

## WCC Pastoral letter calls for recommitment to tackling HIV and AIDS



*Conversation between Central Committee members in Trondheim. © Susanne Erlecke/EKD/WCC*

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Despite huge progress since AIDS was first identified 35 years ago, the threat of AIDS still haunts much of the world. 21 million people currently have no access to treatment of HIV, and AIDS-related illnesses are now the leading cause of death for adolescents in Africa. More than 2 million people are newly infected annually. The world is facing the catastrophe of 6 million AIDS-related orphans, and this figure is growing.

These shocking statistics are part of the reason why, at its Central Committee meeting in Trondheim, Norway at the end of June, the World Council of Churches (WCC) reaffirmed its commitment to eliminating AIDS as a public health threat by 2030.

Nyambura Njoroge, Presbyterian minister and WCC's Programme Executive of the Ecumenical HIV and AIDS Initiatives and Advocacy says the reaffirmation is vital because churches "continue to bury people from their congregations. We need to ensure that people in the pew have access to this pastoral letter so they feel part of the Christian community. For those living with HIV, we are continuing to commit ourselves to accompanying them."

Indeed, since 1984, the WCC has been among the vanguard of those responding to HIV in both compassionate care and advocacy against the root causes of vulnerability to infection. Among many other ground-breaking initiatives, in 1996, the WCC reminded churches to recognize the link between AIDS and poverty. It exhorted faith-based communities to advocate that antiretroviral treatments be made accessible to all. It has forced those tackling the disease to address stigma and discrimination, while encouraging accountability of governments and churches. WCC further advocates universal access to treatment and helps overcome political and legal barriers that deny rights for people living with HIV, while promoting sustainable resourcing.

Njoroge is therefore encouraged that so much progress has already been made. She urges "all Christians to remember how much we have prayed. Sometimes we forget how far we have come, and how many of our prayers have been answered."

As a result of huge global activism across all sectors, almost 16 million people are on treatment today. But more still needs to be done.

"It's very serious now because new infections are amongst adolescents. Many HIV-negative people are vulnerable," she says. "Some mothers unintentionally pass on the virus to the new-born babies. It is especially difficult for a mother to wake up and know she has passed on HIV. It involves guilt, shame even trauma."

The pastoral letter calls on church leaders to lead by example, provide for those in need and to use the churches' prophetic voice. As Njoroge says: "If you are a leader in church it is good for you to be tested, because religious figures are still held in very high regard in many communities. When a church leader talks about HIV it gives the

congregation permission to speak about taboo subjects. There is a segment of the Christian community that still believes that HIV is a punishment from God for sexual immorality. People who are stuck still see it as a moral issue.”

She also urges people to “see the connection between a violent environment, especially sexual and gender based violence, and HIV. Violent contexts are one of the major drivers of the pandemic, or they hinder its treatment.”

This is a point echoed by Dr Manoj Kurian, the coordinator of the WCC’s Ecumenical Advocacy Alliance, whose “Live the Promise” campaign coordinates church-based international advocacy on HIV. “HIV and AIDS,” he says, “alerts us to a particular condition that is much more than medical but is a social condition that reveals the vulnerabilities that we experience as human beings and societies. It’s a symptom of many deeper issues, which we need to continue to address whatever the situation.”

Moreover, he – perhaps controversially – sees the current economic climate not so much as a hindrance but a challenge. “It’s times of crisis that bring us to work together and do much better. Resources are a challenge, but only a challenge. Having fewer resources is not an excuse, but an opportunity to ask ourselves difficult questions and to continue to invest in our societies to ensure that we can overcome HIV.

“These issues of poverty and disease remind us why we are here and do what we do. It reminds us that it is our business to be on the side of those who are at the margins of society. Jesus is challenging us today.”

*\* Robert Bartram is a communications specialist with 20 years’ experience drawn from a range of governmental, inter-governmental and media organizations, based in Geneva.*

**More information:**

[WCC Central Committee Pastoral Letter: Churches Recommit to Accelerate HIV Response](#)

[Faith-based participation in the 21<sup>st</sup> International AIDS Conference \(16-22 July 2016\)](#)

[WCC Ecumenical HIV and AIDS Initiatives and Advocacy](#)

[WCC Ecumenical Advocacy Alliance’s Live the Promise Campaign](#)