

Story from B. N. MATLOU

I left Nigeria in 1992 to return to South Africa at the dawn of transformation into the new rainbow nation. I however got stuck in Botswana for another six years before I had the courage to pick bags, lock, stock and barrel four children inclusive and finally make the ultimate move back to a country I left since 1961 at a tender age.

I became very active in church matters in Botswana and thus interacted with the sick and dying. I was anointed in the Healing Ministry which means I had to pray for the sick in hospitals and administer deliverance in church. This also includes counselling and talking to the sick and hopeless.

I saw a lot of suffering. A particular experience is etched permanently on my mind. I had a friend whose husband committed suicide after discovering that he was HIV+. The Zambian Women's Association in Botswana hosted a get-together where other African nationals were invited. On arrival at the venue I embraced and kissed this very stunningly beautiful woman. This, however, occurred at the entrance to the venue. Soon after, she asked me to repeat what I had done right in the middle of the dancing floor where many people were dancing. But being a shy person I declined, little realising that that singular act was to show others who I later gathered were stigmatizing her that there were people who were prepared to embrace, hug and even kiss here. I lost my chance then, to reduce stigma and educate through action. Needless to say I have carried the guilt for so long even though I did not realise what the aim was at the time.

Joining the UN system has also enabled me to continue working in the field. That aside, if you are interested in people's welfare then in the present South Africa you cannot but be affected by HIV/AIDS. I have personal friends who live with the virus. I therefore share their stress and pain when they come down with all the baggage of ill health, financial burdens etc. In other words as long as there are people close to you who are affected and infected, you are affected and infected. Just yesterday a friend in Kimberly was crying bitterly because she is assisting three children 4 -12 years whose mother has just died and the family is nowhere to be found to help. The squalor and poverty she found the children in just broke her spirit. How can this not touch you? It isn't that faraway you know!