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## A Culture of Death

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### *Poverty and HIV/AIDS*

The hand of the Lord came upon me and he brought me out by the spirit of the Lord and set me down in the middle of a valley; it was full of bones. He led me around them; there were very many lying in the valley, and they were very dry.

He said to me, "Mortal can these bones live?" I answered, "O Lord God, you know." . . . They say, "Our bones are dried up, and our hope is lost; we are cut off completely."

**(Ezekiel 37:1–3, 11b)**

### **When Death Is All Around Us: The Valley of Death**

"UROMBO UROYI HUNOPARADZA" is a Shona saying that means, "Poverty is poison; it kills or destroys." Poverty and HIV/AIDS have proven to be deadly partners in causing horrendous evil all around the world. The combination of poverty, a dead economy, the HIV/AIDS pandemic, plus the collision of cultures, has caused much suffering and havoc in many indigenous contexts, especially in Zimbabwe. Even before the age of HIV/AIDS, poverty everywhere has always been one of the worst enemies to humanity. The mixture of poverty and HIV/AIDS is a sure death sentence to poor people. In this chapter, I introduce some of the major indigenous contexts such as Africa face, with major reference to Zimbabwe. The problems introduced here are not the only ones, but are among the major contributing factors to the suffering of the people

of Zimbabwe. I do realize that the issues presented in this book may be more complicated than the way they are stated; however, common sense will show that the issues presented are key to the overwhelming suffering experienced in Zimbabwe. The main problems noted are poverty and a poor economy due to corruption, HIV/AIDS, and a collision of cultures. All these problems are interrelated, and their combination has produced bleak conditions for the people and for the future of the country. Case studies will illustrate the problems Zimbabwe is facing. The following example from my own firsthand experience shows the suffering taking place due to poverty and HIV/AIDS.

In 2004 I was home in Zimbabwe with my mother. She told me that one of our neighbors we were very close to, Mai Madube, had just died of AIDS. Growing up, I had known both this woman and her husband as a very strong, dedicated Christian couple. When my mother told me she had died of AIDS, my response was, “She couldn’t have died of AIDS; they were a very strong Christian couple; one wouldn’t expect this from such a couple.” My mother looked at me with disbelief. She read my mind. She said, “Even strong Christians with good values are dying of AIDS, my son. You have been in America too long; you read, see, and believe all the lies they tell you on TV that all people in Africa are dying of AIDS because of extramarital sex and sexual promiscuity. Yes, there are some who are dying because of these affairs, but that is not the whole story. I don’t know how many people we have buried so far, who died of HIV/AIDS, who did not engage in these behaviors at all.” She went on to say that Mai Madube did not die of AIDS because she engaged in extramarital affairs; her husband did not either. “She did not die of AIDS,” my mother said, “but died of poverty and a mother’s love.”

“You see, Mai Madube’s son, Tatenda, contracted HIV/AIDS. How? Nobody seems to know. Tatenda had a big open bleeding wound on his foot that would not heal. The mother had to dress this wound every day. Some people told her she would get AIDS because she was touching the open wound with her bare hands. She knew about gloves, but because of poverty she could not afford to buy gloves. Madube’s family had to think of putting food on the table first before they could think about buying gloves. Others even wondered how she had a stomach not to loathe and be averse to taking care of her son, who had a wound that smelled like gangrene—a situation many believed he brought on himself.

“Mai Madube vowed that as long as her son lived, she would love him and treat him like a person. She did not want him to experience a lonely death because of this horrendous disease. She took care of her son for almost six months, and it is during that time she contracted the disease. She had some blisters that opened up from weeding her garden, and yet she had continued to take care of Tatenda. She washed her hands all the time, as is the advice, but she still caught the disease. “For us who knew Mai Madube and have seen this type of thing happening many times, Mai Madube did not die of AIDS; she died of poverty and a mother’s love.”

My mother went on to share that at her age of seventy, she had never experienced such death and suffering as she had witnessed in these last two decades. “The person who invented HIV/AIDS will never enter heaven,” she said. “This is the genocide of genocides, and he or she knew well to put HIV in poor countries where one can ‘smell poverty,’ where there is no medicines and the necessary material to take care of the infected. I think the person really wanted to wipe out all the poor people from the face of the earth so the rich can then come and take over the lands,” she said. “When one walks the streets you meet all these young children without parents. Whoever thought a twelve-year-old ‘with milk still coming out of his nose,’ could be a head of a household? I pray to the Lord to put a stop to this unnecessary suffering.”

### **The Poor and an Economy under Siege**

The above conversation with my mother has stayed with me, and it helped me to ask tough questions as I traveled around the country doing workshops with pastors on issues of HIV/AIDS. It is true there are people who are dying from having been infected by HIV because of infidelity or prostitution, and I will give examples of such situations as well. However, there are so many forgotten faces of women and children who have been innocently infected and affected. We usually don’t hear about them since, as my mother said, the story we hear of from the “Western scientific research and media” is that most Africans who are dying of HIV/AIDS have acquired it through sexual means. Some even claim that the reason there is much spread of HIV in Africa, especially, is because Africans cannot control their sexual desires or urges. This

is far from the truth. It is the combination of poverty and HIV that is continuing to produce horrendous suffering.

Poverty did not invent itself; it is a human creation. One looks around the world to find people who are literally dying of obesity while others in a bordering country are dying or starving because they cannot find a little piece of bread to make it through the day. Due to poverty, there is malnutrition, lack of medication, and poor health-care systems. In many of the developing countries around the world, people are dying from diseases that could easily be treated elsewhere. The poor suffer and die, while the rich and their government officials can drive or fly across borders to get health care and everyday commodities.

In an indigenous context such as Zimbabwe, it is not only those who are HIV/AIDS infected who are crying out, as did the children of Israel during Ezekiel's period of prophecy (Ezek 37:1–3, 11b), but it is also those who are affected. If it is not HIV/AIDS killing the people; it is the poor economy and drought conditions; if it is not the economy and drought, it is the collision of cultural values destroying and breaking down the traditional family social structural support systems, causing misery each and every day. Many people in the country of Zimbabwe are losing hope, and others have literally left the country to seek greener pastures or simply survival. Others are praying and asking the question, why are people continuing to suffer under such conditions while other humans, and God, are watching and not coming to their aid? "Why, God?" they ask, "Is there hope in the current African country of Zimbabwe?" The country has become the valley of death, with not much relief in sight. There are little glimmers of hope, and yet the picture of the future seems to be getting gloomier.

It is generally agreed that it takes about one US \$1 per day to feed each hungry child from developing countries of the world. We have people with billions of dollars sitting in their bank accounts (waiting for a rainy day) while children are dying for a piece of bread. The world is watching, and there is plenty to go around, but the contagious disease of global greediness continues. At the local level in Zimbabwe, we have similar occurrences of greediness and selfishness. The government itself set up an anticorruption commission because of corrupt leaders.

The government of Zimbabwe has demonstrated its resolve and political will to effectively combat corruption through the

creation of the Ministry of State Enterprises, Anti-Corruption & Anti-Monopolies. The ministry is dedicated to fight corruption through systems of integrity that ensure transparency and fairness both in the private and public sectors. The Ministry is charged with the responsibility of fighting corruption that impedes economic and social development and monitor restrictive practices and unfair business practices especially the trends in mergers and acquisitions. The ministry also administers the Anti-Corruption Commission Act 2004, which provides for the setting up of the Anti-Corruption Commission. The Anti-Corruption Commission is an independent, powerful and high profile body, which provides mechanisms to investigate corruption at all levels in Zimbabwe.<sup>1</sup>

We can't keep blaming the West for all the suffering in the country without paying attention to the corruption occurring under our noses in this country. Corruption is destroying the economy. No one wants to invest in a country where corruption is rampant. Even the president, Robert Mugabe, himself has recognized it. Recently, he was quoted in the state run newspaper:

President Mugabe has castigated some senior Zanu-PF [Zimbabwe National Union-Patriotic Front] officials who were abusing their authority to amass properties and wealth, saying the ruling party might be forced to embark on a campaign to weed them out. Addressing the 66th Ordinary Session of the Zanu-PF Central Committee at the ruling party's headquarters in Harare yesterday, Cde Mugabe said some senior party officials were abusing their authority by acquiring wealth for self-aggrandizement. The President said some were seeking to evict ordinary people who had been legally allocated farms while others were demanding first preference in the allocation of business stands or houses built under Operation Garikai. "We shall now be bound to have a campaign of cleansing the Central Committee. You are not being fair; the numbers are growing. Some of you are being crookish even in leadership positions."<sup>2</sup>

The gap between the poor and the rich keeps widening each day, the dollar value tumbles, inflation is soaring, and the prices of everyday commodities skyrocket. To use my mother's words, one can "smell

1. Ministry of State Enterprises, Anti-Corruption & Anti-Monopolies Ministry Profile, "Fight Corruption."

2. "No to Abuse of Power."

poverty.” In fact, most of the people can no longer afford the basic commodities of bread and milk.

Bread is now a luxury to many families after retailers increased its price again. . . . Workers at a city bakery attributed the sharp increase to the price of wheat, which rose from \$900 000 a ton to more than \$12 million. The Grain Marketing Board is buying wheat from farmers at about \$6 million a ton. “That is the only way we can remain viable because the price of wheat was also increased. There are also chances of the bread prices being increased again before the end of the year,” said a worker who requested anonymity. Efforts to get a comment from the National Bakers Association chairman, Mr. Burombo Mudumo, were fruitless as he was said to be out of office.

However, residents who spoke to Chronicle said bread was now beyond their reach and they would now have to do without it. “I have since stopped buying bread because it is quite expensive. It is better to have isitshwala (thick porridge) in the morning than to have bread and tea,” said Mr. Mehluli Ncube.

President Mugabe last week lambasted profiteers for scuttling the Government’s efforts in turning around the fortunes of the economy.<sup>3</sup>

In this circumstance, no one is going to think about buying gloves if they are taking care of someone who is HIV infected. If one cannot even afford to buy bread and milk, how could one even think about buying basic health-care materials? Again, it is not just a question of immorality that HIV/AIDS has spread like wildfire in Sub-Saharan Africa and in most of the indigenous poor countries; HIV/AIDS has just added fuel to the fire that was already burning. As I argued earlier, before HIV/AIDS showed up on the scene, poverty was there, and it had already killed many people.

The Zimbabwean government made things worse also by allowing illegal land invasions. Much productive farmland is just laying unfarmed. This worsened the economic situation in Zimbabwe. The land issue in Zimbabwe is complicated, but at the same time, the government, from year 2000, mishandled the situation for the sake of buying votes. Land was given to people who did not have the means, and some knew little about how to farm the land. Other people ended up with two or more farms (lying in waste) while others did not get any land.

3. Chitemba, “Bread Prices Go Up Again.”

In other words, some of the economic crisis was self-created by those who drove away the farmers (especially by those who drove away some of the white farmers) who were being very productive.

### **The Ugly Face of Poverty: Prostitution and “Small Houses”**

Today, with more women finding their way into the city to work, some reach for the old trade of prostitution to make ends meet. The situation has worsened with the very poor economy and with the heads of households dead from the HIV/AIDS pandemic. Many times people miss the point that what is forcing these young women or single mothers into prostitution is poverty. I remember that one prostitute interviewed on Zimbabwean television, when asked why she was into prostitution and if she was afraid of catching HIV and dying from AIDS replied, “Which way is not dying, dying of hunger or dying of AIDS? I have been doing this for some time now, and I am still alive. I would rather die of AIDS than die of hunger.” This does not justify this woman’s behavior or thinking processes, but it says much about what poverty can force people to do. The economic crisis in the country has caused people to resort to lifestyles worse than ever thought of before. In another situation, a single mother was noted as saying that she would rather die of HIV/AIDS while trying to feed her children than to watch her children die of hunger.

The situation in Zimbabwe has created a culture of death. Some see this culture of death mentality slipping into the minds of the younger generation. You hear some of the youth say such statements as, “I might as well enjoy myself since death is just around the corner.” I remember watching an interview on TV of a prostitute in Harare. When she was asked whether she used condoms to protect herself from being infected with HIV, her response was, “Have you ever eaten sweets [candy] in their wrapper? Why would I want it that way? If I am going to have sex, then I am not going to have that plastic [condom]; I want to enjoy it.” For this woman, enjoyment was more important than to be alive.

As I stated earlier, we have two main groups of people in Zimbabwe today: the very rich and the very poor. The rich are exploiting the poor, and the poor have nowhere to turn other than to self-abuse or to literally sell themselves to those who have. There is no way one would look

at some of the scenarios that have developed in Zimbabwe today and not point a finger to poverty. A new phenomenon has developed in Zimbabwe called the “small house.” This is where a man will have two women, the wife at home and another—a mistress—living in another part of the city. The mistress or girlfriend has been nicknamed the “small house.” In the West, this phenomenon is known as having an affair outside of marriage.

Some of the women (mistresses) who are willing to be involved in the “small house” lifestyles are those who are trying to make ends meet economically. However, others do it as professional prostitutes. For some, the husband’s death forces them into these situations in order to maintain the family—they have mouths to feed and no other means to make a living. In some situations, women are forced by their bosses to compromise their values in order to cater to the welfare of the family. At the end of the day, the sad story is that some of these bosses, or rich men, end up infecting these women with HIV, since they usually have many sexual partners. They are to blame in many instances where the wives of these bosses also die of HIV/AIDS. There have been several court cases reported of wives beating or stabbing a “small house” mistress, and then literally hanging herself afterwards. The following are examples of stories from local newspapers in Zimbabwe.

Yesterday, Mateyo appeared before Justice Yunus Omerjee, charged with murder. Mateyo, however, denied the charge, arguing that she had no intention of killing Lembani when she stabbed her in the heat of the moment. Mateyo claimed Lembani had incensed her after she caught her red-handed emerging from a nearby bush accompanied by her husband. She admitted that she knew about the affair before the tragedy. “When I asked my husband to explain where he was coming from with her, he rudely responded. Lembani, who earlier on had several times vowed to continue with the affair, was also provocative to me,” she said. Venrandah Munyoro, for the State, however urged the court to convict Mateyo of murder with actual intent, arguing that she had planned to physically eliminate Lembani over the alleged infidelity. While cross-examining Mateyo, Munyoro said the accused had threatened to kill Lembani before she finally delivered the fatal blow. “I put it to you that you actually planned the murder. You went to her (Lembani’s) house screaming at the top of your voice that you would murder her, which you later did,” the prosecutor submitted. . . . The tragic



case comes against the background of a concerted campaign by the political hierarchy, with Vice-President Joice Mujuru lashing out at the proliferation of “small houses”, a street term used to refer to mistresses. There is a growing trend of cases involving cheating husbands. Most of the cases end up in violence and sometimes in the death of one of the partners.<sup>4</sup>

The situation of the “small houses” or “affairs” has even become a concern for the government. What I see as a problem here is that the government is focusing on the behaviors rather than what is causing this type of activities to persist. The economic situation is the main problem that is resulting in some of these women’s engaging in this conduct. It does not mean that the problem of “small houses” will totally be eradicated even with a better economy, but it will be much less prevalent and probably left mainly to those who lead the life of prostitution. Another local newspaper, the *Chronicle*, reports this “small house” incident that happened in Victoria Falls.

In a fit of rage, a well known Victoria Falls businesswoman allegedly severely assaulted and stripped naked her husband’s “small house,” after catching the lovebirds arm-in-arm. The two were coming from the mistress’s lodgings. The incident happened on Tuesday morning. Mrs. Menela Moyo, who runs restaurants, a bottle store and other businesses in the resort town, allegedly assaulted and tore off the clothes of one Mercy, whom she was accusing of going out with her husband. Sources said Moyo’s husband had since moved out of the marital home and was staying with the mistress. Contacted for comment, Mrs. Moyo (38) admitted assaulting her husband’s lover. She said the 20-year-old hairdresser had ruined her marriage since her 40-year-old husband had stopped fending for his family. “I got a tip-off that my husband was dating this girl and I decided to make investigations until I caught them. But what really pained me more was the fact that my husband is wasting the family wealth on her and only last month, he sold five of my beasts just to spend money on the girl,” said the fuming Mrs. Moyo. The husband could not be reached for comment, as his phone was not reachable. Police in Victoria Falls confirmed the incident.<sup>5</sup>

4. “Small House’ Killed.”
5. “Woman Strips ‘Small House.’”

The few instances above are an indication that the issue of “small houses” has become an issue in destroying marriages as well as a problem in the spread of HIV. Men who do this can become a danger to the woman they are married to as well as to the “small house” woman in the spread of the disease.

A 26-year-old Bulawayo woman hanged herself with an electrical cord after discovering that her husband had an extramarital affair, Chronicle learnt yesterday. . . . A relative of the deceased woman, who did not want her name to be disclosed, said the woman, Anna Ngwenya, of Gwabalanda suburb, hanged herself on Saturday night in the toilet of her matrimonial home while her husband was asleep. “The couple, which had two children, had been having serious domestic problems with the wife accusing her husband of being unfaithful,” she said. “Things came to a head on Tuesday last week when the husband’s ‘small house’ (girlfriend), with whom he has a child, visited the family. I am told that the husband spent two nights with the ‘small house’ in a spare bedroom ignoring his wife.” The relative said that this infuriated the wife who threatened to beat up her husband’s girlfriend. “As a result of the quarrel in the family, the girlfriend eventually left on Thursday, but the situation remained tense,” she said. On Saturday night, the woman sneaked out of the bedroom and hanged herself. When the husband woke up at night, he realized that his wife was not there and he started searching for her. “He found her hanging in the toilet and alerted neighbors who reported the matter to the police.”<sup>6</sup>

I am not arguing that all small houses will disappear as soon as the economy recovers. However, situations such as these have become so prevalent because of poverty and a bad economy. Sometimes people end up engaging in such behaviors to take care of their children; however, others are just simply trying to survive.

### **Another Ugly Face of Poverty: “Sugar Daddies”**

Besides the situation of “small houses,” we also have another problem—that of “sugar daddies.” Usually these are rich men, many of them married, who cheat on their wives by privately having affairs with younger women. The key issue is they are rich and have money to literally pay

6. Chuma, “Woman Hangs Self over Small House.”

the young girls to sleep with them. The intention of these men is not to marry the girls but just to have a “good time.” Some pay the girls to have sex in return for payment of school fees, clothes, gifts, and other luxuries.

Due to poverty, many women and young girls who sleep with these men need money to survive and end up contracting the deadly virus. As stated earlier, many of the orphans who are left to fend for the family have the burden of making sure their younger brothers and sisters have food to eat. They are forced by the situation to enter into relationships with these “sugar daddies.” A United Nations reporter interviewed one of these girls, Tracy Bunjwali:

She’s a sex worker, but not many passers-by would suspect that the slight figure standing in a narrow street opposite a nightclub in Zimbabwe’s gold mining town of Kwekwe is also a university student. Tracy Bunjwali, a second-year business studies scholar and part-time prostitute, says her biggest fear is that she might bump into somebody she knows while out on the streets waiting to be taken to a nearby hotel-cum-brothel. She has little choice, she says. Orphaned during the last term of high school two years ago, the 23-year-old has to support a brother and sister still at school after her parent [*sic*] died of AIDS-related illnesses.

Despite a government-run education assistance programme for vulnerable children and those orphaned by AIDS, the grant falls well short of needs in a country weighed down by triple-digit inflation. “My uncle, a municipal general hand, took us in when both our parents died, despite that he was struggling to feed, clothe, and send his own six children to school,” Bunjwali said. “I don’t come here often. I only do so when hard times befall the family,” she explained. “I have to take the risk so that my brother and sister remain at school. . . . This is something I never imagined I would do,” said Bunjwali. “I am aware of the risks and have decided to take a routine monthly visit to the voluntary counseling centre for an AIDS test.” She has been tested three times so far, and all have been negative. “I have overcome the fear of visiting the centre,” she added.<sup>7</sup>

If it were not for poverty and HIV/AIDS, one would not find a girl such as Tracy on the streets. She is taking this risk in order to take care of her brother and sister and to help them go to school. The parents’ deaths left her as the breadwinner since the uncle’s income could not

7. PlusNews, “ZIMBABWE: AIDS Orphans and Vulnerable Children.”

support all of them. I pray that Tracy does not get infected, finishes school, and finds a job that will support the rest of the family. The added complication to her situation is that with the economy so bad, even if she were to graduate, it won't be easy for her to find a decent job to support herself, her brother, and her sister.

Tracy and her siblings were very fortunate that the uncle took them in, even though the uncle's income could not sustain them. Many of the children who are orphaned by HIV/AIDS end up on the street with the extended family leaving them to fend for themselves. This never used to be the case in this traditional indigenous culture.

A situation such as Tracy's is not isolated to a student who prostitutes to care for younger siblings. There are many reports of students at university campuses (both male and female) resorting to prostitution in order to make ends meet. The following is an example of such a report:

First, students, like millions of their countrymen, are going hungry on campuses. Universities and colleges simply cannot provide enough food for them. The government is broke and the meager allowance it doles out to students is not enough to supplement the miserable food provided, let alone to buy books. Grant payments are frequently made months late because the government is cash-strapped and inefficient. Second, students feel they have to pass at all costs, even if it means sleeping around with lecturers. According to a social studies lecturer at Harare's University of Zimbabwe—where sexual harassment of women students is rife—this has turned the whole concept of manhood upside down. “Young women at campuses want men who can provide for them,” she said. “They want men who can supplement the little food provided on campus. They want men who can take them to movies. They want men who can pay to have their hair done at the hairdressers. They want men who make them feel like ladies.” Such men are known as “sugar daddies” and are deeply resented by other male students. The social studies lecturer recalled a tragic incident not so long ago when an impoverished female first-year undergraduate, Tecla Tom, committed suicide in a student hostel as an apparent way out of entrapment by a “sugar daddy”. She left a note for her husband, which said in part, “It does not matter, Innocent, my husband, the time had come.” When students subsequently went on the rampage against the hold of sugar daddies on women students, 20-year-old science undergraduate Batanayi Madzidzi was beaten up and killed by police.

The massive economic crisis gripping Zimbabwe—with inflation approaching 600 (now 1000) per cent and eighty per cent of the population living below the poverty line—has not spared the education system, and students are the chief victims of the malaise. . . . “Then there is the question of ‘sex for exam and course work marks.’ “They will sleep with female students and pass them without any qualm,” said the social studies academic. “Like everyone else, female students just want to get the hell out of university. They cannot contemplate being failed and having to spend another year at the institutions.” So, she says, it is common practice for female students to have a sugar daddy as well as a regular boyfriend. After finishing college, they quickly want to erase the memory of the sugar daddy and marry the young boyfriend. “But sometimes it is not easy to make the transition from the sugar daddy to the boyfriend because the boyfriend is still a young man struggling to get his feet squarely on the ground,” she continued. Nor are male students exempt from prostitution. They hang around with “sugar mummies”—older women who are either divorced or widowed but who have the means to maintain a “toy boy.” “It is common for older women to drive into campus and pick up these young men. The situation is desperate,” said the social studies lecturer. “Campuses have become the epicenters of the spread of diseases such as AIDS.” The toy boys have become social misfits and rarely socialize with young women of their age. With AIDS rife in Zimbabwe, affecting an estimated quarter of the population aged 15 to 49, their sugar mummies are often HIV-positive, and the boys themselves are left to die lonely deaths from AIDS after the women have passed away.”<sup>8</sup>

The crisis causing all of this is not HIV/AIDS; it is the economic crisis, which is affecting every corner of Zimbabwean society. People are being driven to these behaviors to make ends meet. The system of the extended family has also broken down. The nuclear-family system has replaced the extended family system, especially in the cities where people depend on income based on employment from blue-collar and industrial jobs. We face a culture of *mazvake mazvake*—meaning, “Each person for him- or herself and God for us all,” or “Lift yourself up by your own bootstraps.” In the age of poverty, it is the economically strong who are “running the show,” even though the values they are using to run the show might be a death sentence to the community.

8. Unendoro, “Zimbabwean Students Driven to Prostitution.”