



AIDS Candlelight Memorial in a time of COVID-19

Sunday, 17 May 2020

We remember the lives we have lost so that we can take actions that keep us safe, healthy and alive.

Introduction

This year, AIDS Candlelight Memorial Sunday will be completely different from the previous 36 years. This year, we as a global community are threatened and locked down because of another pressing epidemic. COVID-19 has changed our current landscapes, perhaps irrevocably. It is of utmost importance that we adhere to the current regulations of self-isolation and the emergency rules that prohibit gatherings, including church services, as prescribed by our different countries.

The immediate need and urgency of the COVID-epidemic, unfortunately, does NOT mean that the HIV-epidemic no longer exists.

With more than 37 million people globally living with HIV, it remains a serious health challenge that threatens not only our physical lives but also our emotional and spiritual well-being. It is a silent epidemic in the sense that though millions of lives are impacted by it, so many people continue to carry this burden in silence and loneliness, mostly in fear of stigma and judgment.

We as faith communities, therefore, have a responsibility, amidst the challenges and dangers of COVID-19, to also remember people living with HIV. This includes those who live openly with their status, those whom we know personally, but also the millions we do not know, and especially those of us who feel too exposed and vulnerable to disclose our status.

The joint HIV and COVID-19 epidemics

The first commonly known occurrence of what is now known as COVID-19 was in December 2019 in Wuhan, China. The World Health Organisation declared it a public health emergency January 30th and a pandemic on March 11th.

At the time of writing, more than 3.78 million people have tested positive for COVID-19 infection. Of them, more than 1.25 million people have already recovered, and more than 264 000 have died.¹

¹ Downloaded on 7 May 2020 from Johns Hopkins Coronavirus Resource Center <https://coronavirus.jhu.edu/map.html>

On World AIDS Day, December 1st 2019, UNAIDS released the following HIV statistics for 2018: The estimated number of people living with HIV were 37.9 million people, the number of new infections 1.7 million and AIDS-related deaths 770 000.²

The statistics for HIV and COVID-19 are not gathered in the same manner. For COVID-19 scientists use actual confirmed cases and for HIV UNAIDS and WHO statistics are estimations based on the extrapolation of country-specific data. Nevertheless, these global statistics inform us of the scale and urgency of both epidemics. The rapid spread of COVID-19 should rightfully be a reason for serious concern that calls for emergency responses.

When we look at country-specific details, the realities could be much different, but this too has the potential to change quickly. In South Africa, for instance, the number of confirmed COVID-19 cases on May 7th is 7808 of whom 3153 have recovered, and 153 people have died.³

The estimated 2018 HIV statistics for South Africa report 7.7 million people living with HIV, of which 240 000 were new infections and 71 000 people died in the year.⁴ These deaths equate to an average of 190 AIDS-related deaths per day.

When we plan our Candlelight Memorial activities or feel unsure of the importance of still addressing HIV during the COVID-epidemic, let us keep these numbers in mind⁵. Let the statistics remind us that in a time of disruption for the entire world and us personally, these statistics represent the permanently disrupted lives of loved ones, women and men, spouses, siblings, parents, children, friends, neighbours and colleagues. Let us remember and remind others also to take action.

The purpose of Candlelight Memorial

“The International AIDS Candlelight Memorial is much more than just a memorial. It serves as a community mobilisation campaign to raise social consciousness about HIV and AIDS. With almost 38 million people living with HIV today, the International AIDS Candlelight Memorial serves as an important intervention for global solidarity, breaking down barriers of stigma and discrimination, and giving hope to new generations”.⁶

The official Candlelight Memorial website urges us to continue to mark this day as important, but also to find ways of demonstrating individual solidarity without putting people’s lives and health at risk.

CABSA would like to invite you to show your solidarity in at least one of three suggested responses:

- Personal – an appeal to you and other individuals to spend time alone or as household reflecting and praying together about HIV. See attachment A.
- Faith Communities – faith leaders and faith communities who can stream or prerecord video or audio messages for church services, please consider the following thoughts and prayer in your services. See attachment B.
- Raise Awareness and Public Solidarity through media and social media platforms. See attachment C.

² From UNAIDS https://www.unaids.org/sites/default/files/media_asset/UNAIDS_FactSheet_en.pdf

³ Downloaded 7 May 2020 from South African Government <https://www.gov.za/Coronavirus>

⁴ From both UNAIDS and AVERT <https://www.avert.org/professionals/hiv-around-world/sub-saharan-africa/south-africa>

⁵ Please keep in mind that the COVID-19 numbers change daily, use Johns Hopkins (note 1) or your local source for updated numbers, should you plan to quote exact numbers.

⁶ From Candlelight Memorial <https://www.candlelightmemorial.org/>

Additional Information on Sunday, the 17th of May

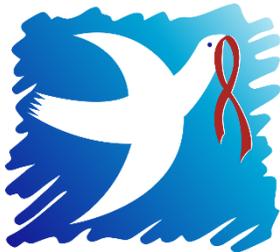
- The Candlelight Memorial theme this year is: **We remember – We take action – We live beyond HIV**
- In the church calendar, it is the sixth Sunday after Passover
- The Revised Common Lectionary's texts are:
Psalm 66: 8-20 John 14: 15-21 Acts 17: 22-31 1 Peter 3: 13-22
- A short prayer video clip can be downloaded or viewed here
<https://drive.google.com/file/d/1H9TQZepSagvjR74RJZyNqIQyn-SEvPsk/view>

AIDS Candlelight Memorial Resources Provided by CABSA (Christian AIDS Bureau)

You are encouraged to share this information.

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Attachment A - Personal Reflection for Candlelight Memorial

Reflection

Pray for God's presence and guidance as you will be reflecting on this Scripture

Read Psalm 66:8-20

Read Psalm 66:8-12 slowly again

To think about: what episodes or experiences in your life come to mind when you hear phrases such as:

- "You have tested us." (v 10)
- "You have refined us as silver is refined." (v 10)
- "You laid affliction on our backs." (v 11)
- "We went through fire and water." (v12)

Read: Verse 12 from *The Message*:

"(He) pushed us to our very limit, road-tested us inside and out, took us to hell and back; finally he brought us to this well-watered place."

The New King James version reads:

"... But you brought us out to rich fulfilment."

Currently, do you feel that God has brought you back to this well-watered place? Or do you feel yourself still very much stretched and challenged? Why? Why not?

Write down your thoughts, discuss this with God or with one another. Also, consider the following questions:

- At present, most of the world are in different stages of lockdown as a result of COVID-19. In what way does this affect your life? Your income? Your relationships? Your health?
- In what way can you be supportive of people who feel stretched to their limits at this point?
- What impact do you think COVID-19 has on people who are living with HIV?

Prayer:

Can be read below or watched <https://drive.google.com/file/d/1H9TQZepSagvjR74RJZyNqIQyn-SEvPsk/view>
(Light one or any amount of candles that you have available while reading this prayer.)

Our God and Heavenly Father

In the midst of this two-fold crisis, we turn to You and light this candle to remind us that our hope is in You, the living God who created us.

We use this moment to remember the millions of people who had died since the start of the HIV epidemic and those who passed away recently. We cherish the memories of loved ones, family, friends and colleagues.

But this year on AIDS Candlelight Memorial Day, we are also deeply aware of the more than 240 000 people who died due to COVID-19 in the last five months.

Lord, we want to pray for lives cut short, and their loved ones who are mourning under the confines of self-distancing and lockdown regulations.

Help us to find ways to comfort and support one another.

Lord, our God, do not turn away from our prayers, but let the burning candle remind us of your presence, even in moments of isolation, affliction and hardship. Let us keep turning back to you, our Light.

In your Holy Name,

Amen.

To think about: How can you show your solidarity with people who are living with HIV, even if you are in lockdown?

More suggestions:

Help our communities to remember through safe public actions such as:

- Tie a red cloth, scarf or garment outside your house (to a window, doorknob, post box, fence or tree).
- Take time and send a word of encouragement or prayer to the people close to you who are living with HIV. If they are living openly with HIV, you could do this on their Facebook page, but if this information is private, send a personal voice note, text or phone them. Let them know you are thinking about them.
- Share this video clip <https://drive.google.com/file/d/1H9TQZepSagvjR74RJZyNqIQyn-SEvPsk/view> or send a Whatsapp to 0832925358 for a mobile phone version.
- Change your profile pictures on your different social media platforms to a burning candle, a red ribbon or the Candlelight Memorial logo.
- If you have a FB account, take a photo of your burning candle and share it on your wall. Invite your friends also to take a few moments to light a candle and pray for the people in our lives who are living with HIV and who have to face the realities of COVID-19.
- Donate goods or money to an organisation specifically supporting HIV positive people and support groups during the lockdown.

In closing, Read Psalm 66: 12-20 again.

Close with your personal response to God in prayer, silence or writing.

If possible and safe, keep the candle burning for the rest of the day.

Attachment B – AIDS Candlelight Sermon Guideline

Greeting

First Reading: Psalm 66: 8-20 (NIV)

Praise our God, all peoples,
let the sound of his praise be heard;
⁹ he has preserved our lives
and kept our feet from slipping.
¹⁰ For you, God, tested us;
you refined us like silver.
¹¹ You brought us into prison
and laid burdens on our backs.
¹² You let people ride over our heads;
we went through fire and water,
but you brought us to a place of abundance.
¹³ I will come to your temple with burnt offerings
and fulfil my vows to you—
¹⁴ vows my lips promised and my mouth spoke
when I was in trouble.
¹⁵ I will sacrifice fat animals to you
and an offering of rams;
I will offer bulls and goats.
¹⁶ Come and hear, all you who fear God;
let me tell you what he has done for me.
¹⁷ I cried out to him with my mouth;
his praise was on my tongue.
¹⁸ If I had cherished sin in my heart,
the Lord would not have listened;
¹⁹ but God has surely listened
and has heard my prayer.
²⁰ Praise be to God,
who has not rejected my prayer
or withheld his love from me!

Welcome

Dear Sisters and Brothers, we invite you into this online space where you are welcomed and reminded of God's loving presence and also of this faith community you belong to, even though we cannot see or hear one another.

During this unfamiliar for all, uncomfortable for some and extremely challenging, if not desperate time for millions of people, we find comfort in Psalm 66. The Psalmist recalled how God had tested and refined them, even allowed others to walk right over them, as to train or prepare them. In the end, God brought them to a place of abundance. The King James Version refers to "deep fulfilment."

May we hold on to the promises of God and seek expectantly for abundance and deep fulfilment as we are all trying to make sense of the realities of the COVID-19 epidemic.

Today is AIDS Candlelight Memorial Day. Therefore we also need to remind one another that the AIDS epidemic is still present, and has been for almost 40 years. Despite the new challenges posed by COVID-19, the older challenges associated with HIV begs not to be ignored or forgotten. Though HIV does not pose the same public health crisis as the easy-transmittable COVID-19, it has trapped millions of people in different states of self-isolation and distress. Therefore we will focus our sermon, prayers and thoughts on HIV today.

Prayer

It can be read or watched <https://drive.google.com/file/d/1H9TQZepSagvjR74RJZyNqIQyn-SEvPsk/view>

(Light one or any amount of candles that you have available while reading this prayer.)

Our God and Heavenly Father

In the midst of this two-fold crisis, we turn to You and light these candles to remind us that our hope is in You, the living God who created us.

We use this moment to remember the millions of people who have died since the start of the HIV epidemic and those who passed away very recently. We light these candles to cherish the memories of loved ones, family, friends and colleagues.

But this year on AIDS Candlelight Memorial Day, we are also deeply aware of the more than 240 000 people who died to COVID-19 in the last five months.

Lord, we also light candles as we pray for lives cut short and loved ones who are mourning under the confines of self-distancing and lockdown regulations.

Help us find ways to comfort and support one another amidst these epidemics.

Lord, our God, do not turn away from our prayers, but let the burning candles remind us of your presence even in moments of isolation, affliction and hardship. Let us keep turning back to you, our Light.

In your Holy Name,

Amen.

Second Reading and Focus Text: Acts 17:22-31

Read the text from your preferred translation.

Then “read” it again by paraphrasing the text:

In this passage, we hear Paul addressing the Greeks. He is visiting Athens, where in verse 16, we read that he was waiting for Silas and Timothy. And while waiting for them, he observed the many idols in the city. This angered him very much.

However, when he was invited to address the Areopagus,⁷ the high court or aristocratic Greek council at the time, he manages to hide this anger for the sake of this message that was bigger than his anger. He grabs his

⁷ <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Areopagus-Greek-council>

audience's attention by connecting with what seems important to them, even though he did not agree with them about its importance.

Paul complements them: From what I have seen, it is clear that you take your religion seriously (v 22).

He paid attention, and therefore he was able to find some connection or conversation starter with the council when he said, "I have found an altar with the inscription: To the unknown God (v 23)."

And then he has the opportunity to share his testimony: This unknown God, I know Him! And I would like to tell you more about Him. This God does exist. And other than man-made gods, this God is not confined to man-made temples, nor was he created by human hands. No, this God is the Creator who made us (v 24-25).

God created us to not only to seek God but also to find God. God does not play hide-and-seek. This unknown God actually wants to be found and wants to be known by us (v 27).

Paul is saying to the Greek council that there is really no point in trying to make our own gods (v 29).

And then Paul lets them in on God's grace when he announces that God has overlooked their erroneous beliefs and man-made gods because they did not know (v 30).

But now ... "But now commands all men everywhere to repent" (v 30 *New King James*).

And in *The Message*, we read: "God overlooks it as long as you don't know any better – but that time is past. The unknown is now known, and he's calling for a radical life change."

Now ...

If we imagine that it is 2020 and Paul was in our midst, addressing our church council or congregation, what do you think this narrative would have sounded like?

I can see you take your religion seriously, especially the important emphasis you put on church services. I can see the various attempts you are making to continue to share sermons with your congregants despite the lockdown and the prohibition on gatherings.

I noticed You are currently in an existential crisis, dealing with amongst others the question – how to be church when you are not allowed to meet? Where do we meet God if we cannot dwell in our man-made temples?

How to have fellowship and be community and also respond to the needs created by the COVID-19 lockdown? Worries about the income of your church, the well-being of your members, the well-being of your fellow countrymen and women? I noticed some of you are rallying to make a difference; I notice some of you are hiding behind your walls and human rights ...

Would Paul find a tribute or altar to the living God whose resurrection we recently celebrated, or would he find our own unnamed gods?

Will these unnamed gods be our own unrepentance and arrogance amidst a world in crisis? Our selfishness, impatience and self-righteousness in the face of illness, poverty and terrible inequalities?

And if Paul should introduce us to God, will we recognise this God he talks about? Will we recognise the Jesus who challenged the accepted norms of the early church, the Jesus who urged us to love our neighbours as ourselves — no, wait, to even love our enemies? The Jesus who spoke truth to power when He addressed the hypocrisy of the Pharisees and religious scholars (Matt 23:1-3), who dined with the marginalised and touched the lepers?

And as we listen to Paul explaining that God created us? Will we realise that if the living God created me and those like me, He also created those who are not like me, the strangers, homeless, sick and vulnerable on the periphery of our communities? The beggar on the street, the long lines of people who are not keeping a social distance (because there simply is no room to social-distance in already over-crowded neighbourhoods)? Will we realise God created my employees, not for the sole purpose of serving me, but to find and serve God?

And yes, this God, our God, also created every HIV positive person, regardless of how they got infected. This God wants us, even those with whom I do not associate, to find Him. In fact, He created all of us with the desire to search for Him (v 27).

Would Paul's message change the way we look at one another?

Would this reminder change the way we engage with God during the COVID-19 crisis and the challenging times in which we find ourselves?

Would this message change the way we think about poor and marginalised communities?

Would this message change the way we think about people living with HIV? Will we be able to look with God's eyes and grace at one another? At those who are different from us?

And in conclusion – what would verses 30 and 31 sound like in May 2020?

The Unknown is now known.

What have we learned about ourselves, our community, our people, our economy and our health system over the past few weeks? What have we learned about the societies we created?

If God is calling for a radical life change in our lives today, what would it mean? What would it ask of us who already dwell with God, already seek God?

Are we perhaps honouring our own man-made gods, shaped to our own desires and preferences? Or are we willing that our God, who created us, will continue to shape and guide us towards a radical life change?

In a time when we are all living in the disruption and struggle for survival amidst COVID-19, let us not forget the more than 37 million people in the world who are living with HIV. Let us remember them and take action to support one another. Let us seek quality of life for EVERYONE.

Prayer

Response - Third Reading

John 14:15-21

Greeting

As we greet one another – may we live as people who know the living God, our Creator, who loves God and allows God to radically transform the way we look at and treat one another.

Attachment C – Raise public awareness and solidarity

In the absence of physical gatherings and church services, we need to find alternatives to create public solidarity with people living with HIV. We therefore invite all Christians with some access to communication and social media to join us in an act of solidarity.

Let us mobilise thousands of people to light their candles and show their support to millions of people who are living in the silent lockdown of HIV, where fear of stigma and judgment often keep them from sharing their status even with those closest to them.

Use your church website, Facebook page, WhatsApp groups, or any other social platforms to spread the message of AIDS Candlelight Memorial Day.

- Invite congregants and households to participate in personal reflection. Distribute Attachment A.
- Invite congregants, church staff and council members to say this prayer and light a candle as they have lunch or dinner. This prayer can be read or watched, view or download from <https://drive.google.com/file/d/1H9TQZepSagvjR74RJZyNqIQyn-SEvPsk/view>
- Send a Whatsapp to 083 292 5358 for a smaller version of the clip that is best suited for Whatsapp sharing.

Prayer

(Light one or any amount of candles that you have available while reading this prayer.)

Our God and Heavenly Father

In the midst of this two-fold crisis, we turn to You and light these candles to remind us that our hope is in You, the living God who created us.

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In your Holy Name,

Amen

Help our communities to focus on HIV and create awareness through safe public actions such as:

- Tie a red cloth, scarf or garment outside your house (to a window, doorknob, post box, fence or tree).

- Take time and send a word of encouragement or prayer to the people close to you who are living with HIV. If they are living openly with their status, you could do this on their Facebook page, but if this information is private, send a personal voice note, text or phone them. Let them know that you are thinking about them.
 - As faith leaders, reach out specifically to congregants living with HIV. Also respond to the physical needs they may have during this time.
 - Change your profile pictures on your different social media platforms to a burning candle, a red ribbon, or the Candlelight Memorial logo to raise awareness and to show your solidarity.
 - If your church or you personally have a FB account, take a photo of your burning candle, share it on your wall and invite your friends also to take a few moments to light a candle and pray for the people in our lives who are living with HIV and who also have to face the realities of COVID-19.
 - Donate goods or money to an organisation that is specifically supporting HIV positive people and support groups during the lockdown.
-