Africa (Sub-Saharan) has 10% of the World’s population but we Africans are host to 60% of people living with HIV and AIDS. The figures keep appreciating and the suffering continues. Africa also has a distinction of being a “traditional society” i.e. one in which religion counts for something. Not only that, but also one in which the authority of religious leaders bear heavily on the adherents of the various religious communities. Thus if the Pope decrees in 1993 against Family Planning, Sex education and HIV/AIDS. Prevention, in 1995 religious leaders in Kenya Nairobi get together and publicly ban “literature on these efforts as “pornography and a disgrace to God-loving people”. “Traditional leaders go to traditional religion to pull out the ancient reason against masturbation” – the discarding of life-semen meant for procreation.

But twenty-five years of the HIV and AIDS experience is beginning to change things. Unlike the 1990s religion is no longer being charged with being anti-life for the sake of holding on to dogmas that need re-interpretation.

25 years of this pandemic has taught religious leaders to re-read their dogmas and to review the explanation of suffering as the result of sin and punishment for disobedience and evil actions. In the Judaeo-Christian tradition we have come to revisit the dualistic strand that enable us to abdicate from the call to creativity and to take refuge in attributing all our ills to principalities and powers, witches and demons. This spiritualization of suffering often leads to fatalism instead of the faith in God that struggles with the hope of receiving a blessing.

Read again the book of Job, and see how all of us are attempting to understand HIV and AIDS from the standpoint of our faith.

AIDS used to spell certain and painful death. So before one dies of AIDS one becomes socially dead, that is ignored and abandoned by society. It is this social death that we
people of faith are called to accompany all who are living with AIDS to overcome. We are called first of all to overcome our moral death. Many of us lack moral agency because we allow others to think for us or treat others as persons who are unable to think for themselves. We are morally dead when we equate morality with sexual ethics and live unethical lives in all other respects. Indeed some of us suffer theological death as we contribute nothing towards enabling people to live with dignity and if they have to die to die with dignity, and be buried with dignity.

The call to solidarity, tolerance and compassion is evidence that the faith communities are returning to their root purpose of supporting and sustain the life that God created. For Christians it is the response to the call to discipleship. Jesus in his earthly life said clearly and lived the adage that saving lives over-rides all other injunctions. We saw the love of God in the way Jesus stood in solidarity with those shunned by society and healed those who were sick. The world awaits the demonstrations of the love of God in the words and works of those who call themselves God fearing and God loving.

We accrue to ourselves the judgement of God as we multiply the hurt of others by our judgemental attitudes. See what God said to the friends of Job (Job 42:7 9).

Some of our judgemental attitudes arise from cultural norms that we repeat without question. Remember that Jesus commended the Syrophoenician woman for challenging the dog saying that would have been an excuse for excluding her and her daughter from the possibility of beings healed. God is continually challenging us to challenge cultural norms that are not life-sustaining and that ride rough shod on the dignity of persons. As we seek diligently to hear the word of God for our times, so listen intently and try to understand the information that is available to guide our attitudes and our actions.

Information

Ignorance breeds fear, a basic human instinct necessary for the preservation of life. So when we have not updated our information so as to know that HIV does not have to lead to AIDS and that AIDS is not automatic sentence to death in a short time, we are bound to re-act to the challenge with fear. If we believe that the Holy Spirit leads us into all
truth, then we need to be open to its promptings. We need to counter ignorance with information while heeding Jesus’ caution against trying to find out “who sinned” at all cost. The theological calling to open our mouths and to enable others to re-gain their voices is clear. We cannot continue to hide behind traditions, taboos and taunts.

On the other hand, the deafening silence around human sexuality has played into the hands of the sexual act and tons of misinformation concerning the appropriate response to HIV/AIDS. The Church’s stance on human sexuality is that it should lead to multiplication of the species. But clearly companionship and delighting in the other are part of the expression of our nature as sexual beings. This calls us to face the complexity of human sexuality as well as the practical route of how to stay safe and responsible as we seek mutual delight. When we begin with sexuality we cannot help but face the issue of gender and the power relations it engenders. Why are we confronted frequently with the notion that “women are not in a position to negotiate sex”? We need the cultural information that is out there among women and men, young and old, that prevents women and girls from having the power to control their own bodies.

Information on the roots of the social vulnerability of women ought to be made public and debated. Why female genital modifications that amount to mutilation? Why do marriage laws and practices, inheritance laws and practices treat women as the property of men? When we can break the silence around these issues and remove their protective cultural shrouds, we shall understand what the real challenge to negotiating sex is. We can put out the statistics that 50% of women living with AIDS in Africa had had sexual intercourse with their husbands exclusively. Yet it has become the norm to point to women when we discuss multiple sexual partners. This is because what comes to the fore is women in the sex trade. We do not look at the husbands who require the services of those women in the trade. We hardly ever examine the role of itinerant traders in the spread of the virus. We have hardly begun to quantify the contribution of military conflicts with its attendant displacement of persons and the teeming presence of military personnel in such zones. Our attention to traditional and contemporary Christian healing
practices has been minimal and yet they all have elements that spread the AIDS Virus and those of other Sexually Transmitted Infection (STIs).

Information on cross-generational sex is trivialised by the way we treat it when the woman is the older person. Whatever the generation gap between the partners, any relationship between persons with an age gap of ten years or more based on material gain; coercion and untruth need to be bare and, discussed and discouraged.

The information regarding the multiple modes of transmission of the virus has gone some way in easing the stranglehold of condemnation borne out of our sanctimonious approaches to human sexuality especially to what is labelled "illicit sex". It has rekindled awareness of ordinary hygienic living. Information on human sexuality and reproductive health is beginning to erode the stigma around sex and the power games in the partnership of women and men. It is revealing the role of sexual relationships as more complex than the need to procreate. We are beginning to admit the element of giving and receiving pleasure through sexual relations.

This fresh perspective on human sexuality is information helping us to understand partnership.

With this mindset of the demonization of the sexual act comes the conclusion that HIV/AIDS is a curse from the spiritual world, which naturally rules against unregulated sexual relations. With more information we are gradually seeing the scourge for what it is, a disease that can visit any body including those whose life style excludes the sexual act. The theological challenge of how to approach innocent suffering is with us. The debate in the book of Job, theological education on how to approach ill health is already in the Bible. We are called to a ministry of healing not of assigning blame. The HIV/AIDS scourge is a call to demonstrate our Christian spirituality of compassion and care. It is a call to mending what is torn so that God may be glorified. HIV/AIDS becomes a challenge and an opportunity to work with God for justice and fullness of life. It is a call to equity giving according to need as Jesus did. When fear flies away we begin to see the human being before us and we are moved to act as God would. The one who created the person before you suffer with that person and so should you.
Compassion

Compassion means suffering together with. Compassion, racham related to the Hebrew word for womb, is an attribute of God in Judaism, Christianity and Islam. Should we who in the Judaeo-Christians tradition, who claim to be in the image of God, not also demonstrate compassion? If you are Muslim and a servant of Allah, should you not do what demonstrates the character of the God you serve? God does not just care for us, God cares about us, Cares so much so that God sent Christ. God’s Compassion, womb abadae turns at the sight of suffering. What do we do when we come face to face with injustice?

Compassion is not just pity having mercy is not just saying “oh I am sorry for you”. It means helping to right wrongs so that people may live in fullness of life. Compassion is togetherness in the community. You are to be in touch with the situation and to touch the suffering with healing hands. Compassion means touching the other. Jesus touched the sick and healed them.

Persons living with HIV and AIDS are still children of God, created in the divine image and bearing a humanity that demands respect and acknowledgement. People of faith who belong to the community of Jesus Christ have no choice but to live as Christ lived, and requires us to do if we truly claim to be the Body of Christ. It is for this reason that Christians have to observe and understand the contemporary situations in which they live and to respond with Christlikeness. Jesus knew his religio-cultural heritage, he knew the actual context in which he lived and responded with an ethic of the possibility of change and transformation that make for the revelation of the glory of God by working for the fullness of Life for what God has created and loves so much. Jesus allowed himself to be talked into reviewing traditional stance on Jewish attitudes towards non-Jews. See the discussion on the rights of dogs with the syrophoenician woman. God is continuously at work in us as we face the task of challenging cultural mores so that we might be on the side of fullness of life.

It is for this need for transformation that we hear Jesus saying, “The Sabbath was made for human beings and not human beings for the Sabbath”. “You have heard that it was said... but now I say ...” “Did you see that widow?” “Bring me a coin” “A sower went out to sow”. Jesus called for observation, for analysis, for understanding, for this reason
we today have to call on people to constantly inform themselves on the challenges of the contemporary world. The reality of HIV/AIDS demands that we continually seek to inform ourselves and others. It requires that as people who believe that God is at work with us and continually leads us into all truth by the power of the Holy Spirit, we embrace openness, and remain prepared to articulate what needs to be voiced.

"Ephatha" should be our watchword. Being informed, informing ourselves and others becomes a critical Christian response to the pandemic. Pharisaism and Sanctimoniousness are not part of a Christ-like response to death and all that diminishes the dignity of the human being with compassion and care. He healed the sick, challenged legalism and oppression and welcomed all who came to him. Living with HIV/AIDS calls for the case of those who are afflicted by the virus or the condition. It calls for careful speech and watching our language before God.

When we struggle to understand, and we live by an ethic of caring, compassion becomes our nature, as it is the nature of God in whose image we are made. The widow’s only son is dead. When we understand what this means in the community in which this is happening, we cannot but suffer with her. Welcoming those who have returned from dissipating the gifts given them will become part of how we live. Enabling persons to access to what is life-giving and life-enhancing will be how we live as those created to be God-like.

Jesus said, let the children come, visit those imprisoned, heal those suffering from leprosy, speak for those who like the widow of the two coins cannot speak for themselves and stand between the accused and the stone-throwers. The theological calling to us as Christians living with HIV/AIDS is to respond with information, compassion, care and Advocacy.

Let us then briefly look at the theological call that comes to us from this contemporary challenge to our common humanity and to our proclamation that we are the Body of Christ.
CARE

You cannot claim to be compassionate when you simply pass by on the other side. If the situation really touches you, you cannot help but act, that is if you care. And if you really care you will not think of your ritual holiness and the risk of contamination. You will not begin to wonder if you have the expertise and the where with all, you will begin to search around you. You will have to bind wounds, and seek more thorough healing processes. That is the Christ way, the way taught through the story of the Good Samaritan. The Christian community that purports to be the Body of Christ cannot but demonstrate the care that flowed from the compassion of Jesus of Nazareth. The Church has to be the womb, the space of compassion where our humanity is nourished to prepare us to be positive actors in the world out there.

Care of all afflicted by the virus has to be the mission of the church. Those who are members have to hear words and experience deeds that celebrate their lives and their humanity. They have to feel themselves affirmed so that they can affirm those who are in the larger community.

HIV/AIDS is a physical health challenge in the first place. But we know full well that health is a wholistic concept, the human being thrives on full well-being-Alafia, Shalom. It is the whole person we are relating to when we attempt to care. When we have Alafia, we are at ease and the whole community is at ease. Dis-ease, the anti-thesis of ease too affects the whole community especially in Africa, with its declared communal ideology.

This communal ideology works out as solidarity in theological language and solidarity exhibits itself in concrete acts that alleviate the suffering inflicted by HIV/AIDS. Solidarity will mean action towards healing and enhancing the well-being of all. Solidarity in our context shows itself in restoring relationships, in family, church and workplace. Standing with people so their humanity continues to be respected. When the Church as a caring community endeavours to create a well-coming atmosphere for all, it will be a truly healing community.
A caring community does not only open its arms to the suffering, it also deals with those who stand on stigma and pollution. A caring community should point out uncaring attitudes and denounce them. A caring community should not only aim at restoring persons to the fold, but also in helping “those who never left” to change their attitudes. See the attitude of the elder brother of the prodigal towards the welcoming and reconciling festival planned by the father. Repentance, forgiveness, love, reconciliation go together as signs of a caring community. A caring community being one that looks out for the wandering and searches for the lost would go out to seek and to care for those living with HIV/AIDS. Some were in church but they have ceased to come...have you noticed the emptiness they have left? Have you reviewed your liturgy to include the challenges of worshipping God in the midst of such great suffering, questioning Self-blaming, Self-stigma, loss of Self-respect and dignity? Do we have encouraging healing rites beyond deliverance rites? What do we do and say when AIDS carries a member of the congregation away? Has HIV/AIDS touched the way we worship and moved us to create life-supporting rites? This is the theological challenge we face to-day.

God loves creation, and anything that mars its beauty must be removed. It is our duty as stewards of creation and each other’s keeper that we struggle against all that seeks to destroy creation. God heals (Exodus 15:20) and we are called to be at work with God in this healing ministry. Christianity in Africa to-day has entered into a mode of exorcism. People seek deliverance from all sorts of unhealthy encumbrances attributed to the machination of the devil and to demons. They are seen as warring against the reign of God. People of the Household of God should take practical steps to join in exorcising the demon of HIV/AIDS, a physical virus that can be defeated with physical medicine. In addition we should join in exorcising the demons of stigmatisation and the unwholesome theology that says God is punishing us with AIDS. Instead we should care enough to be open to how God is directing us to protect life and to deal justly and mercifully with one another. It is by doing this that we can join the African Anglicans whose hope is that “Future Generations will be born free of AIDS. Caring will bring us closer to the humanity of the other. We shall be touching the inner person not just “a Suffer” for we too will stand with them. Touching leads to Solidarity and Solidarity binds us closer so
that even in our diversity we are enabled to work together for the well-being of the whole community and the persons within it. Solidarity demands touching the other as you are touched by the circumstances they live.

Accessing the realities around the reasons for the spread of the virus should help move us from stigmatising those infected and those affect to seeing ourselves standing in their shoes. When we realise how close we are to the virus we will be moved by compassion rather than seek to blame and to shun. When Jesus saw the widow with the dead son, he was moved with compassion. When Jesus saw the hungry crowd he was moved with compassion. Compassion towards lepers and those on the brink of being stoned caused Jesus to act.

May be some of us have never seen a person who is under the control of the virus. Information about a condition is one thing; coming close to the situation is entirely different. It touches your senses directly and “moves your womb”, the seat of compassion in Hebrew and Akan understanding of human emotions. The womb, a space provided for us to be nourished so we might grow into the form of a human being goes into spasms when the life so delivered is being mangled up.

To achieve a stigma-free environment we need to experience the humanity of the persons whose bodies have come under the attack of the virus. They do not cease to be persons. The image of God does not depart from them; indeed they become the face of the suffering Christ.

Compassion is what makes us move closer to those who suffer so we may ascertain how we might contribute to sustaining the dignity of the humanity under such a siege. Even showing interest will lift the spirits of those weighed down by the lack of wholeness, the sense that they are polluted, tainted, discarded because they suffer. The story of Job and the servant songs of Isaiah have vivid imagery of what the absence of compassion feels like. Sometime even simply listening will be evidence of compassion.

The compassion that made the women who came up from Galilee with Jesus, stand by his cross inspite of the risk and the emotional trauma is what we need in this contemporary crisis. Compassion is demonstrated by actual acts to effect change in the condition of suffering. Compassion is suffering with, rejoicing with. It is sharing the emotional state
of the other, but usually related to suffering. See Matthew 25: 34-36, the hungry, the homeless, the naked should move us into action.

The poverty syndrome of Africa makes the face of AIDS most terrible. Those in other parts of the world who can afford anti-retroviral live with HIV/AIDS without manifesting any obvious symptoms. Now that we know that AIDS is not an automatic death sentence, compassion requires that we ask, “What shall we do to be saved” as a human community living with AIDS. AIDS does not belong to an identified group of persons we can proceed to stigmatise. We have become more caring about the language we use. We are not so quick to point to sin as located in sexuality. Compassion calls us to view the vulnerability of women that reduce their negotiating power with abhorrence, not the women. From such a standpoint compassion calls on both men and women to work to uphold the dignity of the humanity of all. We can no longer use disease as a means of discrimination and control. If we suffer together then there is no room for discrimination and stigmatisation. We are left with no option to caring for the persons afflicted and the whole community that is torn apart and demoralized by the presence of HIV/AIDS.

**Solidarity**

We are called to solidarity, we are enjoined to stand by, accompany and advocate on behalf of all who hurt. Solidarity is inescapable because we constitute one body and when one member hurts, we all hurt. A theology of accompaniment is clearly demonstrated by the incarnation. Jesus became human, took on our condition, the better to enable us to overcome our disabilities. We are called to accompany people as they struggle for fullness of life.

The Solidarity of our humanity should mean that we all have aids. Our Solidarity as faith communities means all people of faith have aids.

Our Solidarity as Churches means the church has aids.

AIDS is like the proverbial kontonkrowi eda amanson k'o nmu.

AIDS is like the horizon is encircles all humanity

We can no longer say etua wo y'o nko ho a etua dua mu.

What is stuck on another is as if it is stuck in a tree

What we need to say now is wo y'o, nko da ne wo da.
What we need to say now is ‘The day for your friend is the day for you.
AIDS brings the English adage “Ask not for whom the bell tolls,
It tolls for you, 

Often the advocacy against stigmatisation sounds like a call for tolerance. But tolerance is not a word I like to use. For me tolerance sounds like, I know you are wrong, but if you do not see it the same as I do, ok, you can have it your way. This is for me not too helpful a line of action for our situation. It is devoid of commitment to community. I could substitute diversity. Accepting diversity only happens after dialogue. After struggling to understand the other’s standpoint, you would have learnt and come to understand the others point of view. How do we live with people whose identities are different? You did not ask to be born female or male, you did not ask to be born black, or to be Thai-speaking. If you are treated according to your biological sex, ethnicity, race and nationality, your basic right as the child of God deserving of dignity is often set aside or eroded.

Diversity enjoins us to learn from nature and from God. The openness to a variety of approaches towards our common humanity. Diversity calls us to hospitality. How far will you go in relating to a person, different from you? Here, if you put yourself in the category of HIV-negative, how is your relation to the person who is positive? Do you cut off relations, consigning the person to social death?

**ADVOCACY**

Advocacy for compassion and healing has been difficult to promote. Difficult because the Church’s initial attitude towards HIV/AIDS was one of condemnation of the sufferers. There was deafening silence from the Church as the condition was associated with promiscuity, adultery, fornication, “unnatural carnal knowledge” all that is labelled “sinful” in relation to human sexuality. Speaking on behalf of the silenced was near impossible as one became associated with the “tainted” condition. When the pandemic hit Africa, the Church in Africa forgot about Jesus Christ who came to seek the lost, heal the sick and who forgave sinners. The Church put on the traditional ritual garb of priesthood and passed by on the other side to avoid contamination. Soon this position could not hold
people living with the virus were in the body of Christ. The body of Christ had to declare itself HIV-positive and be positively engaged in stemming the tide of its development.

“You find them something to eat” “Let the children come” If your ox falls into a well on a Sabbath day would you not take it out? How much more this daughter of Abraham. Do you see that widow? Leave her alone. In these and many circumstances, Jesus voiced the needs of the voiceless, met them and spoke in order to move others to meet those needs. We affirm as Christians that the Holy Spirit, our advocate takes our inarticulate pleas and formulates them according to the divine will and future for us. We, the Body of Christ, the dwelling place of the Holy Spirit, can do no less than advocate for acceptance and healing on behalf of all afflicted by virus. God frowns on injustice. And justice means giving people what is their due as children of God.

We have the resources in our scriptures and theology to craft language that blots out the shame that has accrued to the HIV/AIDS condition. When this is done people will not shy away from testing to know their status. When we get involved with advocacy we shall lead our congregations and others to be open to testing and counselling. Openly advocating for inclusiveness will ease tension and fear, dissipate stigmatisation and bring more people into putting heads together to seek alternative life-styles for those at risk. Advocacy says “let them come” and “Leave her alone”

From information, we have come to gather that HIV/AIDS is not only a bio-medical issue. The challenge of advocacy includes access to medical and other resources, but there is much more. We need to speak out, to examine, and seek to eliminate beliefs and practices that promote the spread of the virus. The religious beliefs that attribute the infection to witchcraft, curses, violation of taboos have to be examined, challenged and dissipated. If there is taboo it must be related to raping and defiling the powerless. It has to do with those who knowingly infect others with the virus. It has to do with people who shun those with AIDS or trample upon the humanity of those afflicted. The church should advocate the positive implications of Africa’s communal ideology as Christians preach
the Pauline imagery of life in a body. The church creates poetry to be sung, let the words be those that are of the mind of Christ.

We are documenting a lot of “best practises” We have persons in Africa, in the world, who are in the forefront of this struggle against the pandemic. Let the church highlight and accompany them and bring more persons into the camp of AIDS overcomers. It is not “they” who are afflicted it is the whole church, the whole nation, the whole world. There is no ‘us’ and “them” in the HIV/AIDS challenge. God’s love knows no bounds and we are God’s children the image of God.

What more do we have to say? There is much to do so let us be up and doing. Advocacy brings us into the multiple sufferings that have reached epidemic proportions in many parts of the world. We cannot think about how to overcome HIV/AIDS without thinking of the seemingly endemic poverty of Africa (and some other parts of the world) and its roots in global economic injustice. Poverty and Tuberculosis are bedfellows. TB is treatable so is Malaria and other more common diseases, but poverty has left them reigning in Africa. People who can live bravely with AIDS die hopelessly because they cannot afford the alleviating medicaments and pharmaceuticals will not forgo some of the high profit margins. The prophetic voice of the church must be heard on these issues calling government and business to account because of our common humanity and our accountability to God. The human rights violations visited upon those struggling to live with HIV/AIDS must be denounced by the Church. Caring to-day should involve the Church in all efforts at conflict prevention and resolution. It is the Church’s duty/advocate for justice in the midst of our situations of social/ethnic biases. There is much more to do so let us prepare our cadre, mobilise all for action, take the HIV/AIDS curricula into Church study groups. Let us have special teaching programs to counter this scourge.

Do not just tolerate one another.
Learn to understand the other.
Do not just stand by looking at the other.
Get close and see what you can learn.
For one tree does not make a forest.
It is as we appropriate the energy emanating from the other,
That we are all energised to work for life.
Compassion means touching
Caring entails touching
Solidarity demands touching.
We are called to touch those who suffer
With the healing hands of hope.
The Holy Spirit our advocate
Calls us to a ministry of advocacy for justice, compassion and healing.

**Summary / Conclusion**

‘Fullness of Life’ is a watchword given to the world by Jesus of Nazareth. Christians read the good news of Jesus Christ as set down by John and they find the saying of Jesus – “I have come that every one might have life and have it in its fullest” (John 10:10).

Fullness of life in my culture is depicted in terms of total well-being, bodily, psychological and spiritual health. It means joy and prosperity. It means living in harmony as a human community and with one’s environment. Jesus has come that we might have all this. This is the ground of our responses to the HIV/AIDS that threatens us all. We need to inform ourselves that we might act out of knowledge. Care will restore the dignity of all who are afflicted by the presence of HIV/AIDS.

Fullness of life rests on our affirmation that our life is sacred, given by God and in a nature resembling God, our lives have to be respected and have to be lived in dignity. Being made in the image of God is a basic spiritual foundation that inspires all our actions and lifestyle. Made like God we seek love, truth and justice. So we Advocate, we care and seek to inform, to act in truth.

Fullness of life of our communities depends on our lifestyle of compassion, flowing from the spirit of solidarity. Loving others as we love ourselves, we see and feel their pain and
so respond with healing. If fullness of life and healing became our priority, we shall not be thinking of ritual purity and Sabbath laws and other cultural demands that do not bring us fullness of life and we shall not pass by on the other side because of our sense in adequacy. We shall use what we have in our hands. Fullness of life demands transcending cultural boundaries and demands that do not promote healthy living.

We have what it takes to be on the side of those who seek to promote fullness of life for all. We have Christ.

**Mercy Amba Oduyoye.**