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**Speech of the Executive Director
at the Ecumenical Gathering
Access for All: The Faith Community Responding
Bangkok, 10 July 2004
by
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Thank you for inviting me to the Interfaith Session today. Faith leaders play a powerful role in shaping the opinions, attitudes, and behaviors of the followers of their faiths.

Religious organizations have a long history of activism on social justice issues, and you have standing to speak the world about the moral challenges of our time, including AIDS. Your organizations are also among the biggest service providers in the global AIDS response, delivering a substantial share of AIDS related care in many of the most heavily affected countries.

So today I want to thank you for your tremendous contribution, acknowledge the importance of your work, and challenge you to expand delivery of care and prevention, and to make sure these services meet the needs of those most in need.

New Report and Agenda for Action

Last week UNAIDS released our new Global Report on AIDS with the latest country-by-country estimates. It documents an epidemic that is growing increasingly severe. More people became newly infected with HIV in 2003 than in any previous year.

But our Report is much more than an account of the devastation of AIDS – it should be a springboard for action. The agenda outlined in the Report calls for: removing stigma as a barrier to delivery of services to marginalized groups; translating growing political commitment into specific actions that increase access to prevention and treatment; building political commitment throughout Asia to avert a catastrophic epidemic in the region; making sure funds are spent wisely and that there is ownership for AIDS programming on a national level; and, addressing serious human and institutional capacity needs.

Using Resources Well

More resources are needed for sure, but we also have to prove we can use resources well.

If we are going to make optimal use of funding to save lives, then we need to put an end to fragmented programming and conflicting requirements from multiple donors in the most heavily affected countries.

Each country ought to have one AIDS action framework, one national AIDS coordinating authority, and one agreed country-level monitoring system. These principles – called the Three Ones – are what are needed to really put countries in the driver's seat.

And because the Three Ones emphasize planning on a country level that involves multiple stakeholders, these principles provide an important opportunity to more closely involve faith based groups in planning a coordinated response.

Role of UNAIDS

UNAIDS will continue to work in close partnership with faith based groups. We are here to change the way the world responds to AIDS. As new resources become available, we help make the money work by: promoting ownership at the country

level; standing up for the needs of vulnerable groups; serving as a global knowledge fund that helps countries get best practices and other information; and, insisting on accountability, knowing that solid outcomes will mobilize future resources.

Challenge to Faith Based Groups

As you know, the AIDS epidemic is not just about a deadly virus. The epidemic is driven by social factors that include poverty, the unequal status of women, and marginalization of particular groups, including people who are living with HIV and AIDS, men who have sex with men, and drug users.

We need faith based groups to play an expanded role -- not just in delivery of care, but in leadership to address those social factors which make people vulnerable and fuel the epidemic. Faith based groups should be leaders in the effort to protect women and girls from infection, in standing up for the dignity and rights of marginalized groups, and in providing honest education about HIV.

Your organizations are an important means of support for youth in their transition to adulthood, and therefore faith leaders must work honestly with youth on issues of sexuality, reproductive health, and HIV prevention to help create responsible and informed young adults.

Faith leaders must especially show solidarity with other faith leaders who are living with HIV.

Dramatic progress in the global response to AIDS is within reach, and faith based organizations are a critical part of that response. But realizing your potential to tackle AIDS requires commitment to make your organizations focal points for action to address the issues that drive infection.

We hope for a day when: every church engages in open dialogue on issues of sexuality and gender difference; every synagogue mobilizes as advocates for global responses to fight HIV; every parish fully welcomes people who are HIV positive; every ashram understands and undertakes study and reflection on HIV; every pagoda is a place where young people learn the facts of HIV and AIDS; and every mosque is a safe place for seeking honest information on AIDS and referral to services.

Thank you again for inviting me to speak today.