

CHURCHES: BARRICADES AGAINST EXCLUSION

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SPEECH

By: Michel Sidibé, Executive Director of UNAIDS

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Churches as Barricades Against Exclusion

Your Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen, Brothers and Sisters.

I want to thank the World Council of Churches for the honour of being with you here today in Busan.

We are together, at the right time and at the right gathering, to forge tremendous change in the world. We share a bold and noble dream of global justice and peace. We may use different words, and work in different ways, but this is our common vision and our audacious goal: to end human suffering and to protect hope and dignity. I am convinced we can get there together.

The world is facing seismic political changes. Societies are at a tipping point. We face an array of new global realities in 2013, and each one presents a challenge and opportunity, not only to the global AIDS response, but to our shared ambition for global justice and peace.

The lingering global financial crisis is squeezing resources and goodwill, pitting health and development issues against each other. Growing political and social conservatism in many spheres threaten hard-won achievements in human rights and tolerance.

We cannot ignore the wave of social unrest and tragic violence sweeping Syria, Egypt and so many other countries of the Middle East.

There is rising public demand to act on climate change, where the failure to address issues in a few countries can lead to devastating consequences for the rest of the world. Across our planet, human rights, core values of human dignity and political integrity are threatened when claims to national security are allowed to trump equity.

For these and other reasons, people's confidence in classic models of governance and many public institutions is diminishing. Into the gap must flow a new paradigm of leadership that is more inclusive and more people-focused. The demand for such a paradigm is already fuelled by radical innovations in the democratizing power of technology and real-time communications. Global connectedness is just beginning to show its power and potential to advance social good and human development—but only if it is accessible and deployed equitably by all.

Over three decades of the AIDS response, I can say with confidence that we have learned precious lessons that are relevant to all who fight for equity, dignity, justice and peace. AIDS has shown that we can change the world when we put human beings—in their irrevocable, God-given dignity—at the centre of our action. The AIDS response has demonstrated the power of bringing those most marginalized to the tables where decisions and policies are made. AIDS has demonstrated the power of engaging a broad alliance of civil society partners to address the challenges of HIV, but also to raise awareness and demand action for issues and communities otherwise silenced in mainstream society.

Progress in the global AIDS response in recent years has been impressive. New HIV infections are declining faster across the globe. No one would have believed just ten years ago that we could extend HIV treatment to millions of people in developing countries. We have been able to demonstrate that the skeptics were wrong. Today almost 10 million people living with HIV are getting treatment in low and middle income countries, compared to just over 8 million in 2011. Seven countries in sub-Saharan Africa have reduced new HIV infections among children by 50% in just two years. By the end of 2015, we are working to announce to the world that babies are no longer born with HIV. And we know that HIV treatment also greatly reduces the chance of a person living with HIV from transmitting HIV to someone else, making it an essential tool to end the AIDS epidemic.

But the AIDS epidemic is not over. AIDS still kills 1.7 million people each year. AIDS is still the leading cause of death among young women globally, and the second-leading cause of death for young men. The persistence of the AIDS epidemic is a grim reminder that health is inextricably linked to justice and peace. Social justice is close to your

hearts, join us to make a call that no one should be left behind when it comes to access to life-saving services.

Just look at the new HIV infections in high-prevalence countries. Recent data from Rwanda and Zambia shows that over 50% of new, heterosexually acquired HIV infections occurred among sero-discordant couples. HIV remains a major challenge for couples, families and communities.

Yes, we scaled up HIV prevention, treatment, care and support services to millions of people—but these were many of the people who were easiest to reach. It will be much harder to reach those still in need—the ones whose lives are hanging in the balance because they remain hidden, or marginalized, or criminalized. It will require a mass mobilization of communities to demand HIV treatment, to address the stigma, discrimination, gender inequity and punitive laws that are so often the barriers to people coming forward for testing, or coming back to receive their results, or even access HIV treatment where it is now available. This requires an even greater commitment to equity, inclusiveness, human dignity and faith. This is why, more than ever before, we must strengthen the alliances between organizations of people living with and affected by HIV and religious communities and leaders. This is essential to ending stigma and discrimination and improving access to health and dignity for all.

Our common commitment to the poor will be a critical force to make sure that the funding needed to reach people with HIV testing and treatment is sustained amid the current fiscal crisis.

The AIDS response is the common entry point for so many of the issues of justice and peace that church communities are trying to address every day: pushing for equity for women and girls and an end to sexual violence. There is growing marginalization—people are excluded for their sexual orientation, for who they love and how they live. I am not here to promote homosexuality, or sex work or drug use, but I am here to promote the protection of those who are most vulnerable. We must ensure they are not hiding or being forced underground where they cannot access life-saving services. They should have an open door to come to your churches, and mosques and synagogues to ask for your support.

We must attack the stigma that separates humans into “deserving” or “undeserving” in the eyes of society and the justice system. We must recognize the dignity of prisoners and migrants, LGBT people, sex workers and people who use drugs. They are members of our families, churches and communities; they are our brothers, sisters,

children, and friends. Many of them are young people—our future and society's great hope. They deserve to be safe from unjust punishment, bigotry and violence.

Faith communities have always helped us make progress on these issues. Beginning in 1986, the late Jonathan Mann of the World Health Organization started to work with the World Council of Churches, under the leadership of the former General Secretary Emilio Castro. I am impressed and grateful for the innovative work of the WCCs' Ecumenical HIV/AIDS Initiative in Africa, which has advanced community dialogues on HIV, stigma and discrimination, which dates back to 1998.

Thanks to your training and dedication, over 30,000 priests have been equipped to lead these dialogues in their communities and act as agents of change. 160 theological colleges are using your books and resources. You have made tremendous strides to increase critical awareness about HIV, expanding the theological-ethical and practical competencies of churches and develop practical tools for faith communities well beyond Africa. This has been key to moving towards dignity for people living with and vulnerable to HIV in more a more just and caring global society.

Over the years you have generated an essential dialogue in faith communities about HIV, sexuality, stigma, discrimination and rights. Now it is time to push boundaries on issues of sexuality, stigma & rights. You must be barricades against exclusion.

The proportion of countries with antidiscrimination laws and regulations that protect people living with HIV rose from 56% to 71% in the last five years. Countries are increasing domestic investments in HIV-related legal services, so people living with and affected by HIV can seek justice from their own governments and communities. And faith communities remain one of our greatest allies in providing HIV prevention, treatment care and support for people and communities in need. Today we need to be inclusive if we want to achieve justice and peace. Faith communities are the barricades against societal tendencies of exclusion.

This is why I was so pleased last August, when UNAIDS joined the Ecumenical Advocacy Alliance, the Global Network of People Living with HIV and the International Network of Religious Leaders Living with and Affected by HIV to launch The *Framework for Dialogue*. This innovative tool provides practical steps to help faith communities and people living with HIV begin or improve inclusive and sustained dialogue and collaboration.

We are seeing results already. Wherever the framework has been piloted, we are seeing how it has triggered precious results. In Ethiopia, Malawi and Myanmar, people

living with HIV and religious leaders are already working together in new alliances to combat stigma and discrimination. The first Asia-Pacific regional dialogue on strengthening cooperation between faith-based organizations and networks of populations most affected by HIV was held in Bangkok this past June 2013. It sparked new ideas and working relationships spanning five countries and four religious groupings in Asia. And this is only the beginning.

I urge the fellowship of churches of the WCC to continue to speak out and reach out. Let me be clear: no one should be afraid when dialogue between faith communities and civil society exposes highly sensitive issues. No one must be silenced by discomfort or doubt. Only through brave, open-hearted discussion can we build mutual understanding and shared objectives.

By working together, UNAIDS and the churches can reinforce alliances between societal actors so that we can act as both translators and conduits of understanding within the community and between the community and government.

People living with HIV in need of spiritual guidance or life-saving health services must be confident to turn to their church for understanding and help. Throughout history, the “power of the pulpit” has moved people and communities from inertia to engagement; from talk to action; and from stigma and discrimination to healing the community and caring for the vulnerable. Faith communities can do more than advocate for justice and peace—they must create an unending demand for it. You are the signs and servants of justice and peace in the world today.

Let me finish by saying that the choices we make today, together, will have a direct impact on the number of people who live and the number who die in the coming years—from preventable diseases like AIDS, TB, hepatitis, malnutrition and complications of childbirth, and from violence and the consequences of inequity and injustice.

We must not take our foot off the pedal now. We must redouble our efforts. When what we look for is justice, I will refuse silence. We must advocate for those who are still waiting for access to HIV treatment. If we don’t pay now as a global community to finish the task we have started, then we will pay forever—both financially and in human lives.

We cannot let shifts in the geopolitical climate throw us off our course or drive a wedge between us. Today we must join our strengths again, take control and influence the trajectory of our journey. To borrow your language, “We must go the extra mile.” We will travel father together than alone.

Let us achieve our vision of zero new HIV infections, zero discrimination, and zero AIDS-related deaths in order to end this epidemic in our lifetime.

Thank you.

UNAIDS

The Joint United Nations Programme on HIV/AIDS (UNAIDS) leads and inspires the world to achieve its shared vision of zero new HIV infections, zero discrimination and zero AIDS-related deaths. UNAIDS unites the efforts of 11 UN organizations—UNHCR, UNICEF, WFP, UNDP, UNFPA, UNODC, UN Women, ILO, UNESCO, WHO and the World Bank—and works closely with global and national partners to maximize results for the AIDS response.

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