



**Press
release**

FAITH-BASED ORGANIZATIONS IN MOZAMBIQUE RISE TO THE AIDS CHALLENGE

Second national seminar aimed at building capacities of religious congregations in response to the epidemic

Beira 8 June – The Mozambican chapter of the World Conference of Religions for Peace (WCRP/COREM – *Conselho das Religiões em Moçambique*), UNICEF and the Joint United Nations Programme on HIV and AIDS (UNAIDS) are joining forces as part of an initiative to strengthen the capacities of faith-based organizations in Mozambique to better respond to families and communities affected by HIV and AIDS.

Following the launching of the initiative in Maputo last September 2004, three national seminars were agreed upon. The first seminar was held in December 2004. The second seminar will be held in Beira at the Catholic University of Mozambique from the 8–10 June 2005. Participants include representatives from Islamic, Hindu, Bahai, Christian and Jewish faiths as well other religious groups.

“UNICEF is convinced that religious leaders can play an important role in changing the course of the HIV/AIDS pandemic, given their presence, influence, confidence and authority at the community level,” said Leila Pakkala, UNICEF Representative in Mozambique, on the eve of the seminar.

At the community level, faith-based organizations have long been in the forefront of reaching out to vulnerable families. In Mozambique, the number of people living with HIV in the country is projected to rise to 1.5 million in 2005 with women making up 58% of those infected. With the number of children orphaned by AIDS expected to double over the next five years, it is anticipated that the number of elderly-headed households will also increase.

“We need faith-based groups to play an expanded role – not just in delivery of care, but in leadership to address root causes that have fuelled this epidemic, such as socio-economic inequalities, marginalization of vulnerable people, poverty and gender issues,” said Telva Barros, UNAIDS Country Coordinator in Mozambique. “Faith-based groups should be leaders in the effort to protect women and girls from HIV infection, in standing up for the dignity and rights of people living with HIV and AIDS, in advocating for an open atmosphere of dialogue that rejects all forms of stigma, discrimination and denial and in providing honest education about HIV.”

The three-day seminar will address the following issues:

- Enhancing capacities of religious leaders to strengthen their interventions in line with the National AIDS Strategic plan.
- Prevention of HIV infection among adolescents and youth; and
- Integrating HIV education in theological curricula seminars.

The seminar will also discuss methods for preventing mother-to-child transmission, the issue of voluntary testing, support for people living with HIV and AIDS and access to resources.