

“It will take faith to get down to business, to overcome HIV and AIDS”



WCC general secretary Rev. Dr Olav Fykse Tveit during the interfaith prayer service at the Interchurch Center Chapel in New York. Photo: Albin Hillert/WCC

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*By Albin Hillert**

As the United Nations General Assembly is getting into gear for the 72nd time in New York, USA, faith communities are mobilizing around issues surrounding HIV and AIDS, working to find common ground, and a shared, strong voice in working to overcoming the epidemic.

“Today we challenge ourselves,” said World Council of Churches general secretary Rev. Dr Olav Fykse Tveit, as leaders from a variety of faiths and confessions gathered at the Interchurch Center Chapel in New York on 12 September for an interfaith prayer service on the theme “Leading by Example: Faith and HIV Testing”. “We must show that HIV is not something that has gone away, even if we live in a context where we do not often hear about it.”

“As religious leaders, we are all called to lead by our examples, to fight stigma and discrimination, and to help promote access to testing and treatment,” Tveit added.

During the service, counselling and confidential HIV testing were offered onsite, as religious leaders testified to the importance of testing and treatment, and of being able to speak out publicly against stigma and discrimination.

Rev. Dr T. Kenjitsu Nakagaki, president of the Buddhist Council of New York, spoke to the importance of seeing HIV as something that runs through all communities, including communities of faith. “When we have a health issue like this, which is present across so many communities, we should certainly come together,” Nakagaki said. “One particular faith community can do one thing, but when we come together with our diverse views and we start speaking together, then we become much more powerful.”

“It will take faith communities to get down to the real business of fixing this problem,” said New York Imam Abdul Azeez. “As people of faith, we know that each one of us can impact the life of someone, to effect a positive change.”

Maura Drewry, who attended the event as one of a group of young adult volunteers from the Presbyterian Church in the USA, concluded, reflecting, “I really think that leading by example is something that as a person of faith I want to try to do. I think it’s often misconstrued that the church is putting a stigma on things, such as HIV and AIDS. Coming together, just acknowledging that’s not always the case, is just a wonderful thing to do.”

Following the 12 September event at the Interchurch Center Chapel, the World Council of Churches – Ecumenical Advocacy Alliance together with UNAIDS, the United States President’s Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief and the United Nations Interagency Task Force on Religion and Development are organizing an interfaith prayer breakfast in New York on 13 September, on the theme of “Fostering Partnerships for Fast Tracking Access to Testing and Treatment to infants, children and adolescents”.

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[Religious leaders and HIV testing, Leading by example to end AIDS](#)