

Faith-based groups bring hope for a fast-track HIV response



Debora Birx, United States Global AIDS Ambassador. © Freddie Allen/AMG

20 September 2016

"If there ever was a time to change words into action, it is today", said U.S. ambassador-at-large Deborah L. Birx, M.D., coordinator of the United States Government Activities to Combat HIV/AIDS and U.S. Special Representative for Global Health Diplomacy, at an interfaith prayer breakfast held during the United Nations General Assembly in New York on 20 September.

The event was promoted by the World Council of Churches–Ecumenical Advocacy Alliance (WCC-EAA), in collaboration with UNAIDS, the United States President's Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief and the United Nations Interagency Task Force on Religion and Development as an opportunity to strengthen relationships and forge new partnerships.

For Peter Prove, director of the WCC Commission of the Churches on International Affairs (CCIA), the group of co-sponsors of the interfaith prayer breakfast is “self-expressive of the forms of partnership the WCC seeks to promote and encourage between FBOs and faith communities of all religious traditions, governments and the UN”, he said. “The WCC seeks to model a strong, proactive, collaborative and compassionate response to HIV and AIDS and to move together from this commitment to action for the elimination of AIDS as a public health threat by 2013.”

Faith-based organizations (FBOs) have played a critical role in responding to HIV since the start of the epidemic more than 35 years ago. Many faith-based organizations have been delivering effective, high-quality HIV services, complementing national public health programmes in the countries most affected by HIV. Their position of trust at the heart of communities allows faith-based organizations to provide services and support that extend beyond the reach of many public sector health systems.

Luiz Loures, deputy executive director of programme, UNAIDS, and assistant secretary-general of the United Nations, stressed that faith communities are on the front of the struggle against the pandemic. “You are the ones who bring us hope. Your capacity needs to be incorporated in our way of work”, said Loures, who leads UNAIDS’ efforts in leveraging critical support to countries to end AIDS by 2030.

“At the end of the day our destiny is one and the same”, said Imman Abdul-Malik, president, NYC Family Day Inc., speaking on the need for stronger common actions by FBOs to end HIV.

In his address, Monsignor Robert J. Vitillo, general secretary of the International Catholic Migration Commission, expressed concern about the vulnerability of children facing HIV. “Children cannot speak for themselves. They need us to speak for them,” said the health representative of the Holy See.

Kalvin Leveille, health educator and HIV-positive speaker for Love Heals, offered a strong testimony to the participants of the prayer breakfast. “Ten percent of life is what happens to us; 90% is what we do about it,” he said. “We have to own where we are, successes and failures, in order to move forward. All of us need to be at the table if we want to overcome this epidemic.”

The engagement of the faith community is paramount to achieving the UNAIDS Fast-Track Targets and the Sustainable Development Goal target of ending the AIDS epidemic by 2030. Countries, faith communities and other partners recommitted to these targets during the June 2016 United Nations General Assembly High-Level Meeting on Ending AIDS in New York. Countries adopted a Political Declaration on Ending AIDS and the faith community issued a call to action to ensure that no one is left behind.

In the call to action, faith leaders pledged to take significant and sustained action during the next five years in four particular areas: reducing stigma and discrimination; increasing access to HIV services; defending human rights; and ensuring treatment for children. They called on all faith leaders to join them.

Participants included faith leaders from a multitude of religions, all of whom agreed to support a coordinated faith-based effort in responding to HIV. The call to action issued in June was reiterated and wide-ranging discussions were held that resulted in a number of strong follow-up recommendations and commitments to action over the next five years to ensure a fast-track faith-based response to end the AIDS epidemic by 2030.

Azza Karam, senior advisor on Culture at the United Nations Population Fund, stressed the exceptional number of side events that are taking place during the United Nations General Assembly. “It is an exceptional time to build stronger connections between the UN and faith-based organizations,” she said.

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