

To conquer COVID-19, build on experiences in dealing with the HIV pandemic and act holistically in the context of Health and Healing!

*I am going to bring it recovery and healing; I will heal them and reveal to them abundance of prosperity and security. Jeremiah 33:6 NRSV*

The WCC-Ecumenical HIV and AIDS Initiatives and Advocacy (EHAIA) International Reference Group and (IRG) the WCC-Ecumenical Advocacy Alliance (EAA) HIV Strategy Group (SG) conducted their annual meeting in the form of a series of online video conferences from 25 to 29 May 2020, in the context of the COVID- 19 pandemic. The Initiatives which have met jointly since 2016, and were scheduled to meet in Johannesburg, transformed their deliberations to videoconferences, bringing together 31 individuals from 18 nations in Africa, Europe, Asia, the Caribbean and North America, including representatives from the All Africa Conference of Churches (AACC) and the Conference of Churches in Asia (CCA). The Ecumenical HIV Community worldwide, who continues to struggle in overcoming the HIV Pandemic for the last 36 years, recognised strong similarities in their encounters with the new pandemic. People living with HIV, key populations and HIV programmes are experiencing renewed challenges in accessing prevention, treatment, care and support for HIV and other chronic diseases. There are also parallels in the manifestation of fear, stigma and discrimination. The group also shared their demanding work, identifying new opportunities for the HIV community to unite and act, to provide their wealth of experience in accompaniment, service provision and Advocacy to the communities facing the new challenges. The meetings also reviewed the ecumenical HIV response in the context of the Health and Healing work, tracing and acknowledging the common history and diverse paths taken, the achievements, challenges and many lessons learned.

Rev. Phumzile Mabizela, Executive Director of the International Network of Religious Leaders Living with or personally affected by HIV and AIDS (INERELA +), and the Co-Moderator of the WCC- EAA Strategy Group and a member of the EHAIA IRG, said: *"HIV has taught us that overcoming pandemics needs a forthright and holistic approach"*. She also emphasised, *"We need to acknowledge and depend on the experiences and the agency of those who are most affected by the pandemic and invest in a long-term commitment to stay the course, with resilience"*.

Assessing the impact of COVID-19 on the work of HIV, the advisors received the 2019 programmatic reports from WCC-EHAIA, WCC-EAA and the WCC Health & Healing Programme. The joint meeting reflected on and provided guidance for changes to be considered for the 2020 planned work in the current context.

*"Online platforms and to meet 'virtually' is of critical importance, but to transform society, we cannot abandon real life accompaniment and solidarity on the ground. In this period of uncertainty and financial hardships, the young people in many regions and localities have unequal access to both internet and electricity and cannot afford expensive internet tariffs and access to online schooling. These differences are a major deterrent to truly equal*

*engagement and participation.*” said Ms Bethel Mhone, the Co-Moderator of the WCC-EHAIA IRG. *“It is only by keeping the living and dynamic engagement of young people and the leadership of our churches at the community level that we can accompany and advocate in this evolving situation, connecting and maintaining the dialogue between the communities, the national, regional and international platforms”* Ms. Mhone added.

Responding to the directive of the WCC Executive Committee to enhance the cooperation between EHAIA and EAA and to bring more coherence of the whole field of health and healing work, the meeting discussed the proposal for the re-establishment of a WCC commission on health, following the 11th WCC Assembly. Rev. Godson Lawson Kpavuvu, the Co-Moderator of the WCC-EHAIA IRG observed, *“We reflected together on participation at the 11th WCC Assembly as well as the possible direction and nature of the WCC's holistic health and healing work can take, beyond the Assembly. We need the rich expertise and experience of the Churches and communities from the different facets of healing ministry to work together, sharing knowledge and resources, to be an effective instrument of God.”*

Rev Fr JP Mokgethi-Heath, who is also a member of both WCC-EHAIA IRG and WCC-EAA HIV SG observed, *“It is also our hope as we discuss the plans for the future, that we will find ways for the Healing ministry of the church to increasingly become a sacred and safe space, which is responsive and present where there is pain, exclusion and misunderstanding. We need to reaffirm and strengthen health-related ministries' work alongside the services required to overcome sexual and gender-based violence, and in practising inclusive approaches to human sexuality. The role of faith communities in providing faith specific sexuality education will be key to achieving this.”*

Rev. Dr Mikie A. Roberts the programme executive for Spiritual Life and for Faith and Order, of the WCC, who guided the prayers for the meeting said *“Our places of worship should submit to the will of God to remain centres of healing. Churches and church run institutions are called to uphold the dignity of every child of God, celebrating their uniqueness, especially those who are in the margins of society and whose vulnerability is increased when excluded.”*

Dr Isabel Apawo Phiri, the Deputy General Secretary of WCC, who convened the meeting stated, *‘To conquer COVID-19, let us build on our experiences of dealing with the HIV pandemic and act holistically in the context of Health and Healing, to remain relevant and ready to respond to the emerging health challenges and serve the welfare of humanity!’* She also affirmed that the WCC response to HIV and any pandemic is stronger when we work together.