

RELIGIOUS Institutions

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9.1 Children's experiences

Children's experiences of religious institutions differed. Some children saw the church as a positive place of acceptance and support. Others experienced discrimination and rejection.

9.1.1 "At church they give us support"

For many of the children who attended the forum, the church represents a place of comfort, safety, support and acceptance.

Tiko, 13 years old: "When I am angry I go to church and I come back better. When you are struggling and you are poor, even small things get to you. When your life is hard, and you are living badly you can't take many things. That happens at home. People believe that when you are hurt, you can go to church, pray about it and you will be better."

Delani, 16 years old: "It is okay for people to sympathise but we need support as well. We need support with our sisters, our aunts and those related to us who are suffering. They need to know that we are people and we are alive. The only thing that we need is support. We need to be treated like people not people who are dying. We live with them. You'll find that at church they do give us this support."

Ziana, 12 years old: "A child can't go anywhere and every time the child thinks about death. People laugh at them and they face many problems like when going to school all the other children laugh at them. So people always go to the church and at the church they console them all and they pray for them and when they go to church the priests treat them well and tell them that they accept them as theirs and as God's children. They can go every day or every Saturday or Sunday to church to pray and people will treat them in a correct manner."

Sisi, 8 years old: "People should encourage children to go to church – you get more alive with God."

“ Church is a good place where you can teach a lot of people. ”

9.1.2 "People walk out of church when the child comes in"

Many children spoke about being rejected and stigmatised at church. Some do not attend church because they do not have clean clothes or a pair of shoes.

A 17 year old boy: "Churches are different. I used to be at the Zion Church. Then I realized that there are many problems that I am dealing with. You know at Zion people share? There was this man who asked how can I be left to attend the Zion church when they know that I have HIV. How can they let me touch their small children? The woman who used to sit next to me came to tell me what the Bishop was saying. So when it was my turn to preach, I told them I know about what they said, and that was my last day at church. And I told them I do not know AIDS to be a contagious disease. Then I left. I went to another church. That's where I got more strength, more power. The music was powerful. So churches are different."

“ A girl who's HIV+ went to a church. When people saw her the congregation went out one by one. ”

Lumka, 13 years old: "When I go to church, I think the people are speaking behind me, so I feel embarrassed to go."

Sefale, 8 years old: "People walk out of church when the child comes in. In my area a girl who's HIV+ went to a church. When people saw her the congregation went out one by one."

Thalani, 14 years old: "In churches people with HIV/AIDS are not welcomed. They say church is the place to preach about the name of God, not HIV/AIDS, because no one asked you to go to get AIDS. People believe that when you have AIDS you are a bad person. You were sleeping with many men without using a condom. People who have HIV/AIDS feel left out because people don't accept them, they blame them."

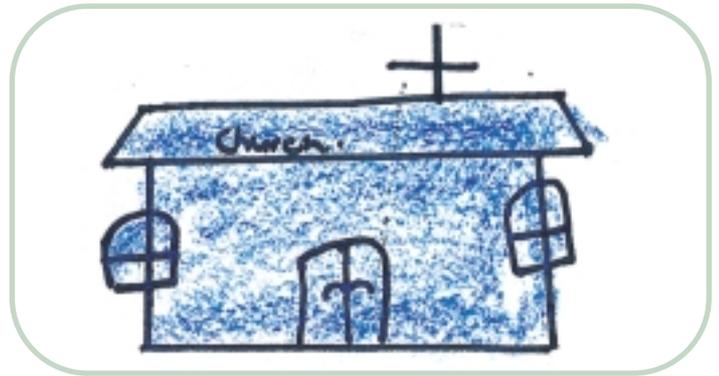
Nolwando, 18 years old: "Sometimes you do not feel like going to church because people will discriminate against you. In some churches they think AIDS is a sin."

“ Preachers don't want to preach about AIDS. ”

9.1.3 “Most people believe in the preacher...they believe he is a man of God”

The children saw the actions and attitudes of the pastors as central to addressing the negative attitudes of congregations. If religious leaders are not supportive of HIV-affected people, the children felt that congregations would continue to discriminate.

Nthabiseng, 16 years old: “Preachers don't want to preach about AIDS. They don't want to tell people or to encourage them to stop discriminating. That is why I hate to go to church on Sunday. Most people who go to church are not supportive and they don't have love. Most of the people, they believe in the preacher because they believe that he is the man of God. People who teach people about AIDS they must not focus only on schools, they should go to churches, or visit house to house to find out whether people are well informed about AIDS or not. They only go to schools. This is no longer useful because we have lots of old people in our area. I know that we are facing the challenge in our churches because they don't believe that talking about AIDS in the church is good. It sounds like you teach people about sex but it is not true because our people, they are dying everyday in front of us. We can't take it anymore. They said church is supposed to praise the name of God, not AIDS.”



The children emphasised the importance of speaking about HIV/AIDS in churches and spoke about the positive role that religious leaders can play in the fight against AIDS. They called for information and for education in churches, to dispel the myths and misconceptions surrounding HIV/AIDS and to address the associated discrimination.

Tebo, 15 years old: “In our church we are lucky because we have a good preacher who always talks about HIV/AIDS. He tells people about this challenge. He encourages them to be supportive and to care about each other so that they can face this challenge.”

“ The more he [the preacher] talks about it, the more people start to be free to help you in different ways and to learn lots of things about their disease. ”

“ It is okay for people to sympathise but we need support as well - at church they do give us this support. ”



Morene, 14 years old: “Church is a good place where you can teach a lot of people. It can be easy to invite people to attend workshops so that they can learn lots of things about HIV/AIDS. People don’t come if you invite them to other places. I believe in the church they can come easily. If the preacher can ask them they will come, because most of the people they love him.”

Delani, 16 years old: “I am also lucky to have a good preacher like this one. He is very supportive. He knows more about HIV/AIDS. He keeps on talking about it so that people can accept us. Even if it is hard, he tries his level best to help us. The more he talks about it the more people start to be free to help you in different ways and to learn lots of things about their disease.”

9.2 Conclusion

The children’s shared experiences reflect the important role that religious institutions can and do play in the lives of HIV-affected children. However, they also highlight the lack of understanding of HIV on the part of many church leaders. This is particularly worrying when one considers that church leaders can have a profound influence on the attitudes and actions of community members in their congregation. Religious institutions have a central role to play in the fight against AIDS and in supporting vulnerable children and families.

The children’s experiences highlight the need for an education campaign targeting religious leaders and encouraging acceptance, non-discrimination and support in religious institutions. The children called for discussions around HIV and AIDS to be included in sermons and for churches to provide workshops on HIV/AIDS education, prevention and care.