



Ecumenical Kirchentag AIDS advocacy session on “Life is a human right - HIV/AIDS requires global solidarity”, Berlin, 31 May 2003

**Speech by
Peter Piot,
UNAIDS Executive Director**

First, I would like to congratulate the Action Alliance against AIDS (Aktionsbündnis gegen AIDS) for its outstanding efforts in organizing a whole series of events at the Kirchentag, which has made AIDS a focus of this Kirchentag.

In the past years, we have seen a significant increase in church related activities in the field of HIV. The Ecumenical Advocacy Alliance, the Anglican Church and the Lutheran World Federation have all developed strategic plans on the fight against AIDS and they are now busy implementing them.

Caritas Internationalis is involved in dealing with the new realities that HIV presents us with, including its theological challenges

I am speaking today on behalf of UNAIDS, which brings together eight United Nations system agencies in the fight against AIDS. Working together with all religions of the world is an important part of our work.

I know that each one of you here today is already an AIDS activist at heart, so I will not tell you about the scale of the global epidemic or the destruction the AIDS epidemic is causing through to today.

Let me make just four points about the state of the epidemic.

First, it is clear to everyone that this epidemic will be the most globalised epidemic in the history of humankind. No region, no community of this world is immune against AIDS.

Second, we are still only in the early stages of the epidemic. We have to think of the epidemic and its impacts in terms of generations, not years.

The dramatic developments in southern Africa are impossible to ignore today. The immediate cause of the famine in southern Africa was drought, but one underlying driver of this crisis was the weakness of agricultural production as a result of the AIDS epidemic. At least one out of every three adults in these countries is infected

with HIV and tens of thousands of people are no longer able to tend their fields or have died of AIDS.

Third, we can defeat AIDS! We know that, with leadership and a broad social movement, it is possible to push the HIV epidemic back. We have seen this in examples from all over the world – from Uganda to Brazil and Cambodia.

Increasing political commitment to AIDS is evident – nearly 40 Presidents or Prime Ministers worldwide now chair their national AIDS councils.

Likewise, it is also manifest in the increase of resources – human and financial – devoted to the fight against AIDS. Last year, nearly 3.5 billion Euros were spent on AIDS in developing countries – including national and international funding sources. That is double the spending of three years ago, but it is still only a third of the way to the 10 billion Euros needed annually.

Fourth, HIV prevention and care are inseparable – just as prevention efforts need to be full-scale, so also access to HIV treatment must be extended to the 95% of the world's people living with HIV currently denied it.

Life is a human right!

But, despite all the progress made, we still have not yet been able to create a worldwide social movement fully mobilised against AIDS. The Churches can make an important contribution to mobilizing such a social movement.

Let me name four key challenges for the Churches and AIDS activists in Churches.

First, the challenge of young people.

Wherever HIV has been pushed back, it was young people – like you – who have been at the forefront of this change.

Churches need to adapt their teachings to the realities of young people, and, in the case of AIDS, it is vital to deal openly with questions regarding sexuality. Churches may preach hard-to-live-up-to moral virtues like abstinence and monogamy. However, they also need to give support to young people for achieving simpler goals, such as postponing sexual activity until they are older or using condoms to protect themselves against infection. Many thousands of lives could thus be saved.

Second, the challenge of stigma.

HIV-related stigma is a very heavy burden both on individuals living with HIV but also on implementing programmes.

The Lutheran World Federation and the Ecumenical Advocacy Alliance, as well as the Anglican Church, say "stigma and discrimination is a sin, and against the will of God".

Third, the challenge of leadership, the *sine qua non* of any effective AIDS programme.

How many church assemblies, synods or conclaves at the highest level have discussed AIDS? How many Bishops from the world's wealthiest countries make regular visits to their fellow church members in countries particularly badly affected by AIDS, as a sign of their solidarity?

Fourth, the challenge of treatment access, which will also be raised by other speakers on this panel.

Churches and Church leaders could become very important advocates for access to treatment for HIV. Indeed, they could also act as watchdogs to ensure that treatment reaches the poorest and neediest.

Church-related health care institutions must include the launching of programs to facilitate access to antiretroviral medicines among their most urgent tasks. Missionary hospitals have already taken on this role in a few countries and have become the backbone of often desolate health systems.

Dear friends,

Leadership, from the grassroots within Churches and from Church hierarchies themselves, is an important lever for the global fight against AIDS. Just yesterday, many of you took part in a demonstration for the Jubilee 2000 movement in order to remind us of how that movement reshaped the global political agenda on debt, as well as to the extent to which church involvement pushed that movement forward.

Despite the many achievements of the global AIDS movement, we are still far from our goal. Your work, as AIDS activists and in mobilizing the Churches around the world, is a vital part of strengthening the fight against AIDS, until we have achieved our goal: the victory over AIDS!

Please excuse my broken German and I thank you for your attention.