

WEEK FIVE



Pastor John Thomas of Fish Hoek Baptist Church in South Africa with a church member.

Week 5:

BASED ON

THE HOLE IN OUR GOSPEL: THE HOLE IN THE CHURCH



FACT

The total income of American churchgoers is \$5.2 trillion. (That's more than \$5,000 billion.) It would take just a little over 1 percent of the income of American Christians to lift the poorest 1 billion people out of extreme poverty. Said another way, American Christians, who make up about 5 percent of the Church worldwide, control about half of global Christian wealth; a lack of money is not our problem. (*The Hole in Our Gospel*, p. 216)



SCRIPTURE | ISAIAH 58:6-12

“Is not this the kind of fasting I have chosen:
to loose the chains of injustice
and untie the cords of the yoke,
to set the oppressed free
and break every yoke?”

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Is it not to share your food with the hungry
and to provide the poor wanderer with shelter—
when you see the naked, to clothe him,
and not to turn away from your own flesh and blood?

Then your light will break forth like the dawn,
and your healing will quickly appear;
then your righteousness will go before you,
and the glory of the LORD will be your rear guard.

Then you will call, and the LORD will answer;
you will cry for help, and he will say: Here am I.
If you do away with the yoke of oppression,
with the pointing finger and malicious talk,
and if you spend yourselves in behalf of the hungry
and satisfy the needs of the oppressed,
then your light will rise in the darkness,
and your night will become like the noonday.

The LORD will guide you always;
he will satisfy your needs in a sun-scorched land
and will strengthen your frame.
You will be like a well-watered garden,
like a spring whose waters never fail.

Your people will rebuild the ancient ruins
and will raise up the age-old foundations;
you will be called Repairer of Broken Walls,
Restorer of Streets with Dwellings.”



THE ‘CHURCH THAT CARES’

Excerpt from The Hole in Our Gospel by Rich Stearns

In 1999, Pastor John Thomas heard a shocking statistic at a local minister’s meeting. Forty-four percent of the population of Masiphumelele, a shantytown slum community of black migrants, embedded near the tiny seaside town of Fish Hoek, South Africa, were HIV-positive. This high percentage stunned Pastor Thomas, whose predominantly white church of about 315 members had little awareness of the impact of AIDS in their own backyard. [The statistic turned out to be lower, closer to 17 percent at the time. In 2008, it was 28 percent.] Just five years after the end of apartheid, relations between black and white were still strained in South Africa, a country that now had more HIV infections than any nation in the world. Thomas was provoked. *How can I face God on judgment day*, he thought, *realizing I’ve done nothing about the greatest problem that lies on our doorstep?*

The troubled pastor decided to share his heart with his church—and nothing has been the same

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since. Fish Hoek Baptist Church is now known around town as “the church that cares.” Today, almost 10 years later, the AIDS ministry of Fish Hoek Baptist Church, known as Living Hope, has a budget of \$1.2 million a year and a full-time staff of 147. By comparison, the church’s annual budget is just \$300,000 with a staff of 10. The AIDS ministry now dwarfs the church in size and scope.

In February 2008, I visited Living Hope and found that what was perhaps most striking was the sheer breadth of their vision. Living Hope encompasses virtually every dimension of the impact of AIDS in the lives of the poor. A sister church has been established in the heart of Masiphumelele to provide a permanent and accessible spiritual presence for the community. A 20-bed clinic, Living Hope Health Care Centre, for treating the gravest cases of AIDS, has been built and staffed with a full complement of health care workers and counselors. Alongside the center is the Living Way ministry, where HIV support groups can meet and men and women can receive training in job skills so they can support themselves economically after leaving the clinic. Because the patients are receiving antiretroviral drug therapy, most of them recover and reenter their communities.

(“Charity has its place,” said one of the staff, “but it’s not sustainable.”) Across the street is a retail store that sells some of the crafts and jewelry made by the women from Living Hope.

Down the road and in the middle of the poorest part of Masiphumelele, we visited a community health clinic staffed by many Living Hope volunteers and lay counselors.

These personnel meet with community members who are about to be tested for HIV, as well as those who are receiving their test results. The clinic’s counselors are literally Christ’s hands and feet to individuals who are hearing for the first time that they are HIV-positive. After the terrifying news is given to patients, the clinic’s staff counsel and pray with them, connect them with available treatments, and help them begin living positively with the disease. There’s even a prenatal clinic that assists HIV-positive women through their pregnancies, ensuring that their babies are born HIV-free. Pumla, one of the lay counselors, told me, “Living Hope showed me, if you are Christian, you have to practice what you preach. The Word of God has changed my life.” (Pumla became a Christian through this same ministry.) Another staff member, Bongani, came to Pumla last year, pregnant and HIV-positive. She was very ill and was cared for during the pregnancy by home-based caregivers, also sent by Living Hope. Pumla counseled her through the pregnancy, and her baby was born healthy. Today, Bongani is a support-group facilitator who counsels other

women who are in the same situation she had faced.

AIDS is best fought by *prevention*, so Living Hope has trained an army of life skills educators who go into the community to work, especially with young people. This is a community rife with drug use, gangs, prostitution, rape, and alcoholism. Speaking about the plight of young people in these slums, Pastor Thomas says, “There are no dreams. It’s the poverty of the mind.” Hence, life-skills education starts in kindergarten and helps kids make wise choices.

While in Fish Hoek, we were also able to visit Fish Hoek Baptist’s homeless ministry and the relief effort they were undertaking in an area destroyed weeks earlier by a fire. The fingerprints of this church were evident everywhere we turned. They were literally transforming their culture, reaching across racial and economic barriers, and bringing hope to some of the darkest places I have ever seen.

Fish Hoek Baptist, this one small church near the bottom of the globe, has garnered the attention of the world. John Thomas has been invited to the White House to be commended for their work

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by President Bush himself. USAID has granted his ministry its financial support, and the local state government has even asked them—a Christian church—to consider taking over the running of parts of the government health infrastructure! Why? Because this single congregation chose to not walk by “the beggar laid at their gate” but stopped, instead, to minister Christ’s love to him. There is no hole in their gospel; they are transforming their community, changing lives, showing people the love of Christ, and bringing the good news to the poor. Theirs is the *whole* gospel, and it has great power. Their audacious vision provokes the imagination of what could be if even one-tenth of our churches gave themselves away to the world, as they have. (pp. 231–234)



MEDITATIONS

“When historians look back in 100 years, what will they write about this nation of 340,000 churches? What will they say of the Church’s response to the great challenges of our time—AIDS, poverty, hunger, terrorism, war? Will they say that these authentic Christians rose up courageously and responded to the tide of human suffering, that they rushed to the front lines to comfort the afflicted and to douse the flames of hatred? Will they write of an unprecedented outpouring of generosity to meet the urgent needs of the world’s poor? Will they speak of the moral leadership and compelling vision of our leaders? Will they write that this, the beginning of the 21st century, was the Church’s finest hour? Or will they look back and see a Church too comfortable, insulated from the pain of the rest of the world, empty of compassion, and devoid of deeds? Will they write about a people who stood by and watched while 100 million died of AIDS and 50 million children were orphaned, of Christians who lived in luxury and self-indulgence while millions died for lack of food and water? Will schoolchildren read in disgust about a Church that had the wealth to build great sanctuaries but lacked the will to build schools, hospitals, and clinics? In short, will we be remembered as the Church with a gaping hole in its gospel?”

—*Rich Stearns* (pp. 238–239)

“We will have to repent in this generation not merely for the vitriolic words and actions of the bad people, but for the appalling silence of the good people.”

—*Martin Luther King Jr.* (p. 190)

“How different our standard is from Christ’s. We ask how much a man gives. He asks how much he keeps.”

—*Andrew Murray* (p. 210)



DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

1. Re-read Isaiah 58. What parts stand out? What is the fasting that God desires from us? What other things might qualify as “fasting” in your world? What are some things you can begin doing in response to this passage?

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2. List some of the results that come from following God's commands in these passages. Read Isaiah 1:10–17. What are the consequences of not following God's commands to stand up for the oppressed and care for the widows and orphans?
3. How is Fish Hoek Baptist Church similar to the church you attend? How is it different?
4. What thought provoked Pastor John Thomas to drastically change what the church was doing in response to the AIDS crisis? Can you think of a time in which a similar thought or situation provoked you to action?
5. The budget for Fish Hoek's Living Hope ministry trumps the church's overall budget. What does this say about their priorities? How does your own church's budget compare in terms of money spent on outreach versus money spent on the facilities and staff?
6. In your own budget, how does your spending on yourself compare with what you expend for others?
7. Re-read Rich's quote and think about the implications. How might future generations be inspired by your example and desire to follow the Jesus you serve? Does this quote challenge you to live differently? If so, in what ways?
8. In reflecting on Martin Luther King Jr.'s quote, would those around you know you are a follower of Christ because of what you do or what you don't do? Explain your answer.
9. Regarding Andrew Murray's quote, when it comes to giving your resources, do you think more about how much you give or how much you keep? How would regularly thinking of your resources as God's impact your thinking about how much you keep?



TAKE ACTION

What is your role in the Church? Where can your talents be used? God has given each of us gifts, and together we form the body of Christ. Find out about all the ministries your church is involved in, and decide which one you are going to participate in, or start one yourself.



CHALLENGE

Make an appointment to meet with your pastor or missions minister. Discuss how the church reaches out (or should be reaching out) to those in need. Consider making a presentation to your church board or elders to advocate for more of the budget to go to missions and outreach.

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SCRIPTURE FOR FURTHER STUDY:

- James 1:26–27
- James 4:17
- Luke 16:19–31
- Mark 7:6–8
- Matthew 13:13–15
- Luke 6:43–44



PRAYER:

Pray for the Church. Pray for yourself and others to recognize their gifts and ability to contribute to God's redemptive work in this world. Pray for unity in the Church. Pray for our church leaders, that they will have the courage to lead their flocks with humility. Pray that the Church might grow together with a genuine desire to see God's kingdom come and His will be done on earth as it is in heaven.