

## **The Story of Charmaine and her baby - Advent and World Aids Day at RUC, 2018. By Judy Cooke**

Charmaine (not her real name) is a 24 year-old young woman, pregnant and unemployed, living with her family in dire poverty in Woodstock - of whom only one member is employed. She discovered that she was HIV positive when she went for a pregnancy test early in 2018. ARV treatment was prescribed which she started to take - but after disclosing to her boyfriend that she was HIV positive, he abandoned her and disappeared, and in the trauma of losing him, and the terrible shame and stigma of HIV infection, in despair she began defaulting on taking her treatment regularly. Endangering her own health and that of her baby. This was when her FAMSA counsellor, working at the clinic she attended, shared her dejection and hopelessness about her future and her baby's. How on earth could she provide any clothes for her baby, being penniless herself? How could she face the family at home - there was no-one there she could disclose to, apart from her mother. Her step-father she knew would not support her and could even throw her out of the house if he learnt of her HIV status. Other family members would jeer and scorn her - and they were involved in drinking and drugs, so the home situation seemed impossible. The anticipation of having this child depressed her deeply.

But there at the clinic, was a formidable team of women, the FAMSA counsellor, the Community Health Worker and the Sister-in-Charge. They went to visit the home to assess the situation and recognised the desperate challenge Charmaine was facing. Her FAMSA counsellor asked a friend at RUC, to pray for Charmaine and her situation, and the Prayer Circle listened, and received the story, and lo and behold, a gift of money was made, out of the blue, to help Charmaine buy some clothes for her baby. And someone else asked her daughter to see if they could collect used baby clothes and equipment for this coming child who had nothing at all. And a veritable shower of used baby items arrived at the church for Charmaine and her baby. The counselling, the support of the clinic staff, the gifts from RUC, all this began to impact on Charmaine. She saw a glimmer of light at the end of the dark tunnel, she was buffered by the concern and compassion that came down upon her, she smiled with joy when she heard about the donated clothes, and she began to take her treatment regularly again, and to want the best for this baby, whatever the outcome would be. Hope was born in her heart and her own strength began to emerge - a future became possible, where none had been before.

And at her home, her aunt came to live with them to support Charmaine, who was able to disclose to her, and who, when she saw the little rocker and playmat and the bags of clothes donated for the baby, wept, and said she would stay with her and help her until the baby was at least a year old.

So, out of a desert of deprivation and hopelessness, the devotion and determination of a group of women to empower a young poverty-stricken woman living with HIV/Aids and to bring her child to the best possible birth and future - was given a special blessing when, after being delivered safely of a little boy, Charmaine's baby was found to be HIV negative. The rejoicing up and down the clinic, in the church, and in the heavens above, was music to the ears! So the prayers will continue to accompany Charmaine and her counsellor and the clinic staff, as they journey with her and her baby, in the glad knowledge that the waiting, and the hard road they had to tread, was crowned in the coming of this child, at Advent.