AIDS 2016 -21st INTERNATIONAL AIDS CONFERENCE

Monday morning, Mandela Day, was taken up by a march organised by TAC (Treatment For All Campaign). Being a BRIS(Middle Income) Country South Africa has to pay the full price for ARVs demanded by the world pharmaceutical giants and cannot rely on generics like Zambia. Zambia also has its ARVs paid for by PEPFAR and Global Funding. South Africa has a very limited form of National Health Service which makes health care very expensive and there is a lack of access for many individuals to treatment and care. There are now 35 million people living with AIDS globally, there are 2 million new infections each year and around 1.2 million people died in 2014 of AIDS related causes.

We were bussed to the King Dinizulu Park in Central Durban where we gathered in a crowd of around 5000 for the March for Health. We were a mixture of people and interests from Faith-based organisations, ANC cadres, Trade Unions, LGBT I Community and sex workers. It was a very South African affair with the usual toyi-toyi dance interspersed with with songs and the Amandla- Awethu cry. The ladies in front of us encouraged us to sing and move and translated for us. Behind an Argentian group responded with the Spanish : United, united, the people will never be defeated.

The crowd made its way down Dr Pixley Kaseme Streey (a lawyer and original founder of the 1912 ANC) and gathered outside City Hall and called out in vain for Ban Ki Moon, who was apparently inside on an official visit. He was to grace the opening ceremony as well. The crowd then peacefully dispersed and made its way back to the global village and Conference Centre for the official opening of the conference.

We then bumped into Sarah Boseley, the Guardian’s Health Editor, and as we walked we discussed the probability of the return of a high death rate in low and middle income countries and how an increased infection rate together with a decline in funding was making access extremely difficult in remote rural areas and leading to the dangers of increased resistance. A vicious circle.

18 000 delegates gathered in the hall to hear Kwetu, Mandela’s grandson look to the future, then Charlize Theron, the SA celebrity and film actress reminded us that to cure aids we need to cure our hearts and minds of the diseases that we harbour there. Chris Beyer said the response was threatened by complacency and a lack of funding. It was a human rights and social justice issue for the marginalised.

As an aside the following improvements in service delivery need to be undertaken. it is vital to find out what patients need not what is convenient for the Health Worker. A reduction in the frequency of clinics that a healthy HIV+ client need attend should be reduced to a minimum, accessing their drugs through their local Community Health worker. VCT needs to be more widely available so that all may know heir status.

As a Christian it was good to see the secular world begin to accept the Church’s view of the holistic intersectionality of the fight and that it is multi-dimensional and that the disease is not caused by factors working independently. We know that multiple forms of discrimination need to be addressed in this fight. Desmond Tutu’s message and prayer echoed this in pointing out the unholy relationship between gender, class, poverty, injustice and discrimination.

And so ended the first day. One concern is that the transport and shuttle services are geared to ferrying delegates to and from the various 3-5 star hotels in the neighbourhood. Those are people usually here on expenses and in less need of public transport than those of us paying for food, transport and accommodation from our own pockets. The Church of Scotland kindly pays for my registration at the conference but all other expenses I meet myself. Daniel from Mozambique for example is living in the suburbs where less costly accommodation is available but has to pay R200(£10) each way in taxi-fares. This is a considerable sum for people from less developed countries.

 Elton John and Prince Harry have, we hear, been invited to address the conference as well. Still we are told a society is best judged how it treats its minorities and the International Aids Association clearly treats the 1% very well.......