

Reaching Out from South Africa

A l e t t e r f r o m S i b u s i s i w e M l a m b o



Dear Friends of the Shambhala Institute,

I am writing this letter out of desperation. I think many of you will remember me from the Conflict and Compassion dialogue last June. Although there are positive stories of reconciliation in South Africa, the socio-economic imbalances of our past cannot be redressed overnight. This year in South Africa we will be celebrating ten years of democracy, but most unfortunately the legacy of apartheid still lives with us. So much damage was done during those years of oppression that it will take decades for all South Africans to be able to live a normal and good life.

At this very point in time, the issue of HIV/AIDS is a major problem for us. Most of the people affected are the previously disadvantaged blacks who are still living below the poverty line. In many cases, these people go for days without food. In the province of KwaZulu Natal, where I live, we have the highest numbers of infections compared to the eight other provinces in the country, and the reasons dates back to the times of apartheid.

First, during the 1980s and '90s, this province was the hardest hit by political violence, so most people were left homeless and destitute. Many children were left orphaned and had to fend for themselves. Most were forced to live on the streets, and they had to sell their bodies for survival. As a result, we have a lot of prostitutes in the streets of Durban.

Illiteracy is another contributing factor. During the same period of political unrest, children had to drop out of school. Those children are now parents who are illiterate and unemployable, and they cannot afford to take care of their own children. Because they are illiterate they don't have access to information about HIV/AIDS and they would rather direct their energies toward survival than worrying about the virus.

There are many rural communities in KwaZulu Natal, and these were never developed during the previous dispensation. They do not have access to media and thus have to rely on word of mouth for information. A rumour easily becomes a reality. It is here where people have a strong belief that having sex with a virgin can cure HIV/AIDS, and we have a high incidence of child rape. The victims include babies as young as five months old.

In rural communities, families are still affected by the migrant labour system that was enforced by the previous government. Black men had to leave their families in rural areas and look for a job in the cities, especially in the mines, and could only visit their families once a year or after two years. Such a set-up often resulted in the men finding women to cohabit with in the cities to satisfy their sexual desires, thereby risking infection. When these men came back from the cities they infected all their wives, since most such men were in polygamous marriages.

The other reason we have the highest rate of infection in the province is because we have a lot of people coming in and out through the seaport and by truck. In an area where unemployment is so high, people are willing to do anything in order to have food and shelter. HIV/AIDS is affecting people between the ages of 15 and 45, and these people have young children who are still dependent on them. When parents die, the children are taken care of by grannies or the older siblings. Child-headed families are a common sight here, with children as young as six taking care of other children. In most cases such children are forced to drop out of school to look for employment. They often become beggars, get involved in criminal activities, become prostitutes, are exploited by drug traffickers, or steal to survive. Once the older siblings start doing all these wrong things, the younger ones follow suit.

I believe this is giving you some picture of the vicious cycle of infection and poverty in which we are trapped. If people like myself are not willing to swallow their pride and break this vicious cycle by intervening in whatever way possible, there is no future for our newfound democracy. HIV/AIDS is swallowing young people who are supposed to be active in the economy of our country. Statistics released in October 2003 indicate that at King Edward Hospital, one the biggest and well-resourced in the province, more than 90 percent of the patients are HIV positive. The socio-economic impact of the epidemic is leaving a big dent in the poorest of the poor communities. The government is playing its part, but it is not enough because the problem is too big. We have started programmes in the churches focussed on the orphans and children in distress.

With the contribution from the government and donations from different individuals, we have been able to purchase a plot of land where those children who really have no one else to take care of them are looked after by kind volunteers from the churches. We decided to start an organisation to take care of the problem, and we have named it Agape, meaning God's unconditional love. We take care of these children holistically—we pay for their schooling, we provide them with food, we buy clothing, we look at the psycho-social impact the loss has made on their lives and have counselling sessions with them.

Our contribution is just a drop in the ocean because we do not have enough resources. In most cases we have to dig from our own pockets, which makes it difficult for us to survive and which has a negative impact on our families.

Should you wish to make a positive contribution in whatever way, please let me know. You can either link us with relevant resources such as funders or business people willing to donate to such programs or make a donation yourself. If you need more information, I will be happy to provide this.

To contact me, call 0725486171 (mobile) or 27 031 9037477 (home), or send an email to me at Sibusisiwe.Mlambo@Diakonia.org.za

You can also call one of the committee members, Zodwa Mqadi: 0834794182 (mobile) or 27 031 766 0459 or 27 031 700 5836.

Contributions to the AGAPE Community Health Centre can be transferred to ABSA Bank, Hillcrest, Durban, South Africa. Account no. 4054345046. \$100 Cdn will pay for one child's school fees for a year.

May the good Lord bless you while reading this letter.

Yours truly
Primrose Sibusisiwe Mlambo