



FEBRUARY 2009

# A THOUSAND QUESTIONS. TORMENTED BY STIGMA.

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As I start this newsletter, I am reminded of the events during the Lilongwe, Malawi CRWRC HIV and AIDS tour. The day started on a good note. I vividly recall that it was a bright Sunday morning with birds flying about and singing captivating melodies. This, as it turned out, was a day that would change my life for good.

I woke up in my hotel bed, trying to digest the events of the previous day. Was it a dream? Did it really happen? My heart raced like a person being chased by a vicious lioness in the plains of Serengeti, eager to catch a meal for its cubs. The reality slowly dawned on me, "Now you know what stigma feels like."

To this very day, I am not sure whether the tour members noted any changes in my mood. I recall trying really hard to hold back my tears as we visited households affected by HIV and AIDS. I realized then that my life had taken a new twist. As the proverb goes, "He who wears the shoes knows best where it pinches." Oh yes, the shoe pinches and I feel it!

Do you recall the questions I asked in my last newsletter? What would you do if one of your daughters, sons, brothers or sisters came home and told you that he or she was HIV positive? For some of you, this may seem farfetched. What would you do if one of your daughters, sons, brothers, or sisters came home and told you they were gay? (I would really like to get your feedback.)

Well, if truth be told, I would have preferred that my experience had been a dream, something that I could ponder like a project that nags and you just never get it done. As it is experienced in untold numbers of African households, I have now seen firsthand what HIV and AIDS can do to people as it has entered the reality of my family. The pain, the questions, the fears, the doubts, the anxiety, and, yes, death!

This is not just about my experience, but the thoughts that people who, just like me, are currently grappling with HIV and AIDS. I found myself speechless, tears flowing like the Zambezi

River which meanders across Zambia to the



mighty Indian Ocean. My river, my pain, my struggles. . . who wants to listen?

Who cares about how I feel? Do I want to share this news with others? Who? Who really wants to hear my struggles right now? Like a thousand questions, my heart leaped just at the thought of sharing with others. The church? Really? Remember the big question? "How did you or your family member get HIV?"

My river of tears is slowly being replaced by hope. Yes, hope! That God can turn this experience into a learning process for me. That I can grow into a better person, equipped with the right tools and the right words to help my brothers and sister affected by HIV and AIDS. Yes, I hope to speak out without sounding apologetic about HIV and AIDS in Africa. For I know now that each day, each moment calls for bold and compassionate leadership to break the yoke of HIV related stigma. Stigma prevents people from knowing their HIV status. Stigma prevents people from receiving the treatment that would prolong their lives. Stigma, yes stigma, fuels the spread of HIV in my community.

Knowing what I know now, I want my brother to receive the support and care that he surely deserves. Stigma or no stigma, he deserves care and support from the people who love him. What better way than this, to show Christ's love and break the yoke in the midst of all the questions and struggles. The church is torn apart. "Should the church ordain gay ministers?" "Should the church preside over weddings of people who are HIV positive?" It appears that the do's and don'ts cloud our minds to the point that we forget the reality.

Are you ready to face the reality? Are you ready to become a welcoming church to all regardless of their sexuality or HIV status? Are you? Are you ready to turn your back on judging others and turn your face in Christ's compassion to those who need your love, your hugs, and your acceptance? Can you extend to others the grace you so badly need yourself?

"I can do all through Christ Jesus who strengthens me!"

In His service, *Nema*

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