

Press release

UNAIDS Executive Director Peter Piot praises religious groups' action on AIDS at Saddleback Church Global AIDS Summit

Washington, DC, November 29, 2007 – Speaking at the Saddleback Church Global AIDS Summit, UNAIDS Executive Director Dr. Peter Piot paid tribute to the contribution religious leaders have made to the global AIDS response, and the key role religious groups have played in providing HIV treatment, care and support in some of the remotest parts of the world.

Two days before World AIDS Day, he highlighted the fact that AIDS remains one of the greatest challenges facing our generation. He noted, however, that since the turn of the century there has been a long-overdue increase in action on AIDS. As a result, more than 2.5 million people in developing countries are now taking life-prolonging anti-retroviral drugs. In parts of Africa, Asia, the Caribbean, HIV infection levels are falling.

"A quarter century into the AIDS response, it is time to take stock of the progress we've made, and consolidate and scale up what's working," said Dr Piot. "It is also time to recognise that all of us can, and must, do more, if we are to get ahead of the epidemic."

Dr Piot called on the predominantly Christian religious leaders and activists gathered at Saddleback, and to the religious community worldwide, to join people from all walks of life in a truly exceptional response to this exceptional challenge.

"One of the things that make it so difficult to address AIDS is the stigma around the way HIV is transmitted. People don't lose their jobs or get beaten up if they have diabetes or cancer. Other people feel sorry for them. But if they have HIV they may have to contend with stigma, discrimination, ostracism."

He called on religious leaders to scale up efforts to promote tolerance: to denounce discrimination and violence based on gender, sexual orientation or social status, and to eradicate the stigma around AIDS. He encouraged them to reach out to groups who are marginalized by society and as a result at greater risk of HIV infection.

He also pointed out that a key driver in the 21st-century AIDS response was President Bush's State of the Union address in 2003, and the announcement of a \$15-billion commitment to tackle AIDS – the President's Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief (PEPFAR). Dr. Piot thanked the United States for making PEPFAR – the world's largest single funder of AIDS programs – a reality and noting the critical importance that the US maintain its leadership in the global AIDS response.

Media Contact: Joann Donnellan 703.966.1990 or joanndonnellan@comcast.net

UNAIDS is an innovative joint venture of the United Nations, bringing together the efforts and resources of the UNAIDS Secretariat and ten UN system organizations in the AIDS response. The Secretariat headquarters is in Geneva, Switzerland—with staff on the ground in more than 80 countries. Coherent action on AIDS by the UN system is coordinated in countries through UN theme groups, and joint programmes on AIDS. UNAIDS' Cosponsors include UNHCR, UNICEF, WFP, UNDP, UNFPA, UNODC, ILO, UNESCO, WHO and the World Bank. Visit the UNAIDS Web site at www.unaids.org.