

Overcoming stigma and discrimination



LINKING RELIGIOUS TEACHING WITH PRACTICAL EXAMPLES OF ONGOING WORK WITH FAITH COMMUNITIES

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CHART



- CHART is a unique collaborative space for researchers and activists to reflect, research, and engage in actual work in the interface of religion and the HIV epidemic.
- CHART includes researchers and activists linked to the Ujamaa Centre for Community Development and Research, the Sinomlando Centre for Oral History and Memory Work, and the School of Religion and Theology at the University of KwaZulu-Natal.
- CHART members engage in a number of projects within communities which either directly or indirectly work towards overcoming stigma and discrimination.

Types of stigma



- Societal stigma
- Stigma by association
- Self-stigma
- Family-specific stigma

All result in various forms of discrimination against those who are living with HIV

Faith-specific stigma



Faith-specific stigma pervades
all types of stigma.

Why?

Theology of retribution



- Most people of faith within Christianity, Islam, and African indigenous religion live by the mantra:

“If something bad happens to us, then we must have done something wrong (we have sinned)”.

- In other words we worship a God who uses illness to chastise and punish us for our wrongdoing.
- And so we live by a theology of retribution.

Retribution leads to death



- Retribution theology leads to shame, blame and silence.
- Because if illness is a punishment from God, then being HIV positive is definitely a result of our own sin.
- So society shuns us, our families shun us, and we shun ourselves.

Undoing “bad” theology



CHART members work towards undoing this bad theology by offering resources that point to a God of life and not a God of death.

Three approaches are used in local communities:

1. Memory box work
2. Contextual Bible Studies
3. Training courses with church leaders who have little formal theological education

Memory box work



- Families affected by the HIV epidemic are all too often engulfed in silence because of shame.
- This means individual members who are infected are seldom able to speak out within the context of the family.
- Recognising that memories enable healing and build resilience, the memory box project facilitates these processes.
- Families are encouraged to talk about living with HIV by physically creating a “box of memories” together.
- Through this process of inter-generational dialogue, they name their shame, find hope and reconciliation, and build resilience.

Contextual Bible Study



- Contextual Bible Study is a methodology developed from liberation theology in which the Bible is read collaboratively for the purpose of social transformation.
- This methodology combines the critical resources of biblical scholarship and resources of local communities as they meet and read the Bible in groups.
- Key to this approach is the privileging of the voices of those who are HIV positive.
- Contextual Bible Study thus enables the recovery of biblical trajectories which reject a theology of retribution and which affirm a theology of life.
- And so through reading the Bible in this way, those who are HIV positive find affirmation and faith which leads to a greater sense of dignity and self-worth.

Training courses with church leaders



- These courses include HIV education with a specific focus on culture and theological reflection.
- Church leaders are encouraged to write sermons to be preached on a Sunday which are evaluated by the facilitators and other group members.
- Issues of stigma and discrimination are directly addressed as they manifest in the communities and families.
- Each church is encouraged to begin support groups for HIV positive people.

Lessons learned



- Overcoming stigma and discrimination is a long-term process.
- It requires behaviour change at a societal, familial, and individual level – all need to be recognised and addressed.
- Faith-related stigma operates at all these levels and therefore a multi-faceted approach needs to be adopted.
- Theological insights offer new ways of understanding the epidemic and are central to any work in faith communities

Theological contestation



- CHART recognises that there are contending voices within our theological traditions.
- CHART refuses to allow theologies of death to prevail.
- CHART seeks to serve a God of life- so that all may live positively.