

This is me, and this is my challenge to the Church:

(Patty Thomas, living with HIV and AIDS, challenges the church in her own words)

I believe that my past is not my future. Both my child and me had been tested HIV positive seven years ago. HIV was taking full control of my life. My biggest enemy was fear of rejection. What will people say? What will the church, my friends, my family and society say?

I was victimized by this virus, and I was convinced that if I walk down the street that everybody will be able to see my status as a sufferer from the virus and that they will mark me as monstrous and disastrous. I became very self destructive towards my body and myself. I had a false belief that that I'm unhealthy, and not a very welcome person to be around with.

Today I realize that most of my fears, doubts, uncertainties and also my ignorance were because of my own internal fears, and these fears were supported by the stigma towards this virus. I also realized that the only way to heal myself from all my anger, bitterness and false guilt was to toss away with all my panicking thoughts. It was to accept this virus and acknowledge my wrong doings and mistakes. I needed to look deep inside myself, my heart, and make peace with this virus. I have come to one realization that no one can challenge your fears for you – only you can do it... that no one can make me feel inferior, ashamed or rejected, unless I allow them to. Despite the fact that I'm HIV positive, that I do have the right to live a life of peace. That I do have the ability to transform my ways of thinking and being, to become a productive member of humanity... that I do have the power to change! And for me, the bravest thing that I could do, when I wasn't brave, was to be brave, and act accordingly.

Living with HIV can cause you sometimes to become a very demanding person. You desire more of people and friendship, which is sometimes humanly possible. No matter how many friends I have, nobody could do for me what I must have done for myself.

I also feel that the church must stop and think, before it can implement workable programmes. It first needs to define its belief systems built on the acceptance and forgiveness of God. For the church to understand the role she needs to play, she must stop asking "How did you get it?", and start asking "How can we help? What can we do?" History is full of examples of church programmes that became great institutions built on the Judeo-Christian principle of charity. In recent times the church has forsaken this calling and engaged itself in theological debates. There needs to be a revival of a practical church with practical solutions. The same Jesus that opened the blinded eyes also fed the hungry. There needs to be a balance in our world view. It is also okay to have theological debates, but then we need to apply it practically.

Practical steps:

- 1 Start to train and educate people about HIV and AIDS
- 2 Consciously treat people living with HIV and AIDS as part of the church, and not as victims, by trusting them with responsibilities.
- 3 People living with HIV and AIDS need a support structure to help us deal with the emotional challenges we face.

Regards,

Patty Thomas.