ADVENT: A JOURNEY FOR MEN AND FOR US ALL

ADVENT is the period of preparation for the birth of Jesus and for His Second Coming. It takes us on a journey from hope to celebration.

Symbolically there is a wreath with 4 candles representing the 4 weeks of Advent and one candle is lit each Sunday:

1. The Prophets’ Candle: symbolises Hope that Christ will come and when we reach out to Him, He will lead us through the darkness.

2. The Bethlehem Candle represents Faith, a reminder of the journey of Mary and Joseph.

3. The third candle symbolises Joy: a turning point in Advent where we move from hope and preparation to rejoicing in anticipation of the return of Christ.

4. The Angels’ Candle symbolises Peace.

As with Advent, the journey with HIV can now be one of hope and celebration. There are new testing options, sensitive to one’s needs; treatment can start immediately and, with consistent adherence, will suppress the viral load to undetectable levels. This means that HIV can no longer be transmitted, health is restored and there is real hope; not only for ourselves but also for those we love.
CHOOSE HOPE!

This beautiful story resonates with all of us, especially in the era of HIV. It tells of an encounter between Jesus and an invalid man lying near the Pool of Bethesda – a place associated with healing. When Jesus learned that he had been in this condition for 38 years, he asked him a very direct question:

“Do you want to get well?”

This question might seem inappropriate for a man who has been lying there for so long, yet his response is very telling. He avoids answering directly and instead gives excuses. His desire for healing has been passive.

Living in denial, self-justification, blame-shifting or in fear of the process of finding healing, may paralyze our action yet if we are truly honest with ourselves and WANT to find a solution, we will find the motivation and courage needed.

Jesus challenges him to do his own part and when he did, his health was restored and he was able to reclaim a future.

‘Get up and WALK!’ Choose to test for HIV, even self-test; take ARVs to prevent opportunistic infections and that suppress viral load to undetectable levels; and reclaim a healthy future.

CHOOSE HOPE!  

Photo by Eric Bondou/EPICAF
LET’S SUPPORT ONE-ANOTHER!

A challenge in the traditional perception of ‘masculinity’ is the lack of health-seeking behaviour of men. However, in this scriptural passage, four men step in and take extreme measures to ensure their friend receives help.

The passage depicts a paralyzed man brought to Jesus. We are not told of the cause of his condition nor do we hear his voice. Yet his friends obviously care and are not dissuaded by obstructing crowds. They are determined to ensure their friend reaches the source of potential healing, even if it meant digging a hole through the roof to get him access!

What is particularly poignant is that Jesus reacted when he saw the faith of the friends.

The crowd’s reactions were varied and included self-righteous judgement - not unlike attitudes towards PLHIV - based on ignorance or moral assumptions. Jesus understood well and He challenges: “Why are you thinking these things?”

It is not for us to judge, but to respond practically, with compassion and accompaniment, and if need be, to go the extra mile.

Advent is an opportunity to actively stand together and to never under-estimate the power of standing in the breech for another.
TAKE CARE OF YOURSELF AND OF YOUR FAMILY!

In general, men find it difficult to admit a need, to ask for help and to follow the advice of others. There is a sense of not being in control.

Naaman, a highly respected Babylonian army commander, was inflicted with a dreaded disease. An Israeli slave-girl suggests he seeks healing from a prophet in Samaria. With endorsement and support from the King, Naaman travels to Israel. He has inflated ideas and expectations of what should happen for him, a man of power, influence and wealth. He questions what is required of him with arrogance and dismisses the advice he receives. It almost costs him the miracle he needed. With the persuasion of those accompanying him, he reluctantly has the humility to let go and let God, and thus find the healing he sought.

There are times when it is necessary to let go of unhelpful attitudes and accept the caring advice of another who may be more knowledgeable. Being tested for HIV and then following the instruction of consistent regular intake of the necessary medicines is needed in order to restore good health to a person living with HIV.

KINGS 5:1-27
GOD LOVES YOU - UNCONDITIONALLY!

Advent is a time of waiting, of expectation, of wonderment and of joy. It is the incarnation of the Son of God entering into our world, sharing our humanity with all its complexity, injustices; sorrows and suffering; becoming one of us - out of pure love - in order to redeem us.

For some, especially those who identify with the LGBT community, their experience of love and acceptance from family, friends and the religious community has often been seriously lacking.

Advent is your time to reclaim God’s unconditional accepting love. He IS love. God created and knows you (see Psalm 139:13 and Jeremiah 29:11) and He makes no mistakes. Jesus preferentially reached out to those who were rejected and who felt on the outside. ‘Love is stronger than hate, hope is stronger than despair and suffering is never the last word. ’

Your life matters and God loves YOU. Be tested for HIV. Seek out supportive faith leaders and networks of PLHIV to accompany you in your treatment journey. Proper adherence to the treatment protocol will suppress the viral load and you can live a healthy life and find renewed purpose.

1 Fr James Martin. SJ. Building a Bridge
RECLAIM YOUR HEALTH!

About 100 years after a defeated Israel was taken into Babylonian captivity, Nehemiah, a Jewish leader, secured support from King Artaxerxes to return and rebuild the broken walls of Jerusalem.

The remnant Jews were totally vulnerable to enemies. He unifies the people and, despite threats of attack, the reconstruction takes a record 52 days! Thereafter, the people listen, learn and commit to follow instructions from the Torah. Rebuilding the broken walls led to a redefining of their identity and gave them purpose as a people of God.

HIV breaches our ‘walls of defense’ against infection, rendering us vulnerable to TB and other opportunistic infections. Who are our ‘Nehemias’? They are those who help us and who support us: health-care providers, family, friends and other PLHIV, to ‘repair the walls’. Alone we are vulnerable but together, on treatment and committed to adherence, HIV can be rendered undetectable and thus untransmittable. It ceases to be the threat it once was and our future, and that of our loved ones, is full of hope.

‘Rebuild the Walls’ – reclaim your health – redefine your identity- take control again!
CARING FOR OURSELVES AND OUR LOVED ONES

The image of Jesus as good shepherd is one of the most beautiful images of God. This image of the shepherd permeates our Advent season and reminds us of the care, comfort and support that God provides to each of us, and in turn, we are called to care for each other. As men who care, like the great prophet Isaiah, we too must "shout from our mountains" glad tidings and good news. This includes knowing your own HIV status, and if positive, immediately getting on treatment and staying on treatment. Then as good shepherds, we care and protect ourselves, our families, our children and our communities. The good news is that HIV infection is no longer a “death sentence.” Treatment today is much easier and more effective than just a few years ago. As men who care, we must speak openly and honestly about HIV with our friends and with our families. Together then, we can end AIDS.

ISAIAH 40:9-11

FAITH AND COMMUNITY INITIATIVE
ADVENT: A TIME OF HOPE

Photo by Eric Bondou/EGP"AF
QUIET VOICES OF ENCOURAGEMENT

The story of the visitation of Mary and Elizabeth, pregnant with Jesus and John the Baptist, reminds of the power of relationships in our lives. Both women had mysterious pregnancies and visits from angels. Perhaps they had questions and fears, but in their coming together, in relationship, doubt was transformed by Faith and Joy. But where are the men in this story? What about their husbands, Joseph and Zechariah? Surely, they were in this scene, perhaps quietly off to the side. Like their wives, they too had mystical experiences and visits from angels. They are models of discipleship and faith even when they did not completely understand. Despite their few words in the scriptures, they are both men of faith who continued to believe. Sometimes we may not understand all of the complexities that lead to HIV infection either in ourselves or others. But, like Joseph and Zechariah we can be the strong, quiet voices of encouragement and support. We can encourage our friends and those we love to get tested for HIV and if positive, support and encourage them to start and remain on treatment.

LUKE 1:39–45

Photo by Albin Hillert/WCC

FAITH AND COMMUNITY INITIATIVE
ADVENT: A TIME OF HOPE
THE LIGHT OF HOPE

The time and season of Advent celebrates and remembers the eternal Word of God, becoming human and living among us. The Son of the Living God takes on our human nature to lead each of us back to his Father, our Father. One of the most powerful symbols during Advent is Light. The light that shines from candles, decorations and our Christmas trees is the Light of Hope, that God is born to be with us. As men who care for our families and care and support our friends, new ways of testing for HIV, including HIV Self Testing, and new, more effective treatments are a real source of light and hope. Like God coming into our world, testing and treatment for people living with HIV is also a true light that shines forth in our families and in our communities. People who are HIV positive and know their status and stay on treatment can live and "shine in the darkness," and the darkness shall not overcome!

Photo by Albin Hillert/WCC
CREATE THE PATHS OF HOPE

The beginning of the good news about Jesus the Messiah, the Son of God, as it is written in Isaiah the prophet: “I will send my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way, a voice of one calling in the wilderness, ‘Prepare the way for the Lord, make straight paths for him.’

Early on during our Advent season, we listen again to the stories of the great prophet, John the Baptist. His whole life was not about himself, but to point the way to another, to Jesus. We listen to the message of the Baptist pointing the Way, pointing toward the Truth. As we work to end AIDS, we must have the voices of men calling out to each other to get tested if we are at risk of HIV, and if positive immediately starting and staying on treatment. For too long some men have been reluctant to get tested or to start treatment if positive. But each of us can “prepare the way” for life for ourselves and others. Open, honest conversations about HIV will lead to straight paths of hope, of healing and of wellness in ourselves, and for those we care for.

MARK 1:1-3

Photo by Albin Hillert/WCC
EVERYONE IS TO BE LOVED!

We see in this text that the disciples were interested on where to place the blame for the blindness of a man. This is the response of many people today, especially when it comes to HIV and AIDS. Instead of help, we moralize. We try to look for someone on whom to place blame. We often think that they should have done better to protect themselves, and in faith circles, we argue they should have been more righteous and committed to God.

This response was sharply refuted by Jesus. Jesus said that neither is to blame: not this person, and not his parents. The church as the body of Christ must have the same attitude. None is to blame. Blame leads to stigma and intensifies the suffering of the affected person. What is the view of our Lord? To Jesus, the suffering of this man presented an opportunity for the love of God to be seen. When we see people in challenging times, we should see an opportunity to demonstrate God’s power expressed through acts of love. Jesus sought to touch this man. He touched his eye, the point of his suffering. So, in the context of HIV, we, people of faith, must encourage, build up, and support every person who needs testing and every person who needs treatment, to LIVE STRONG with HIV by taking treatment for life.

FAITH AND COMMUNITY INITIATIVE
ADVENT: A TIME OF HOPE
ADHERENCE IS KEY TO HEALTHY, VIBRANT LIVING

Jesus said, Go and wash in the pool of Siloam. The man went and did it. He was blind but he did not use his blindness as a reason for not following the instructions. He adhered to the prescribed treatment plan. When he did so, he started a new, better life.

What has this story to do with HIV? People living with HIV are required to regularly and religiously take their HIV medicines; to follow the instructions given to them by health care-providers. Adherence to ARV medicines helps to reduce the viral load. This makes it hard for the virus to transmit and affect others. It also leads to better management of other serious illnesses such as TB. The result is that the individual lives a vibrant and productive life. The good news is that ARV treatment protocols have become easier and PLHIV can now take just one pill as opposed to the many different pills that were previously used.

JOHN 9:1-27
NEW DOORS OF HOPE: JOIN PEER SUPPORT GROUPS

In this passage, we see Jesus interact with the lepers. People who had leprosy back in the day were required to stay away from others for not spreading the infection. Yet, once again, Jesus shows us the way. Jesus was willing to engage with the lepers. In the same way, we should be willing to interact and engage with our brothers and sisters living with or at risk of HIV. What is truly beautiful in the text is that the men of the story were willing to seek help. When they saw Jesus, they shouted for help. Often times, men do not seek help until it is too late. Asking for help is a sign of strength and not weakness. This applies also in the context of HIV: **REAL MEN SHOW REAL STRENGTH by asking for help when it is needed!** Nowadays, support groups open new doors of hope. At men support groups, simple health education and HIV self-tests are integrated into regular bible studies, services, sports, conferences and weekly meetings. The engagement of leaders in men’s groups or of HIV champions is a clear sign of Jesus’ support and engagement toward each one of us.

LUKE 17:11-19

Photo by Albin Hillert/WCC

FAITH AND COMMUNITY INITIATIVE

ADVENT: A TIME OF HOPE
TESTING CHANGES LIVES

Jesus said that the lepers should go and show themselves to the priest. Why? The answer is provided in the book of Leviticus. It follows that the priests in the Jewish setting were not just religious leaders. They were also health officers (See Leviticus 13 and 14). Consequently, it was their duty to examine those who signs of leprosy and give the diagnosis. By Jesus sending the men to the priest he was underscoring the need for proper diagnosis through the approved methods of testing.

When it comes to HIV, for people at risk of infection, knowing one’s status is important. It helps one to protect oneself and loved ones. It also allows one to receive early treatment if found positive. In doing so, life is prolonged and productivity is increased. Fortunately, there are many ways of testing available nowadays. This includes the option of self-testing, which provides an opportunity for one to test in the privacy of one’s own homes. The procedure is easy and convenient. This can also be done for couples and other family members who may find it hard to leave home for testing.

LUKE 17:11-19
LEVITICUS 13+14

Illustration by Alice Müller
MULTIPLE TESTS

In the first few verses of chapter 13 of Leviticus, we see that an initial test of leprosy that turned negative had to be repeated at least three times before confirmation was given. In the same way, HIV tests need to be repeated several times. Repeat testing is a sure way of covering any viral load that may have been missed during its window period. If you are at risk of HIV infection and your test result is negative, repeat the test every three-months. If you are in a discordant couple relationship, get tested regularly and be sure to receive all the appropriate information about PrEP. PrEP, a medicine to prevent HIV, is only to be used by people who are HIV negative and it is recommended for people at elevated risk of getting HIV, such as discordant couples where one partner is HIV positive and one is HIV negative.

Dear Lord, we pray for courage to go for HIV tests. We thank you that you have enabled the scientists to come up with so many ways. Help us to face our fears and guide us in making the right choices. In Jesus’ Name. Amen

LEVITICUS 13 +14

FAITH AND COMMUNITY INITIATIVE
ADVENT: A TIME OF HOPE
YOU ARE NOT ALONE!

This story is well known. Simon could not object or resist the soldiers ... he could not refuse!

"Why me, why now" are two questions that he probably faced, as he struggled to find and keep balance under the weight. We also face denial and resistance when challenged by life threatening circumstances!

He was yoked in behind a man who had reached his last strength. Perhaps Simon then realised his true vocation, to help serve his fellow man in need ...he became a witness to hope... in his submission and sharing of the unrevealed redeemer's cross he is saved!

We also become fully-alive and redeemed by the Lord through sharing in the burdens of strangers on their way of the cross! This is the paradox of life, suffering overcome by the Resurrection!

HIV brings the truth of life and true love to the affected, infected and those called to care. **No longer is the virus cause for a journey of despair. Through testing and treatment and care, we can live in renewed hope and experience the power of God’s love, brought near through relationships redeemed along the way!**

Photo by Eric Bondou/EGPAF

FAITH AND COMMUNITY INITIATIVE
ADVENT: A TIME OF HOPE
TO BE A RESPONSIBLE FATHER!

Joseph illustrates what it means to be a responsible father looking after his family when, directed by the angel of the Lord, he took his family to Egypt to escape death. Like Joseph, many HIV-positive fathers today are taking responsibility for their families. They take important decisions for the well-being of their children and partners. In the context of HIV, this means ensuring that the children, wife or partners of an HIV-positive man have an HIV test. It also means that each HIV-positive person in the family, women and children alike, start and stay on treatment for life. Treatment today is easier to take and more effective.

To live your life to the full never miss to take your HIV medicine as prescribed and support your HIV-positive family members to do the same. Be a responsible father and support your family to get tested and treated together so you can all live long, productive and healthy lives!

Photo by Albin Hillert/WCC
SUPPORT YOUR WIFE!

Jesus has made it clear that we must love one another, just as he has loved each one of us. As husbands following Jesus, we have a clear duty and responsibility to love, respect and support our wives. Indeed, we’re told in the scriptures that if we do not provide and support our wife and household, we are denying our faith. So, what must we do in the context of HIV to love and support our wives?

If men living with HIV do take their HIV medicine daily as prescribed, they will be healthy and won’t give HIV to their partner. With daily HIV medicine, a woman living with HIV can give birth to and raise a HIV negative baby, which is wonderful news! Husbands should support their wives when pregnant to be able to attend antenatal care and get tested for HIV. If found to be HIV-positive, they should support them to immediately access HIV treatment so that their health will improve! When husband and wife get tested together the process has been found to improve the couples’ communication so they can encourage each other to stay on treatment and talk about health issues. Husbands should continue to support their wives to get re-tested at the end of breast feeding, and stay on treatment for life. It is important also that mum and baby continue go together as a pair to the clinic to ensure that the infants living with HIV are tested and stay on treatment.

Photo by Albin Hillert/WCC
LOOK AFTER YOUR CHILDREN!

Jesus loves children, in fact he said that unless we change and become like little children, we will never enter the kingdom of heaven. It is the responsibility of fathers to do all within their power to keep their children safe and healthy and to seek help to heal them if they’re sick. A good example of a father’s compassion for his daughter is illustrated by Jairus, one of the synagogue leaders, who pleaded with Jesus to come and heal her, which he did. What does this mean in the context of HIV? First and foremost, we must remember that children can get HIV too and we must show love and compassion by doing all we can to stop them from suffering and dying. All babies of an HIV-positive parent must have an HIV test within the first two months of their birth. Infants must be re-tested when they finish breast feeding. Timely testing will save them! All children living with, or exposed to HIV should be put on appropriate HIV treatment immediately. **All children with HIV can take treatment, and most children who start ART right away can look forward to growing and developing normally, going to school, making friends and living long and healthy lives.** There are now better medications available for children, and fathers must make sure their children take them regularly! If a father is positive himself, he should give the good example taking his HIV medicine as prescribed too.

“Now choose life, so that you and your children may live”.

FAITH AND COMMUNITY INITIATIVE
ADVENT: A TIME OF HOPE
TOGETHER WE CAN END STIGMA!

Jesus, like Elisha, confronted leprosy that was then greatly feared in society as a highly contagious and debilitating disease which, like HIV, was highly stigmatized. Healing the lepers was part of Jesus’ healing mission and his disciples were called to work with and speak out for the marginalized and rejected in society, as best illustrated in the parable of the Good Samaritan. Fathers are called today to speak out not just for their families but for all those in our communities living with HIV who are marginalized and need support. One of the main aspects of this work is tackling the stigma and discrimination faced by many adults and children living with HIV, which makes them reluctant to come forward to be tested and access treatment. Moralizing HIV by some in churches has been the basis on which people living with HIV have been stigmatized and discriminated against. HIV is a virus not a moral issue and, regardless of our HIV status, we are all children of God created in His image. Fathers should work with church leaders to help tackle stigma and discrimination and get everyone at risk of HIV infection tested and on treatment. Let’s share hope with our families and our communities! Together we can end AIDS!

LUKE 17:14
LUKE 10:33
MATTHEW 7:12

Illustration by Alice Müller

FAITH AND COMMUNITY INITIATIVE
ADVENT: A TIME OF HOPE
HIV YOUTH-FRIENDLY SPACES

“Do to others what you would have them do to you”. For religious leaders, including youth leaders, the task is to watch over those under their care. In the context of HIV, this means that our places of worship and community groups must be HIV-friendly spaces: places where people, including young people, feel loved; where it’s safe to talk about HIV; places free of stigma and discrimination. When youth leaders encourage young people living with HIV to lead peer support groups; when they mentor and support other young people to get tested and stay on treatment, they impact and improve their lives. There are exciting examples of churches that have organized Health Kiosks in places of worship which have significantly increased the uptake of HIV testing. Likewise, other churches have organized “Baby Showers” in places of worship to celebrate news of pregnancies and these have sensitively encouraged family members, especially men, to have an HIV test. If you are a young man, work with religious leaders in your faith community to provide spiritual and psychosocial support for all those living with HIV, especially adolescents and young people, encouraging them to adhere to treatment. In this time of hope, together let’s make our church a place of love and respect for and with those who are living with HIV.

Photo by Peter Williams/WCC
GOOD NEWS FOR CHILDREN WITH HIV

Children are very precious to Jesus. As his followers we have to do all we can to ensure they are loved, protected and encouraged to thrive, so they can enjoy life in all its fullness. Children have often been forgotten in our efforts to address HIV. This in spite of the fact that they can get HIV too. Babies can get HIV during pregnancy, birth or breastfeeding from their HIV-positive mother, if she does not or cannot take her HIV medicine daily. However, nowadays there is plenty of good news to share and we can use this time of hope to spread such good news in our faith community. 1. Babies will not catch HIV, if their mum is on treatment. Let’s make sure that all HIV-positive women in our faith community are supported in this important journey! 2. There are new methods of testing children for HIV which enables the test result to be obtained the same day. This way even HIV-positive children can start treatment immediately. 3. Most children who start antiretroviral treatment right away, and who keep taking their medication regularly, can look forward to growing and developing normally, going to school, and making friends. In this time of hope, let’s all become messengers of good news for our children.
WE YOUTH LEADERS STAND STRONG FOR HEALTH!

WE YOUTH LEADERS STAND STRONG FOR HEALTH! This is the message that young people and youth leaders should spread this time of Advent in our faith community. Youth peer educators and champions are key to successful adherence and viral suppression in young people living with HIV. This is particularly true when the peer educator is living with HIV as they have much experience to share and can offer consolation, empathy and sound advice on HIV prevention, testing, treatment and care. Love, care, compassion and understanding of HIV are the successful elements of many peer support groups led by young people. During this time of Advent, let's offer hope by engaging our youths in creating dramas, clips, YouTube videos, WhatsApp messages, and social media messages for youth in our communities about living well with HIV!

Photo by Peter Williams/WCC

1 TIMOTHY 4:12
PROVERBS 20:11
MATTHEW 11:25

FAITH AND COMMUNITY INITIATIVE
ADVENT: A TIME OF HOPE
YOUTHS AGAINST STIGMA!

The message from the Bible is clear: we are all one in Christ Jesus and that includes everyone who is living with HIV! Jesus does not show favoritism. He is the friend of the outcasts, the people who have been shunned and despised by others in society.

What has this to do with HIV? How can we address HIV related stigma in our faith community? Youth leaders, including Sunday school teachers, are in important positions to engage with the children who attend church and youth groups to talk and discuss about unjust treatments towards our brothers and sisters; and to talk about stigma, particularly stigma faced by children and young people living with HIV. We are all one in Christ Jesus. And this important message needs to be shared from an early age.

RAISE A VOICE OF HOPE! – with open arms to people and children living with HIV!

MARK 14:3
ACTS 10:34-35
GALATIANS 3:28

Photo by Albin Hillert/WCC

FAITH AND COMMUNITY INITIATIVE
ADVENT: A TIME OF HOPE
CHRISTMAS: TOGETHER IN RENEWED HOPE

Christmas brings many reflective images to mind: the tired rejected couple who had failed to find any accommodation save a humble stable; shepherds startled by angels on a hillside; Magi arriving from far, bearing gifts of profound significance; and the birth of a baby who would forever change mankind. Christmas can be a time of great excitement for children, a time of families coming together and it can also be a time of profound loneliness for those who feel isolated, rejected or afraid. Christmas is a time of hope – of new beginnings. It is ‘God with us’ – not as some distant being whose existence in no way resonates with the daily challenges we face, but as one of us, accompanying us and experiencing everything and more that we experience, affirming, uplifting and healing, not only the body, but also relationships and wounds in the soul.

Advent culminates in that love coming into the world in a tangible form.

We are not alone and need never feel alone.

We can look forward to the future with renewed joy, whatever our circumstances have been in the past, for today offers new possibilities.

FAITH AND COMMUNITY INITIATIVE
ADVENT: A TIME OF HOPE
Advent is a season of hope and expectation.
May we become in this season, messengers of hope.

In this time of Advent, we are sharing, through reflections, the good news of the many advances in HIV testing and treatment.

New testing methods and treatment options mean that people living with HIV can live full lives.

Now we know that *KNOWING OUR HIV STATUS IS EMPOWERING!*
We can take positive action: with HIV medicines, we take care of ourselves and take care for our loved ones.

*NEVER GIVE UP!* Take your HIV treatment every day!
It will suppress your viral load faster. This means you’ll feel much better and you will not transmit HIV to others!

Our calling as Christians demands leadership in demonstrating love and compassion.
Let’s pray that in this season God grants us wisdom to overcome our fears and prejudices to become messengers of hope in our faith communities.