

Rev. Paul Mokgethi-Heath on HIV and religion

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The Second coming: HIV/AIDS and religion

Rev. Paul Mokgethi-Heath

Sometimes we like to think we are the only people experiencing things, needing things, wanting things or even thinking in some certain way but sometimes the burden of keeping things to yourself might be great and ultimately lead to things that are far worse. But after talking with other people and listening to stories you realise that you are never alone, it's not only happening to you. The Heroes Campaign run by the AIDS Consortium encourages dialogue; these sessions are aptly called 'BUA' which translates from Sotho to mean 'Speak'. This campaign encourages people living openly with HIV to share their journeys. According to the Aids Consortium this is meant to Open channels of communication and encourage discussions around stigma and discrimination.

I decided to attend the bua session for the month of may held in Newtown. The theme was TB/ HIV Co-infections. Rev. Paul Mokgethi-Heath who is a Pastor at the Unity Metropolitan Community Church in Johannesburg shared his story to an Auditorium packed full of community development practitioners and this is a snippet of what was said during the Q & A session.

Please share with us challenges or Problems that you had with the ordaining board over your status since we have so much stigmatization of HIV people?

Not necessarily, I didn't have any problems. With the UFMCC, The Universal Fellowship Metropolitan Community Churches (the church I'm in) HIV/AIDS one of their ministries that they have emboldened. It's (HIV)one of their ministries. They have been at the forefront in terms of HIV/AIDS since the church was started. And because of the World Aids day that we have on the 1st December of each and every year it was started or rather the church started to make people aware that HIV/AIDS was alive and it was in existence. In my congregation HIV/AIDS has never been such a problem. One or two of the board members had issues with it but through my preparation and through me educating them as well, they have learned to accept it.

Do u ever preach about HIV/ AIDS in church?

Every Sunday we talk about it. We make sure we have a candlelight session but before we do that we have people we invite each and every Sunday to talk about their problems and share their stories and just share their journeys. We are doing that at each and every service. My church is well informed.

In terms of how the members take it, it has been a challenge we talk about it and as much as we are open we still see a lot of people dying as I mentioned in the video clip (shown) the problem of self stigmatisation is still there, people don't want to talk about it.

We have home-based care and support for our members and we have workshops once a month. My house has become a hospice, don't really want to call it a hospice but rather a place where I can strengthen them and give them the support so they can go back to their communities.

What made you to go to test; I believe that 'it takes a real man to want to test and know their status', in 1998

you go to test?

I had problems with my eyes when I came back from the United States of America in 1986 and I went to see my doctor and that's when I decided to have an HIV test done and that's how I found out. I didn't really have any problems.

How do you as a pastor deal with being gay and with being HIV and AIDS especially as the issue of gays and lesbians in South Africa is still a sensitive issue?

Yes, I am married to another man and he is also a pastor and I know we can talk about culture and religion and debate scriptures. I can talk about it if you have time. I know that God has called me to be a minister and God loves me and that is why I'm married and am in a monogamous relationship with another man and I thank God for that.

How did you feel when you found out you had HIV and how do you feel now that you know?

Before I tested I was still healthy but had this annoyingly, persistent flu that just wouldn't go away but a year later I was put on ARV's and have been taking them faithfully for ten years and have never had any problems with them. I've never had any side effects, never been to hospital. The medication I was put on is Zidovudine and Combivir and I'm still taking the same medication for 10 years.

HIV/ AIDS is hardly talked about in churches, when you meet with other pastors do you encourage them to speak about HIV and AIDS in their own churches since most preachers associated HIV with sin etc?

In terms of the relationship we have with other pastors it's a difficult issue to discuss sex or HIV with other pastors it's still a taboo some other pastors will even go as far as saying "it does not exist in their churches, those people are not in their churches meanwhile people with HIV/AIDS people are sitting in church, filling up the church. Because many pastors do not want to take up the responsibility of dealing with the problems of the members of their congregations. An organisation that was formed two years ago African network of religious Leaders living with or affected by HIV and AIDS and we try and engage with other ministers and have workshops and we meet to discuss issues around HIV/AIDS and they would be willing to come to your churches to speak to your pastors

How do you live with the virus?

What makes me live with that oomph? I make sure I live health, I eat well, I exercise, I get enough sleep, I party when its time to party, I travel and enjoy myself. I have a strong faith and believe and through my communication with God keeps me going at all times.

What can you tell us about the issue of discordant partners where one is positive and the other is negative?

Please let's protect those who are negative and they should stay that way. If you know your status then talk about it, don't hide it, I know it's a very difficult issue because we are scared that when we come out and talk to our partners about it they will reject us and they will run away from us and yes sometimes they do and they will gossip about us and yes sometimes they do and they will be scared. Be true to yourself. Be an agent of change and make sure that at all times you are yourself.

Self Stigma when there's something that you are hiding at all times it will eat you from inside and you will have sleepless, restless nights.

But if you are free, and you are open and you talk about it, even your health will be free

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