but instead are aficionados of love and life, hope and health. What distinguishes the church from many other human organizations is its relentless commitment to compassion and its unconditional love for every human being. The Christian church has never accepted common definitions of "reality." Had we done so, the apostles never would have left Jerusalem, taking the gospel to six continents. If Christians had been realistic, they never would have sent out missionaries with the intent of conquering hunger, defeating illiteracy, translating the Bible into every language, upgrading the status of women and children in every culture, starting new churches, or challenging every disease on earth.

Any sane analysis of statistics would demonstrate that, throughout the history, the problems have always been too great and the resources of the faithful too small. Star throwers are distinguished, however, by their ability to see beyond the ordinary, hope beyond the usual, and act beyond what is expected. In that spirit of faith some Christians around the world are beginning to address the global AIDS pandemic—knowing that God is leading them into the heart of suffering because we worship a God who is an aficionado of love and life, hope and health. We affirm with the Talmud: "If you save one life, you save the whole world."

In our search for the right thing to do, start with understanding some of the issues. And, perhaps, meeting someone face to face who is in the situation of poverty or disease. God's light shines down in our reaching out, so allow your arms to open and see how God can use you.

May God's blessings be added to these words,
Amen.

Resources:

The United Methodist Church Global AIDS Fund, Advance #982345
Information and stories from several articles in the magazine: *New World Outlook*, July/August 2009, the mission magazine of The United Methodist Church.

Breaking the Conspiracy of Silence: Christian Churches and the Global AIDS Crisis, By Dr. Donald E. Messer.

¹ Grand Junction and Grand Mesa are located in the U.S. state of Colorado.

² *New World Outlook*, July/August 2009.