

The Challenge of the Church by the Society in regard to the problem of HIV/AIDS

1. Contextuality
2. AIDS as a disease like other diseases
3. AIDS as a challenge to the Churches in regard to their spiritual, social and theological speaking and acting

1. Contextuality

First of all I want to mention my own contextuality. The following thoughts and deliberations are shaped by the urban milieu in Germany of the year 2002. They refer to talks and experiences, which I have had with persons of this milieu. They refer to experiences of the social and Church work of other people and institutions. And they reflect my own theological insights and convictions. In a pluralistic situation within our Churches, as we face it in Germany, you will certainly find other and opposite positions. To notice contrary opinions and accept them is one thing, another will be to look with others for a common position and understanding. The following thoughts want to stimulate the mutual theological debate.

Since several years AIDS- Church Services are taking place in Bremen on the 1st of December. One Congregation of the Bremen Church has accepted the challenge, together with other groups and initiatives to celebrate a Joint Service. After the Service those who have attended are invited to a discussion. The initiative for this Service has been originated by a Counselling Centre for gay men. The Pastor of the Congregation had been addressed whether he could imagine to celebrate an AIDS-Service. Those who counsel AIDS infected persons in this Centre have gained the experience over the years that for many people suffering from AIDS their Christian background played an important role in dealing with the themes like Guilt, Reconciliation and Dying. Besides their rage and disappointment about the Teaching and Acting of the Churches in regard to homosexuality they had the desire to be accompanied in a Christian way, the desire for reconciliation and to be accepted as individuals. Homosexuals were and still are the largest group of AIDS infected people. In addition to the threat by the AIDS disease they are still stigmatised as a group within our society.

The Pastor, the Congregation and the whole Church were being addressed from the outside, what they could say and give in a very concrete way to particular people in a particular situation. In an urban milieu of Germany, which since the

70ties is facing a massive decline of Church Membership and Acceptance this request to the Church is something special.

People who have emigrated from the Church already a long time ago, who did not belong to any local Congregation any more, who belonged to a social group which was discriminated theologically and by the Church, these people turned to a Congregation while suffering from Disease, Anxiety and Dying, because they had questions and were looking for answers. At least some of them hoped to find an answer together with the Church.

The Request for Counselling and Caring of people who have been infected by AIDS and their relatives and partners came up during the 80ies. Because the topic AIDS had been limited strongly to the scene of gay men the Church was forced to gain a different understanding of homosexuality. The debate over a proper understanding is still going on and is very controversial within our Churches. The EKD - Protestant Church in Germany (the roof of the major Protestant Churches in Germany) - has published a memorandum "*to live with tensions*" and has tried to formulate positions which could support a consensus.

Some however feel that these positions are not going far enough for homosexuals to acknowledge them and to put on equal footing those among them in long term relationship. Others in contrary fear that each positive statement on homosexuality and the recognition of long term relationships of homosexuals are a betrayal of the biblical message.

In Germany the discussion and development of the civil law has gained an importance in regard to the on-going debate over the theme "homosexuality". Since last year couples of the same sex can officially register their long term relationship and they will enjoy legal protection by the State. The equal statues with the marriage, as many critics have feared, however did not happen. On the basis of this civil development a debate has come up within the Church whether a benediction shall be granted to couples of the same sex who want to establish a long term relationship. Within our Church we have Members who strictly say "No" and Members who say "Yes". In the Church of Bremen some Congregations have publicly declared to give benediction to people of the same sex who want to live together. Other Congregations emphasise *conversion* and *healing* of those who are homosexuals. The controversy is very intensive and a threat to the Unity of the Church. The pressure on the Church and within the Church by those who are liberal minded is growing to accept homosexuality as a way of living which is not against the Bible. On the other hand particularly pietistic circles are strictly against any kind of recognition and tolerating it.

In a society dominated by the media which is coined by different life styles Church positions and statements in regard to sexuality and life styles are rarely noticed. The importance of ethical and moral orientation given by the Church has lost its influence for many parts of our society. Even the identification of the denomination has become very blurred, for example the Protestant Church is being

made responsible for statements of catholic priests. Young people in general do not expect moral advise and reprimand from the Churches, however quite often they expect care and consolation.

The meaning of contextuality

- The Church lives together with real people in a certain time at a given place.
- The Church is speaking of the heritage of the biblical tradition.
- The Good News of the Church's preaching is not a news of yesterday, but it shall be understood by people who live here and now and ought to be helpful to them.
- Even unpleasant and troublesome themes are being put in front of the Church; silence is not an adequate way to communicate the Gospel.
- The Parable of Jesus of the Good Samaritan includes a double provocation: one can not decide who lies in the street, and one can not decide who comes to help.

2. AIDS is a disease like any other disease

This headline is true and false alike.

It is true, because AIDS is a disease which like any other serious disease forces those who are affected by it and their relatives to occupy themselves with suffering, pain, hope, saying farewell and finally with dying and death.

It is false because AIDS is linked with the topic sexuality and a guilty conduct of life as no other severe disease of our time.

Since the discovery of the HIV during the 80ies and its pandemic a lot has been said and written about it. Thriller-like presentations of this "gay men" epidemic, apocalyptic visions about the extermination of mankind and in terrible way the frequent reference to Africa as a wild and dark continent and as the origin of this epidemic have ghosted through the Media, press and TV, as well as reports about individual fates.

The Western European and North-American societies have reacted quite quickly on AIDS. Perhaps the reason for that may be on the one hand that those among the homosexuals who have been affected first, particularly in the US, have been well organised and politically active. They have been able to build up a network of self-help activities and support.

On the other hand it was rightly feared that AIDS would not be limited to homosexual groups alone but could penetrate other parts of the population as well. Bisexuality, promiscuity, prostitution and drug-addiction, but even Medical intervention (particularly blood-transfusion of bleeders) have made and still make AIDS a problem of the whole society.

Campaigns for "safer sex", the use of condoms during sexual intercourse have been financed on a large scale. In the meantime one has gained the impression that the excitement and par-time hysteria have calmed down. In Germany it seems that AIDS has disappeared to the public after a period of great attention. With some dangerous consequences: precautions are neglected again.

Everything seems to be under control. The worst fears did not become true. Medical treatment has been improved decisively. Public advertisements for condoms have become normal. A German reader of newspapers gains the impression that AIDS happens mainly in Africa today.

But even in Germany people die of AIDS and new people become infected by it. The rate of infection is growing again since two years, particularly among young people. Despite Medical progress AIDS remains an existing disease which forces people to occupy themselves with dying and death.

But very directly AIDS is always connected with moral and emotional understanding and concepts. And because AIDS as a disease is always related to a personal life style there is the danger to lift the finger and to judge from a moral point of view. Therefore each person who gets infected can be confronted with questions of guilt and forgiveness.

It is not a surprise that AIDS is a taboo in many parts of the world, even in our country despite the public discussion on AIDS and the self-outing of some prominent persons who are suffering from this disease. Last year a pastor of the Bremen Church prepared the funeral for a Member of his congregation who has died of AIDS. He knew it. But the relatives asked him emphatically by all means not to mention it, rather to give another reason for his death. The family was ashamed of it feared for its good reputation.

I summarize:

- AIDS is a disease that affects human beings in a very concrete way.
- Affected are also the surroundings, i.e. family, partner, friends, community.
- Challenged is also the society that is responsible for precaution, Medical care and social help.
- Challenged is also the Church, for she has infected Members and is consulted by those who do not belong any more to the Church.
- At the latest the Church must clarify and express her position at a funeral of a person who has died of AIDS.

3. AIDS is a challenge to the Churches in regard to their Spiritual, Social and Theological Acting and Preaching

Since 1993 the Protestant Church of Hamburg, a big city in Northern Germany, supports a Counselling Centre for AIDS patients which employs two full-time persons. Rev. Rainer Jarchow is one of them. By his work he has become well-known in our country. And he has written a book about his experiences. The way how he has accompanied the patients through Pastoral Counselling and Services he has set new standards in Germany.

I. Pastoral Counselling

The Pastoral Counselling of the Churches refers to the whole person.. It cares for the physical and spiritual well-being. Pastoral Care is not a therapy. It has the chance to address the human being as a whole independently from what is medically possible. Based on the biblical message the Pastoral Counsellor accepts the other to be a person, for whom the love and affection of God are valid independently from his own ability and his deeds. Based on the biblical message the Pastoral Counsellor considers the other as a person who is entangled in guilty and life threatening relationships. Taking into account these double aspects Pastoral Counselling is embedded in the message of Jesaja 61 and Luke 4. In other words Pastoral Care is taking part in the protest of Jesus against the self-destruction of mankind.

II. Social Work (Diakonia)

The Social Work of the Church in the same way is being carried out in the responsibility over against the whole person. To accompany some-one by comfort and love includes also to care for the living conditions which help and support him. Individual Engagement and actual assistance and help by the Church as an institution supplement each other and make together the Social Work (Diakonia) of the Church. Institutions are able to set a high professional standard which individuals can not guarantee. On the other hand we need the engagement of individuals because there is a danger in our society which is shaped by conditions of a welfare-state that our Congregations and Members tend to delegate the Social Work to institutions.

The Social Work of the Church in her comprehensive form is a test for her Pastoral Counselling and Theology (Matthew 25).

III. Theology

The Theological acting and preaching of the Church is interwoven in her Pastoral Counselling and Social Work in a very complex way. It is a purely academic question whether Theology has the priority over against the two

other aspects of the life of the Church. Responsible Theological Reflection and Speaking is part of the contextuality of the Church. The Word of God according to the Biblical Scriptures is never a Word as such, but a Word for human beings in their specific situation. Theology as well as Social Work and Pastoral Counselling address the whole of person. Therefore being challenged by AIDS the Church faces at least three Theological Topoi (Themes):

- aa. Guilt and forgiveness
- bb. Healing
- cc. Sexuality
- dd. Services and Devotions

aa. Guilt and Forgiveness

The Human Being depends on forgiveness. Each person is entangled in guilty contexts in his personal and in his social life. These entanglements exert an influence on the whole life of a person., Body and Soul may fall sick. In his pursuit of happiness(since the US Declaration of Independence "pursuit of happiness is a recognised Human Right) a person is in danger to ignore his or her salvation. (Matthew 16,26: "*Will a man gain anything if he wins the whole world but loses his life?*")

Guilt is not a dimension of Morality in a way, that moral or immoral acts automatically prevent and support guilt. According to Luke 13, 1-5 (the tower disaster of Siloah) there is not a direct interrelationship between Doing and Suffering. The call of Jesus to repent is apart from Morale and addresses the just and unjust alike.

- How can we speak of guilt and forgiveness in an adequate theological way without running down a human life as such ?
- What kind of rituals do we have to deliver people from guilt?
- Which responsibility do we have for the life of an individual and for the society?

bb. Healing and Suffering

The Gospels tells us that Jesus has healed people. Their physical and spiritual well-being is being restored. The desire to be healed is taken seriously. Suffering as such has no value. Otherwise it may lead to cynical thinking. People who suffer need particularly God's encouragement through others. Where suffering leads other people to keep distance to those who suffer, the later are implicitly considered as to whom God himself takes distance. (Job) Where people who are fallen sick become isolated the human encouragement through forgiveness is rejected to them. From the theological point of view however there is no doubt that God himself is suffering with them.

Each person has the right to have access to relevant medicine and methods of healing. The societies of Western Europe and North America have enough therapies available to offer their people because of their enormous wealth. It is a scandal that most of the infected people in Africa are lacking adequate Medical treatment for financial reasons.

If human efforts, however, to heal fail we need to offer our solidarity with those who suffer. This is rooted in the knowledge of our limits, finiteness and shortcomings.

- The confidence in modern Medicine - is it replacing our necessary engagement with irrevocable suffering?
- Healing - rites - which are theologically responsible today?

cc. **Sexuality**

Sexuality as a topic of desire and joy of human beings is not a Subject in the Bible (The Song of Solomon is an exception). Women are not seen as human beings with their own individual sexuality. Homosexuality is denounced as abomination and offence against God.

But sexuality is an human expression embedded in the individuality and personality of each person and therefore part of a nature which we can not decide on freely. Sexuality belongs to the whole of a person. It is a short-sighted view to reduce sexuality to begetting and posterity. We must be frank to concede that even in the Church, perhaps among us, we have de facto differing views of humanness in regard to this matter than the people in the Biblical Stories.

- Gen.1.31 - behold it was very good - can we refer it to different options of sexual preference according to our present understanding? In other word is homosexuality included in God's judgement about his good creation?
- How do we judge today Gen. 19,-1-8 (Sodom and Gomorrah)?
- How do we understand today what Jesus has said to the so called female sinner - Luke 7, 36-50?
- The Song of Solomon in the way how it describes sexuality, which place does it take in our preaching?

dd. **Service and Devotion**

During the Service the Christian Congregation comprises all aspects of her Pastoral Counselling, Social Work and Theology. In the Service the Congregation celebrates

the victory of Jesus over Death and the divine delivery of man from his disorders. Therefore the theme of each Service is life as a whole: Where do we succeed and where do we fail to reach the aim of God?

Special Services for particular social groups focus on their existentially important questions. The regular Service plays for the Pastor Counselling of AIDS infected persons in Hamburg a very important role. Prayer, Intercession, Benediction, Encouragement and the Experience of the fellowship with others under the Word of God are very important. The liturgical language, the Biblical texts and the Sermons address the people in their particular situation. By that they are feel accepted.

Rev. Janus, Bremen