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CHRISTIANITY AND LIFE SKILLS TRAINING OF YOUTH: TOWARDS HIV PREVENTION IN AFRICA

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1. Introduction[1]

Youth as a stage in the development of the human person has drastically changed since the industrial revolution, culminating in the post-war decades. Similar change in Africa, largely since the post-colonial era, is taking place in front of our eyes with accelerating speed. Adolescents are physically maturing earlier due to improved food and health care, while their social maturity has been delayed due to reasons that include prolonged school-based education. The vicious cycle of increased early sexual activity – the spread of HIV/AIDS - the growing number of orphans, street children etc, can also be traced to this factor. Hence efforts towards HIV/AIDS prevention need a larger perspective and a more concerted effort.

> Systematic life skills training can help accompany the youth of Africa in handling this social change, and thus combat HIV/AIDS. What are life-skills? According to UNICEF, life skills:
> refer to a large group of psycho-social and interpersonal skills which can help people make informed decisions, communicate effectively, and develop coping and self-management skills that may help them lead a healthy and productive life. Life skills may be directed toward personal actions and actions toward others, as well as actions to change the surrounding environment to make it conducive to health.[2]

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[1] Sincere thanks to Fr Roy Fosker for his work on this essay to improve its language and style.
[2] http://www.unicef.org/lifeskills/index_7308.html (22/03/07)

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Why should life-skills be taught? How can youth in Africa be reached in order to participate in life skills training? Can schools, governments and NGO's reach their targets without the help of religion? What advantages do religions have over other agents providing life skills training to young people? These are the concerns of this essay.

Religions have their social functions; they are agents of the socialization process of their adherents. Religions play an important role to varying degrees to fulfill, what Abraham Maslow called, the Hierarchy of Human Needs. In Africa, religion still greatly affects social life; and young people are interested in religion. Therefore this essay argues that mainstream religious institutions have a greater role to play in offering Life Skills Training to their young adherents. Focusing on the efforts of Christianity, we should like to point out the advantages that Faith-Based Organizations (FBO) enjoy in their efforts towards HIV prevention. Despite lack of sufficient financial support from prejudiced secular donor agencies, churches have the advantage of easy accessibility to different age groups, especially youth; the commitment of volunteers and service providers that go beyond financial interests, while the presence of personnel and infrastructures even in remote areas add to the other advantages.

The paper concludes by delineating certain strategies in carrying out life skills training among young people. The content of such training needs to aim at knowledge, skills and motivation. Knowledge should be focused on truth about HIV/AIDS without overly prejudicing the facts. Churches also need to be aware of the stereotypes in their truth-claims. Skills are to be built particularly through the use of participatory methods based on experiential learning techniques. FBOs have an edge over other NGOs at the level of motivation, since religion appeals at an intimate level to a religiously oriented person. This opportunity provided by religion has to be tapped effectively in our concerted fight against HIV/AIDS.

2. Social Functions of Religion

2.1 Religion as an Agent of Socialization

Socialization is the interactive process through which an individual learns the basic skills, values, beliefs and behavior pattern of a society. There are several agents that facilitate this process. First among them could be the family, though in today's society the influence of the family is being largely minimized. School and media are gaining the upper hand as agents of socialization. Sociologists agree that, to varying degrees, religion is an agent of socialization. [3] Though in the West, due to the rising secularism the role of religion may be insignificant among a large number of people, in Africa religion still plays an important role, particularly in the transmission of values.

Religion carries out the socialization process of its adherents through the use of three major strategies:[4] social cohesion, social control and emotional support. All agents of socialization may use these strategies, but I think, the third factor is the strongest in religion, especially in traditional societies. Religion, by offering emotional support, helps people to endure suffering and deprivation, while providing answers to ultimate questions - of life, death, suffering, love, etc.

Religion conditions individuals by strengthening their bonds with the group. In this way, religion not only provides a sense of belonging to its adherents, but also steers them into acceptable social behavior. Durkheim found that suicide rates were lowest among those people who had strongest attachment to religious groups. In a critical note he points out that, "Religion modifies the inclination to suicide only to the extent that it prevents [people] from thinking freely."[5] While this may be true, human beings as social animals have no escape from social institutions

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[3] It should be noted that religion is also a major provider of education in the history of the world, and particularly in Africa up to the present day. Through church-based schools religion continues to play its role in socialization.

[4] Cf. Durkheim, 1951; Weber, 1963.

[5] Durkheim, 1951, 375.

that influence their way of thinking and behaving - whether it is the social stratification systems, or media, or religion.

Life skills training is part of the socialization process, and as a an agent of socialization religion has not only the possibility but also the responsibility to offer life skills training especially to its young followers.

2.2. Religion and Hierarchy of Human Needs

Abraham Maslow contends that human beings who manage to fulfill their "basic needs" seek to satisfy "higher needs" which are hierarchically arranged as in a pyramid.[6] He claims that unless the lower need is at least partially fulfilled human beings do not aspire to higher needs. Our contention is that in the history of humanity, religion has played a vital role in the fulfillment of the hierarchy of human needs. Ideally religion is concerned with the human need for transcendence, by paving the way for an experience of the Divine. However, it may fulfill different needs for different people.

a. Humanitarian Action: By providing humanitarian action religion fulfils the physiological needs of people. The word "mission" in the Catholic Church is often identified with a place that offers medical and educational facilities and sometimes even food. For instance, the Catholic Church alone, "thanks to its institutions worldwide, provides 25% of the total care given to HIV/AIDS victims, placing itself among the leading advocates in the field, in particular among the most ubiquitous and best providers of care for the victims."[7] That is why, Peter Piot, Executive Director of UNAIDS, once said, "For years, Roman Catholics have been important providers of competent and compassionate care to people living with HIV infection around the globe."

b. Psychological Function: In the second level of hierarchy Maslow speaks of safety needs. Religion empowers human beings to deal with fear and anxiety. It gives psychological security. Today, for example, some of the Pentecostal prayer sessions provide not only very powerful

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[6] First proposed in his 1943 paper *A Theory of Human Motivation*.
[7] Cf. Cardinal Hummes, 2003.

support for the psychologically wounded but also a therapy, thus fulfilling the psychological needs of individuals.

c. Sense of Belonging: Religion fulfils the human need for identity and belonging. It gives a social identity. It provides a sense of belonging. One may introduce oneself by saying, "I am N.N. and I am a Christian." In this case, one's identity is drawn from one's religion. By providing a community around the adherent, religion offers a support system. This also contributes to fulfilling what Maslow calls, Esteem Needs.

d. Existential Function: Religion provides insight into the meaning of human and cosmic existence. It provides the "logos" of one's existence.[8] As Viktor Frankl wrote so vividly in his book, the "logos" gives the purpose for one's existence. This meaning and purpose in turn, pushes one to be proactive even amidst the struggles of life. Religion answers certain human intellectual questions: Who is God? Why suffering (problem of evil)? How did the universe come into being (Question of origin of world)? In this way cognitive needs are met.

e. Self-Actualization: Maslow speaks of two higher needs of growth; first among them, the need for self-actualization. Self-actualization is the instinctual need of humans to make the most of their abilities and to strive to be the best they can be. Self- actualization is expressed, among other aspects, in the ability to accept the different realities of life, in creativity, in a holistic moral system, in a capacity to discern and make objective judgments, etc. Good religion is in fact concerned about all these aspects of self-actualization.

f. Transcendental Function: Religion traces the path for "Supreme Realization", as Eastern religions term it. Or in simple words, religion enables people to touch God, to cater to the spiritual need of the human soul, and to be as one with their creator. William James calls this "Religious Experience".[9]

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[8] Frankl, 1993.
[9] James, 1971.

In brief, religion can enter into almost every aspect of human life. While in the West the influence of religion might have been minimized, particularly since the French Revolution (1789), in Africa religion still has substantial influence in Society. Therefore, in the present context in Africa, religion can and must play a vital role in life the skills training of young people.

2.3. Role of Religion in African Society Today

John Mbiti, a renowned African ethno-philosopher, asserts that, "Africans are notoriously religious.... Religion permeates into all the departments of life so fully that it is not easy or possible always to isolate it."[10] There may be signs of rising secularism, especially in the cities, as some authors claim, "far from the African being inherently, if not 'notoriously' religious, secularism is rapidly becoming a more generalized phenomenon in the African continent..."[11] However, the level of secularism in Africa is in no way comparable to the levels that exist in Western Europe. The majority of new adherents to the Catholic Church, for instance, are found in Africa. Religion and religious feeling still occupy a central role in the life of the African, even if an individual may not officially practice religion. This is true even among the educated urban elite, especially the young.

Besides, as Tony Blair *et al* affirm in *Our Common Interest* (March 2005), "Religious beliefs, movements and networks [in Africa] cross the lines between material and spiritual experience. They affect all aspects of how people live, including the social, economic and political parts of their lives. Indeed, many Africans voluntarily associate themselves with religious networks for purposes that go beyond a strictly religious aspect."[12] Africans more easily relate to the family, clan, tribe and religion than to the State. After all, the concept of nation state is hardly fifty years old in most parts of Sub-Saharan Africa. The State as a concept may not exist in the minds of people, and much less the State as a service provider. The document quoted above also cites a telling

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[10] Mbiti, 1969, 1.
[11] Shorter/ Onyango, 1997, 13.
[12] Blair, 2005, 33.

example: in the Congo (DRC), where in the absence of a working national postal service people leave letters in Catholic churches to be transmitted to other parts of the Congo, since the Church is the only reasonably coherent nationwide infrastructure. The document concludes its observation about religion in Africa thus:

> Where nation building is one of the greatest challenges facing African governments, there are lessons to be drawn from the experiences and different forms of identity offered by religion. What is overwhelmingly clear is that, in the words of Michael Walton, 'religion can be a force for good or bad in African development, but can't be ignored.[13]

This being the case, religions especially the Christian churches, need to acknowledge the tremendous potential that they have in terms of their influence on the African society. In this context, the concern of this essay is to assert the critical role that churches can play in accompanying young people towards handling the current social changes, by offering them life skills.

3. Changing Youth Reality: Need for Life Skills

Adolescents experience physical maturity earlier due to improved food and health care, while their social maturity has been delayed due to reasons that include prolonged school-based education.

In 1900 the average girl started to menstruate at about the age of 19. Now, with better food and health care, menstruation frequently starts shortly after a girl's 10th birthday. In 1900, most boys were sufficiently well established in a job by the age of 20 that they could afford to marry and start a family. The gap between childhood and becoming a fully responsible adult was measured in months rather than years; but not now, not in the year 2001.[14]

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[13] Walton, 2004 - cited in Tony Blair, 2005, 129

[14] Abbott, accessed via www.21learn.org

In the year 2001 and beyond, we confront a group of people who are not children, yet they are not ready to take up responsibility (or at least the adults do not trust them to take it up). From speaking about "adolescence" in a more psychological sense, we spoke of "teenagers"[13] in the later part of 20th century, and today we just speak of 'youth'. In other words, with industrialization and urbanization adolescence has been prolonged.

With this new situation of youth come also new problems like:

- The age of taking up full-time jobs in urban set-ups has been largely delayed. So some young people, especially those in rural cultures, are married and considered adults, while their counterparts largely in urban cultures are still in school and considered dependent children. This leaves the young people hanging in a balance between childhood and adulthood for over 15 years. This also raises serious questions in time management; they don't have a role in society that is in any sense useful.

- Due to early onset of puberty and delayed marriage, many young people are becoming sexually active and some have become parents themselves, without having settled down in terms of a job and marriage. Consider the predicament of a girl who reaches puberty at the age of 12 and is married at 26, as compared to a girl (in the 1900s) who reached puberty at the age of 19 and was married the next day! According to Tanzania Demographic & Health Survey of 1996, for instance, the median age at first intercourse is 16.9 years.[16] The TANESA survey of 1997 on sexual exploitation of schoolgirls in selected schools in the Mwanza region holds that 75.8% of class 7 students had had sex;

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[13] 'Teenager' is a term that entered the Oxford English Dictionary only in 1954, and refers to ages between 13 and 19. See, Abbott as above.

[16] Tanzania HIV/AIDS Indicator Survey of 2003-04 has shown a increase in this age (to 18 years). This is a positive sign.

and by age 16 years, 80.1% had had sex.[17] Consequently, besides facing the economic brunt of the situation, young people are also exposed to health risks associated with sexual activity, including exposure to STDs, and HIV/AIDS.

Hence the efforts towards HIV/AIDS prevention need a larger perspective and a more comprehensive approach. Systematic life skills training can help accompany the youth of Africa in handling this change, and thus combating HIV/AIDS.

3.1 Life Skill Training for Young People

Why all this enthusiasm about life skills suddenly? For one, modern society is changing at a fast rate; and the rate of change itself is accelerating.

The first to be affected by these changes is young people.[18] Secondly, in traditional society life was much simpler, things moved at a slower pace, and a young person needed many fewer social skills. Moreover, traditional African societies had a system of teaching these skills to young people, especially during the period preceding initiation rites. These days, when life has become more complex, initiation rites are often reduced to mere hospital procedures and thus the opportunity for life skills training is being lost.

That is why formal education is called upon to fill this gap. The Delors Commission, while speaking of the four pillars of education, said: "In addition to learning to do a job or work, it should, more generally entail the acquisition of a competence that enables people to deal with a variety of situations, often unforeseeable...."[19] And according to the report of CONFINTEA V, "the objectives of youth and adult education are: a) to develop the autonomy and the sense of responsibility of people and communities; b) to reinforce the capacity to deal with the transformations

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[17] See, Kuleana, *The State of Education in Tanzania – Crisis and Opportunity*, September 1999, 59.

[18] Cf. Selvam, 2006, 65-71.

[19] Delors, 1996. The four pillars of education are "Learning to know", "Learning to do", "Learning to be", and "Learning to Live together".

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taking place in the economy, in culture and in society as a whole, and c) to promote coexistence, tolerance and the informed and creative participation of citizens in their communities, in short to enable people and communities to take control of their destiny and society in order to face the challenges ahead."[20]

3.2 Religion as a Life Skills Trainer

Life skills training for young people can be carried out through the agents of socialization: family, school, peer group, media and religion. Family's influence on the young person is inversely proportionate to the age of the individual. Therefore the influence of the family on youth would be less as compared to its impact on children.[21] Besides, with the growing number of families that are breaking up or families that are single-parented, this influence is greatly reduced. In this situation youth may not be able to learn ideal social behavior from their families.

Schools do have increasing influence on the youth of East Africa. Especially with the exaggeration of the importance of boarding schools,[22] youth are prone to be influenced by their peers and the curricular and extracurricular activities of the school in their socialization process. However, in an exam-oriented, curriculum-based school system there is hardly any time for extracurricular activities or for life skills training. Besides, youth in secondary schools in Africa are often a minority of their age group. For instance, in Tanzania, only 8.46% percent of youth are in secondary schools.[23]

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[20] UNESCO, 1997, §7. CONFINTEA is the UNESCO International Conference on Adult Education.

[21] According to ILO, a child is one below the age of 18; and youth is aged between 15 and 24.

[22] Boarding schools are increasing at a fast rate in East Africa due to the fact that schools are not found within the reach of youth. Boarding schools seem to be a good alternative to inadequate study facility at home and the emotional stress caused by problematic parents.

[23] The United Republic of Tanzania, 2002 Population and Housing Census.

Media could be another means of imparting life-skills training. Among African youth radio has a wider use. Skills, including life skills, are learnt by repetitive exercise; in this aspect the impact of media can be weak, since radio, for instance, provides only information and no opportunity to practice life skills. How then can youth in Africa be reached for Life Skills Training? Religion, still having a great influence on African youth, as argued above, can be a viable locus for imparting life skills.

Various researches have shown that religion does have a significant influence on the social behavior of young people. For instance, "an adolescent with high levels of religiosity would have a more conventional perspective, implicating moral concern that functions as a personal control against engaging in behavior that would lead to pregnancy. Individuals who attend religious services frequently may have sexual behavior consistent with religious teaching."[24] Therefore, religion can be a major player in the life skills training of young people, especially in Africa.

4. Role of Christianity in Life Skills Training: Some Strategies

On the one hand, governments and donor agencies need to appreciate the above fact that "especially where the state is perceived as unable to deliver, religious networks appear to be gaining a new attractiveness. Contrary to apparent assumptions in the 20th century that religion was in inevitable decline worldwide, people in Africa are converting in large numbers to Christianity and Islam."[25] On the other hand, religions need to realize their unique role in providing life skills training to their young followers and thus to control the spread of HIV/AIDS and so to enhance human life.

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[24] Davis, 2002, 339.
[25] Blair, 2005, 127-28.

Now, can religions change young people's behavior just by preaching from the pulpit? They need also well-proven strategies. We shall list here certain strategies and methods that can make religions' efforts in life skills training among youth people effective.

Churches have tremendous accessibility to youth. While real statistics are lacking, it is estimated that over 70% of churchgoers in the Catholic Church in Tanzania are below the age of 30. But life skills cannot be taught from the pulpit. It is said that, children remember,

> 20% of what they hear
> 30% of what they see
> 50% of what they see and hear
> 70% of what they say themselves, and
> 90% of what they do.

That is why, the old Chinese proverb goes, "When I hear, I forget; when I see, I remember; and when I do, I learn." If this is the case, church liturgy itself has to become experiential and other opportunities to gather youth need to be sought.

4.1 Experiential Liturgy

Liturgy is the first tool of accessibility that the churches have in reaching out to youth. When they are children, if liturgy makes an impact on them in such a way that it has something to offer which their discos and social functions cannot, then those youths who are attracted to church liturgy. Liturgy by its nature is a social event, and as such elements of socialization are not out of place. Liturgy serves to fulfill the social and transcendental needs of the person. Liturgy not only traces the path to a God-experience, but it becomes a moment of deepening of faith - that is, catechesis - and can also teach a person how to be an effective member of society. Thus liturgy can become an opportunity to teach life skills. Many churches are experimenting with liturgies that are exclusively meant for young people.

However, to achieve these ends liturgy should have the following characteristics:

- Existential: liturgy should not be far-fetched from real life. Life has to be brought to liturgy and liturgy back to life. The theme of liturgy is to be relevant to the present needs of young people.
- Creative: young people get easily bored. They are constantly looking for new experiences. Liturgy also needs to offer them new experiences, which would take them to a deeper level of self-awareness, to a higher thirst for God and to a more effective way of dealing with others.
- Experiential: liturgy has to become experiential for young people rather than being the mere repetition of a ritual. Liturgy has to be participatory. Young people become part of the liturgy rather than remain mere spectators.
- Profound: Young people have an eye for whatever is profound. Most young people may not appear serious, but they are easily moved by whatever touches them deep within. Use of symbols and moments of silence can make liturgy profound.

4.2 Youth Groups

The influence of the church on young people has to be in concentric circles. While the church may influence youth *en masse* through its liturgy, some young people may be more interested in matters of their own growth. These young people need to be given an opportunity to belong to youth groups according to their interests.

Youth groups can play an important role in the life skills training of young people. In Africa the strongest relationships are between age-mates. Therefore organized youth groups give them an opportunity to express their sense of belonging. Youth groups, when guided well, become a forum for the formation of convictions among young people. They are also a locus for learning social skills and emotional maturity.

To ensure the learning process within groups, the following elements are crucial:

- It is good to have a variety of groups. There can be different types of groups, depending on the nature and goals: apostolic groups, interest groups (like sports clubs, etc.), and international youth movements (like YCS, YCW, Focolare, etc.) The variety can attract more youth, make it easy to organize large numbers of youth into controllable numbers, and to cater to the different needs of young people.
- Every group needs to have its objectives clearly chalked out. To be effective, groups should have their members, leaders and an adult patron or matron.
- According to the objectives of the groups there could be different activities in groups. These activities could cater to the four dimensions of the growth of the young person:[26] physical activities - work, recreation, etc; educational activities -study, seminars, library; socio/emotional activities - celebrations, picnics, etc.; spiritual activities - prayer, Bible study, retreats, liturgy, etc.
- It is possible to have specific sessions of life skills learning in youth groups.

4.3 Ongoing Training

In many churches the formation of young people is often reduced to sporadic seminars. Seminars on HIV/AIDS, for instance, that rely too much on the lecturing method alone may pass on information, but are not enough to change attitudes or to build life skills. Skills are learnt by doing and by repetition. Therefore workshops have better chances in imparting life skills. They should include group discussions, games, activities, field trips, singing and dancing, drama, role-playing etc. The method of role-playing is particularly effective in imparting life skills.

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[26] Evangelist Luke describes succinctly the growth of the boy Jesus in four dimensions: " And Jesus increased in wisdom, in stature, and in favour with God and with people." (Lk 2:52, NJB)

Secondly, besides the occasional seminar we need regular contacts with small groups of young people. Coming together once a week, say, for a period of six months or even over a year creates the possibility to build life skills. The imparting of skills in relation to HIV prevention need not always be direct. These can be learnt in the broader context of life skills.   Life skills include self-awareness, self-acceptance, self-assertiveness, appreciating the dignity of the human body, interpersonal skills, communication skills, problem-solving skills, decision making, choosing healthy recreation, creativity, managing time, managing stress, etc.

The following elements can ensure more effective skills learning in an ongoing formation program:

- Peer-education: Young people themselves could be trained to be trainers. Young people have a greater power to influence their peers, especially in the African context. Youth training needs to take to heart the recommendation of Pope John Paul II, "In order to meet [the problems of African youth], young people themselves should be called upon to become the evangelizers of their peers. No one can do this better than they."[27]
- Team-teaching is another effective means of communicating convictions and life skills. In team-teaching the same topic is taught by two or more trainers, covering different aspects consecutively. The team-teaching approach conveys the message more powerfully since it is a group that stands behind a conviction, besides having other advantages.
- Experiential learning: skills are practiced during training in a simulated atmosphere. Games, exercises, group discussions and role-plays are simulating. They challenge young people to build attitudes and skills that become useful to them when faced with real situations.

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[27] Pope John Paul II, 1994.

5. Conclusion: Training with a Holistic Content

In general, information on HIV/AIDS is, on the whole, not lacking among young people. The government, together with the mushrooming NGO's, have done their work with propaganda. Why then do we see no sufficient change happening in their behavior? Why has all the investment on seminars not paid the dividend? I believe that to build a character three things are needed: Knowledge (what?), Skills (how?) and Motivation (why, for what?)

For instance, let us say I want to become a football player. I need some knowledge about the positions in the field, about the rules, etc. But someone may know all these without having entered the field. So I need skills too: how to trap, how to dodge, how to pass, etc. These skills are learnt by repetitive physical practice that eventually makes neurological changes in my brain. Now, to go through this tedious process I need motivation: why do I want to be a football player? The three aspects, knowledge, skills and motivation, contribute to the effectiveness of whatever I am doing.[28]

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[28] Adapted from Covey, 1990, 48.