Guidelines for a Church Service focusing on World AIDS Day – 2010
(Developed by CABSA in cooperation with Communitas and the AIDS Task Group of the Combined Commission for Diaconate, Family of Dutch Reformed Churches)

Sensitive and correct language
A church service focussing on HIV and AIDS can seem to be “the right thing to do”, but the good intentions can be harmed or even destroyed if sensitive language is not used throughout. Therefore we never refer to someone who is HIV positive as ‘contaminated’! Rather refer throughout to “people living with HIV”. They are not ‘AIDS sufferers’, ‘victims’, ‘sinners’ or unbelievers.

Do not think of, or refer to, people living with HIV as a group outside the church or the congregation (them). Speak of them and with them as a natural part of the congregation. In other words, be careful of using stigmatising language. Statistically there is a very good chance that people living with HIV might be present in the service – even if you are not aware of someone in the congregation living with HIV.

Awareness and creating a sensitive environment

**Red Ribbon:** The familiar red ribbon is a symbol of care and commitment. Hand out red ribbons at the door or let young people pin them on as people enter the door. If there is a cross in the church, a red ribbon can be draped around it.

Arrange in advance that children create **posters** about HIV and AIDS. Put them up in the foyer or in the church. (NB: In order to maintain sensitivity plan and discuss these posters with the children and don’t simply leave it to them.

**Candles:** If used purposefully, candles can have a powerful symbolic meaning. The lighting of candles during the service can be utilized well as a liturgical moment of elucidation and prayer (see below).

**Pledging:** Challenging congregants to commit to a pledge can have strong symbolic value.

**Liturical Moments - Lighting Candle(s) and Prayer of Intercession.**
Arrange in advance for individuals to pray the following prayers while lighting a candle:

**Small Child (old enough to read the prayer):** Heavenly Father, I pray for babies and children who became HIV+ at birth, or while they were still drinking their mother’s milk. Please help that they can play with their friends as I like to do. Amen

**Young Teenage girl:** Thank you Lord Jesus that I can enjoy my young life, because I feel safe. I pray for other children that are abused by adults. Help them to know that you love them very much. Amen
Teenage Boy (age 15 - 18): Thank you Heavenly Father that I can live in a home with parents, go to school and participate in sport. I pray for young people like me who do not know such a life, because they have to care for their younger brothers and sisters after their parents died. Amen

Married Couple: Holy Trinity, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. We thank you that we are married, happy and safe together. We pray today for married men and women who were infected with HIV by their marital partners.

Older Woman: Heavenly Father, I thank you for the joy of these years in which I can live more peacefully and enjoy so much of my children and grand children. I pray for grandmothers, like me, who have to feed and care for and bring up babies and children all over again, because their own children died of HIV related conditions. Amen

Congregation (or leader): Our Father, who are in heaven – today we pray for so many people whose lives have been touched in so many ways by HIV or AIDS. We also pray for many others, who are working to make a difference in this time. Thank you that nothing can separate us from your love in Jesus Christ and that the sun that shines every day, and the light of the candles remind us of your love. We pray for the day when the light of your love finally dispels the darkness of HIV and AIDS. AMEN

Information about HIV and AIDS
Providing basic information about HIV and AIDS can be very valuable. The preacher should consider the need for information and the time available in advance. Keep in mind: Ensure that correct information is conveyed; Information should be brief and focussed; Beware of conveying too much information in a short time period, especially when dealing with statistics; Remember that statistics do not make sense to everyone.

The Reality of HIV and AIDS
It can have a powerful impact on the congregation to have a person living with HIV speaking during the service. This should however be treated with great sensitivity. If the necessary preparations cannot be made in time, this should rather not be included. Keep the following in mind: Make the necessary arrangement well ahead of time; Make sure that there is no misunderstanding about fees or honoraria; Make sure before the service that the individual is emotionally ready to speak; Introduce the speaker as someone who will speak about how HIV touched their life, not as someone who is HIV + or something similar; Arrange in advance for someone to thank the speaker briefly; It is important that the speaker is assured of the care and concern of all and that something of this care becomes visible; Remember that it takes courage to share a personal story with a group of strangers; Arrange for an appropriate person to move with the speaker, especially after the service. This person should also be able to support the speaker emotionally if necessary.

MATTHEW 24:36-44
Sermon Suggestion 1
A characteristic of humanity, so it would seem, is a preoccupation with calculation of the end times (the congregation can be reminded of prophesies such as those of Nostradamus and South Africa’s own Siener van Rensburg; claims that Jesus was seen in the clouds above
Mosselbay in February 2010 and an invitation to believers to wait there for the Second Coming of Christ; the claims around the Mayan calendar etc). Should we read something deeper into the disaster in Haiti, the eruption of the volcano in Iceland and the ash cloud over Europe in April 2010? The number of natural disasters is becoming overwhelming. “Signs of the times”, people whisper.

A youth worker recently confirmed this. Apparently there is a growing tendency amongst young people not to further their studies after school. (To me this sounds like a lack of future vision!) According to the youth worker, the argument is that further study is unnecessary if Jesus is coming soon! “Cocooning” is the practice of setting oneself apart, together with others who have seen the ‘light’, like you have. You start preparing yourself for being accepted – spiritually cleansed – by the One ‘coming on the clouds’. This is an ‘eyes-raised-to-heaven’ lifestyle.

There is of course another, probably more common, lifestyle: one of “eyes-turned-inwards”; modern man’s safe hiding place of the ‘self’. If you live behind high walls, it is easy to carry on with ‘life as usual’. The world and her demands can be left behind the high walls: “let’s forget a while”...eat and drink, fall in love, get married, have children, just like in Noah’s time (cf vs 39). Even in that time, people focussed on their own everyday needs and did not realise what was happening. They were caught unawares, because they saw, but did not perceive. The world of “eyes-turned-inwards” comfortably keeps the rest of the world out.

The problem with an ‘eyes-raised-to-heaven’ lifestyle is that our eyes can become ‘trapped’. It is much more convenient (and it even seems spiritually more noble) to live with your eyes turned upwards, than to open your eyes and notice what is happening around you. What is happening around you is so distressing that you would prefer not to see it. So you avoid buying newspapers, you don’t watch the news anymore, because all you see is bad news. You choose to focus your thoughts on ‘whatsoever things are pure, whatsoever things are lovely, whatsoever things are of good report.’

And on World AIDS Day you do not want to hear about AIDS...you want to hear something about Jesus. That is why you come to church. Your need is truly spiritually noble; yes, it is sad about the “AIDS orphans”. It is not that you don’t care. But maybe.....you don’t want to say it, but maybe it is God’s way of controlling the population numbers in Africa. The earth is unable to sustain the number of people in any case. And yes, their culture is different than ours. They ‘believe’ in polygamy.....we all know of miners with a wife here and one in Mozambique. HIV is a disease of immorality. It’s their own fault. It’s God’s reward for sin. The Bible is clear about homosexuality and we know how promiscuous their lifestyle is. All we can do is to pray that they repent.

Rather preach about repentance, or Jesus. Matthew 24:36-44 could easily be used to support this argument. Doesn’t the text repeatedly warn that the Second Coming would be unexpected? As it can happen any time, certainly a lifestyle of ‘eyes raised to heaven’ is better?

The problem with an inward focus is that you can stay so busy with your own world, that you can live your life is such isolation, that the pain of the world passes you by. Then a World AIDS Day service could provide interesting information, you could even hear things that you really did not know. It is not as if the self-concern leaves me without feeling. But it is someone else’s problem. To survive today takes so much energy that one does not have any energy left for anyone else.

Maybe this attitude is a bigger risk. It is as if the words of verse 39 summarises something of the modern context: “And they did not know...” Do we really know what is happening on the
other side of the wall? Do we really want to understand the impact of globalisation on people’s struggling lives? Do we really want to understand the reality of family violence? Do we really want to know about children bringing up children? Do we really want to understand why experts suggest that it is dangerous for women to be married today? Do we really want to know what our HIV status is? Do we encourage our children to know their status? Or would we rather not know? Because if we don’t know what is happening, it is easier to keep our “eyes-turned-inwards”.

And then the disillusionment: Matthew clearly says that Jesus is speaking to the disciples. This warning is not directed to “those people out there”, but to us. Matthew particularly reminds the reader that it is “your Lord” that will come unexpectedly.

We know now of one lifestyle that is not fitting for a believer, the one with “eyes-turned-inwards”. There is no way we can justify turning away our life and our availability from others. The question remains if an ‘eyes raised to heaven’-lifestyle would then not be a better option? Become more spiritual! Read the Bible more often, pray more regularly? You want to be prepared, after all!

It is not “eyes raised to heaven” that portrays vigilance and preparedness! It is also not “eyes-turned-inwards”. It is a lifestyle with “eyes focussed on the world” which will pass the test of vigilance and preparedness. It is when you see people around you...really look them in the face, discover their human dignity, discover yourself as their neighbour, that you start practicing vigilance and being prepared. Because it is in really seeing that you discover Christ. This is what we learn from Matthew 25:1-46. The test is not to get “closer to Christ in heaven” rather it is to get “closer to Christ amongst people”.

The reality is that God’s coming to this sphere has always been unexpected. The coming of Jesus as a human was unexpected (Joh 1:9-11). We in fact celebrate Advent because, from the experience of the first unexpected coming, we again wait for the Unexpected! Advent is the Festival of Expectation! But this is not waiting as if life’s ‘pause’ button has been clicked. It is not waiting in a waiting room, listlessly paging through a magazine just to pass the time. We are not waiting in this ‘in-between time’ with an attitude of ‘one day’. Then it wil also be said of us that “we did not know” what was happening. The real power of the ‘festival of expectation’ that we will be celebrating during the next four weeks of Advent lies in the un-EXPECT-ed.

World AIDS Day is one of those events that remind us that we dare not live with ‘eyes turned to heaven’ as an escape, nor with “eyes-turned-inwards” in detachment and self-centredness. This is why it is so appropriate that this day is celebrated at the beginning of advent. This day is our call to “know what is happening”. When you know what is happening, it forces your eyes outwards. Towards people. Because this is where the unexpected coming of Christ happens every day. There, between the ‘other’ people, the marginalised and the stigmatised, you practice vigilance

Sermon Suggestion 2

One of the greatest challenges with the HIV and AIDS epidemic in our country, and in other countries in Africa, is denial. The denial of the facts and realities of HIV and AIDS caused the delay in the role out of a South African treatment programme which cost thousands of lives (some researchers suggest as many as 350 000 lives were lost), left children orphaned, made people lose hope, left grandparent to care for children on their limited pensions. If we see this and start understanding the impact we understand that HIV and AIDS affect all of us.

We deny the possibility that we can be exposed to the virus, because we deny or wish away the weakness of our life partners. But, when I ignore my own risk, I become a risk to others.
When I deny my own status, I put others in danger through sexual contact, through bleeding wounds or through pregnancy or breastfeeding. Through denial I deny myself the opportunity to protect others, to access early treatment, to make healthy choices and to live a long life in spite of the virus which made itself at home in my body.

Denial is one of the psychological defence mechanisms we use to protect ourselves against anything that is painful or threatening to our happiness. But denial also hinders healing and recovery. If I merely deny the tension in my marriage relationship, and pretend nothing is wrong, I undermine the potential for healing the relationship.

The same applies to addiction (alcohol) – and the impact HIV and AIDS could have (or not have) on my life. There is one more thing we need to say about denial. Denial always brings us to a decisive point in our own life story. It is a point where I need to choose to look squarely at the reality, or where I need to acknowledge that I was in denial.

What does the Bible say about denial?

Matthew 24 deals with the second coming of Christ (see above for more information). Matthew uses the Greek word “parousia” to describe the idea of the second coming. Matthew applies this word, which is normally used in the Hellenistic context to announce the arrival of the ruler of the day, to Jesus. The idea is that of a sudden presence.

The second coming of Christ represents a decision point which we need to face. There are dangers in the day, but also promise. The second coming holds two potential realities. It is at the same time the reality of the promise and the reality of crisis. The first reality is the reality of the promise. It promises life, albeit a different kind of life, an unknown life or a life indescribably strange. Therein lies the danger, the crisis nature of the return of Christ. And this is where the denial starts.

Two people are working in the field. One sees the promise and the other the crisis. Two people are grinding at the mill. One sees the promise and the other the crisis.

When Matthew tells these stories of Jesus, he wants to help us think about the consequences of denial, and the consequences of apathy when we are confronted by denial.

Matthew brings together three examples: Verses 37-39: Noah's time. As he usually does, Matthew uses an example that would be familiar to his Jewish audience: the unexpected flood in Noah's time. In Noah's time there were people who carried on with their lives “as usual” (v 38, also 2 Peter 2:5 & 3:20). While they were still busy with cooking, caring for their fields, sweeping the yard, the water suddenly came and overwhelmed them. And then, to move from the time of Noah to the time of Christ, he uses two images representing the fullness of human activity required for survival. Verse 40 - work in the fields (agriculture) and verse 41 - women in the mills (industry).

What is it that threatened them? The second coming? No, the denial of the return of Christ, or rather that, in the midst of the struggle to produce and manufacture in order to survive, they no longer see the threat. Put differently, they became so preoccupied with their own survival that God no longer made sense, and the possibility of God's kingdom passed them by. They were too busy to give shape to the kingdom, through love, commitment, reconciliation and forgiveness. They let people die, suffer, and be stigmatized.

We can ask whether there is a connection between the reality of HIV and AIDS on the one hand, and the coming of the Kingdom, or rather the second coming of Christ, on the other. The relevance of the text can be found in the call to be vigilant. To be vigilant, is to live with the promise.
Matthew uses a fourth image to help us understand our tendency to denial. That of the thief which comes in the night. It was part of the Jewish expectation that the end times will come in the night. It will be unexpected and catch us by surprise. Hence the warning is repeated over and over again and strengthened with illustrations from the reader's life: Watch, because the time is not known (24:42, 44, 50, 25:13). The idea of vigilance is not that of a guard on a wall, inactive and struggling to stay awake, but someone who is fully awake and living in the present. Vigilance therefore is not about waiting until the Lord comes, but rather being engaged in the here and now until He comes!

What does this vigilance look like in a world with HIV and AIDS? It has to do with obedience and responding to promises, like Noah. A vigilant congregation is one that does not turn and walk away, but reaches out and becomes involved with the realities of HIV and AIDS. We can do this because we know the promise of life. HIV does not have the final say over our lives. Christ has the last word over our lives.

Vigilance asks from us that we should be busy with our work in a different way- not as a struggle for survival, but as an opportunity to bring life. Vigilance in a world with HIV and AIDS is to take into account the risks to you and others. It asks for a responsible lifestyle, where you respect and protect the people you come into contact with - by being sensitive to them and knowing your own status. Then we live with hope in the midst of the crisis and we discover that, what we do to others, we do to Christ (Matthew 25:40). We are busy in a different way, because we are no longer only busy for our own sake, but also for our neighbors.

Vigilance in a world with HIV and AIDS is to understand that the church has a prophetic task. It was people who worked together (e.g. the Treatment Action Campaign) who unmasked, tackled and eventually defeated the previous government's denial of HIV! The church should also do this! The prophet sees the coming of the Kingdom in the here and now of everyday existence. He also points out things that are life-threatening. Things that cause other people's lives to be 'a living hell', such as stigma, denial, discrimination.

How do we increase our vigilance in the face of HIV and AIDS? It requires a conscious choice to know your status, not to be content with last year's HIV test for an insurance policy - not only for yourself, but so that you may honestly encourage others to be vigilant too. The congregation could organize such a test clinic, Pastors and church leaders can set the example and be tested (remember testing is always voluntary and results are always confidential).

And maybe that is the point Matthew makes. While we now live with great anticipation, we have a responsibility to be aware and make others aware.

**Prayer after the Sermon**

Heavenly Father,
in this country and in this time of HIV and AIDS, we call upon Thee
We pray that your name be sanctified;
that where there is darkness, your children will bring light,
that where there is despair, your children will bring hope
that where there is sadness, your children will comfort,
that where there is loneliness, your children will embrace.
From your hand, Father, we receive life anew each day.

Jesus our Saviour,
in this country and in this time of HIV and AIDS, we call upon Thee
We pray that your kingdom will come.
Forgive us for being concerned only about ourselves.
Help us and our leaders to follow your example of justice, mercy and faithfulness
so that we can overcome stigma and discrimination
so that we become practically involved in need,
so that we will stand unashamedly with those among us affected by HIV and AIDS.
Christ, you are our Guide.

Holy Spirit, our Comforter,
in this country and in this time of HIV and AIDS, we call upon Thee
We pray that your will be done.
Deliver us from indifference and carelessness,
and give us hearts of flesh;
so that you can lead us, teach us and use us.
We pray for everyone who so desperately needs you.
Encourage each one who struggles with their health because of HIV,
Comfort each one suffering as a result of others' lack of love,
strengthen each caregiver who may be tired,
help each one who in different ways try to combat this pandemic,
and give us and our children the wisdom to be responsible and act vigilant.
Thank you, that where you lead and we obey, you give peace and joy
Amen

**Congregation Pledge**
The service can be ended by a renewed congregational commitment to respond to the challenges of HIV and AIDS

(Adapted from the pledge used at the release of the video: The URCSA Cares)

**Leader:** In thankfulness we commit ourselves to be a caring, justice-seeking, nurturing community.

**Congregation:** We covenant together in commitment to God and one another.

**Leader:** As God loves us and cares for us, we too, will be a caring community.

**Congregation:** We welcome into our community and into our church all persons whose lives have been touched by HIV-infection and living with HIV.
We say to all: As God welcomes us into God's covenant, you are welcome in our congregation.

**Leader:** We will be a justice seeking community

**Congregation:** As a congregation, we will oppose all forms of discrimination against people living with HIV and AIDS.

**Leader:** We will be a nurturing community.

**Congregation:** We will care for one another and love one another as God has loved us in Jesus Christ. We will pray for the healing of God's creation. We will be Christ's presence in each other's lives, especially in the lives of those of us living with HIV and AIDS. We will be witnesses to God's unconditional love.
Leader: Through Christ's example we are made stronger in faith, finer and gentler in spirit.

Congregation: Through Christ the Saviour and the power of the Holy Spirit and God's goodness and grace, we are set free to love, serve, witness and care, unconditionally.

Leader: Let us now affirm together, as people of God, a covenant to care.

Congregation: As members of the body of Christ, we covenant together in the Name of God, to assure people living with HIV and AIDS that they will never be destitute of our Christian love, care and compassion. We invoke for ourselves Christ's words in Matthew: 25: "I was hungry and you gave me food. I was thirsty and you gave me drink. I was a stranger and you welcomed me. I was sick and you visited me." We will make true our confession: We must stand where God stands.

Leader: Go and follow Christ!