

Living a GRACE-FILLED LIFE

This month marks the start of a new series on “living a grace-filled life.” We’ve asked a wide range of writers and pastors for their thoughts on how to bring grace into the world. The series begins with this essay from Covenant pastor and AIDS worker Dennis Wadley.

Faith, Hope, and AIDS

DENNIS
WADLEY

THE WORD “PANDEMIC” comes from the Greek words *pan*, meaning “all,” and *demos*, meaning “people.” With this in mind, it is fitting to call the HIV/AIDS crisis in South Africa a pandemic.

The ramifications of this awful disease affect the lives of every member of society: the man who contracted the disease through sex with a prostitute; the child who was orphaned after her mother (a rape victim) died of the disease; the community member who has a healthy family but spends at least one weekend each month traveling to funerals and trying to strengthen and encourage his friends and family.

Grace-filled and faithful people are desperately needed in the wake of this destabilizing and debilitating pandemic. In thinking about how to live a grace-filled life, consider the stories of two women, one young and one older who personify grace and faith in the midst of tragedy.

LULAMA'S STORY

I first met Lulama, a forty-one-year-old woman whose name means “humble,” at the HIV support group in Philippi, a township outside of Cape Town, South Africa. Lulama was unemployed (more than 40 percent of South Africans are without work) and had been rejected by her husband, parents, and children. Her family disowned her when they learned she had been infected with the HIV virus. Homeless and staying with friends, all cramped in a dilapidated shack, she struggled to survive.

Then Lulama met a woman who ran a micro-business making necklaces to be sold in tourist markets or mailed to churches in the U.S. for fundraisers. When Lulama received her first paycheck, she used the 700 rand (approximately \$100) to purchase her own metal shack. She also bought vegetables, which her immune-deficient body desperately needed. The ministry I work with, Bridges of Hope, supplied her with immune boosting vitamins. Although she began to recover physically, emotionally, and spiritually, Lulama chose not to sign up for a government program that provides AIDS medication. Without her family, she didn't feel she had a reason to battle this destructive disease and fight for her future.

ASANDA'S STORY

Asanda is an eighteen-year-old orphan and single mother. Her baby was born three months after both her parents died. Asanda's father was coming home from work one evening when he passed two men who were raping a woman. Asanda's father pulled out his gun and fired two shots into the air, hoping to scare the men off. Instead, the two men drew their guns and shot him seven times, leaving him comatose. Asanda's mother had AIDS, and the news of her husband's shooting was too much for her and she died not long after the shooting. When Asanda's father came out of his coma, he heard the news of his wife's death. Immediately his health spiraled downward and he also died.

Asanda was left alone to care for both her new baby, Kazimla, and her five-year-old sister. Rather than helping her, Asanda's extended family stole many of her belongings and tried to sell her home out from under her. Eventually Asanda's grandmother took Asanda and the two girls in, ostensibly to care for them. In reality, Asanda became a domestic servant, forbidden to go to school and barely given enough to eat.

Taking Kazimla with her, Asanda ran away from her grandmother and walked across a



busy freeway into the gang-infested neighborhoods in order to escape the situation. On Christmas Eve she was robbed of her few possessions by gang members and left without hope.

THEIR STORY TOGETHER

Not long afterwards, we introduced Lulama to Asanda. Lulama became a caregiver for Asanda and her baby. An anonymous donor from the U.S. provided funds to support Asanda, and she began to rebuild her life. She began attending high school again, and before long she was referring to Lulama as “Mom.”

Because now she had a reason to live, Lulama applied for a government program to receive anti-retroviral drugs for AIDS. She started on the immune boosting medications last February and after the initial difficult adjustment, has been physically thriving.

I wish I could end the story there and say that everything is rosy, but I can't. The struggles of living in a South

African township and battling against HIV/AIDS are not clean and tidy, nor do they come equipped with a Hollywood ending. The battle against HIV/AIDS is laced with as much trauma and devastation as you would expect in any war.

Asanda must now painstakingly sort through the losses in her life, and with that, I believe, she is battling depression. There are days that she struggles to get out of bed and cannot find it within herself to leave her baby and go to school. Asanda is only in the tenth grade, and has a long academic road ahead of her before she will graduate.

Lulama has been accused by Asanda's family of providing care for her “only for the money,” though she is not paid, and merely receives food and lodging in return for her ministry to Asanda.

In the midst of these overwhelming circumstances, both Lulama and Asanda have mustered the faith to face up to a series of never-ending challenges and have received and given enough grace

to continue on.

Lulama has come to believe that the God of the universe has a plan for her that includes both suffering and success. She knows that God's call upon her life will not be easy, but that as she trusts in him and allows the Holy Spirit to work through her, she will exercise and strengthen the love that dwells within her.

Asanda has found the strength and grace to get up each day and care for her baby daughter. She is trying to stay on a path that will lead both of them to a better life than they have known.

Please pray for Asanda, Lulama, and the hundreds of thousands of people like them who are trusting in God's grace and are exercising their faith each day in South Africa in order to live the life that he has for them. □

Dennis Wadley is a Covenant minister living in South Africa, where he and his wife, Susan, direct Bridges of Hope International (www.bridges-of-hope.org), an AIDS prevention and community development ministry.