



RELIGIOUS LEADERS CONSULTATION ON ENDING THE AIDS EPIDEMIC IN THE CARIBBEAN

1-2 February 2017

Port-of-Spain, Trinidad and Tobago

Theme: 'Religious Leaders' Contribution to the End of AIDS by 2030'

Consultation Communiqué

Pan Caribbean Partnership against HIV and AIDS (PANCAP)

Consultation Communiqué

The Regional Consultation of Religious Leaders, convened at the Hyatt Regency Trinidad in Port of Spain, Republic of Trinidad and Tobago on 1 – 2 February 2017, brought together 55 Religious Leaders from 14 Caribbean countries, representing Christian, Muslim, Hindu, Baha'i and Voodoo religions, Pan Caribbean Partnership Against HIV and AIDS (PANCAP), United Nations and regional officials. It was coordinated by the Planning Committee of Religious Leaders and PANCAP and focused on the theme, *Religious Leaders' Contribution to the End of AIDS by 2030*.

The Context

Religious leaders affirmed the reality of God by invoking the divine presence prior to the beginning of each session. Leaders were mindful that our religious heritage positioned us to engage in discussions about faith, justice, love and peace, mindful that we are one family under God. At the opening ceremony, the Chair of the Conference Pastor Winston Mansingh, President, Faith Based Network of Trinidad and Tobago, outlined that the overarching objective of the consultation was to focus on the contributions that religious leaders can make towards ending the epidemic by 2030. The aims were to:

- use the targets of the 2016 UN High Level Meeting Political Declaration as guidelines for action
- agree on the role religious organizations can play to promote healthy living and well-being for all ages in the region
- identify best practices which religious leaders can contribute to ending the AIDS epidemic
- identify gaps to be filled in prevention;
- identify types of regional cooperation to be undertaken among religious groups/organisations; and
- identify resources required to facilitate implementation of recommendations.

Giving welcome addresses and remarks, The Hon. Ayanna Webster-Roy, Minister of State within the Office of the Prime Minister of Trinidad and Tobago pointed to her country's commitment at the highest level to the aims of the conference with the recent reinstatement of the National AIDS Coordinating Committee including representatives from religious organisations under the umbrella of the Prime Minister's Office. Dr Edward Greene, United Nations Secretary-General Special Envoy for HIV in the Caribbean brought greetings on behalf of the Secretary-General and highlighted the imperatives for fast-tracking the response to AIDS. The issues reflected in the remarks of Dr Kevin Harvey, Regional Director of the AIDS Healthcare Foundation (AHF), included the focus of AHF on strengthening partnerships with special reference to supporting a coordinated approach to the implementation of the recommendations from the consultation. Mr. Dereck Springer, Director of the PANCAP Coordinating Unit brought greetings on behalf of the CARICOM Secretary-General, expressed appreciation for the collaboration with The Global Fund and the support of AHF and UNAIDS. He reinforced the principles agreed to by the Conference Planning Committee of Religious Leaders as follows:

- Enhancing family life and focusing on those in need
- Increasing access to treatment and affordable medicines
- Reducing gender inequality including violence against women, girls and adolescents
- Promoting sexual and reproductive health and rights including age appropriate sexual education
- Implementing legislative reforms for modifying AIDS-related stigma and discrimination

The Keynote and Feature Addresses: Two complementary visions for ending AIDS

In his Keynote address, Prof. Clive Landis, Deputy Principal, The University of the West Indies, Cave Hill Campus, identified the major scientific developments leading to the conclusion that anti-retroviral therapy (ART) delivers a life-saving benefit to persons living with HIV by abolishing end-stage AIDS. But the power of ART extends to a public prevention benefit as well. “*Treatment as Prevention*” is the scientific breakthrough of the decade showing that persons living with HIV who achieve viral suppression on ART are non-infectious. Hence, an important avenue to ending AIDS is removing societal barriers that stand between persons living with HIV and effective ART treatment. Everyone in society therefore has a rational self-interest in eliminating stigma and discrimination in order to create a supportive environment where people feel secure enough to know their status, to access ART medication and to achieve viral suppression. These attitudes will have the effect of lowering HIV viral load in the population and hence limit HIV transmission in society.

Rev. Phumzile Mabizela, Executive Director of International Network of Religious Leaders Living With of Personally Affected by HIV and AIDS (INERELA), giving an inspiring feature address shared her experience as a faith leader who is living with HIV. She encouraged religious leaders to see themselves as a positive force for change and advocates for removing policy and legislative barriers in order to effectively deal with HIV. She challenged participants to lead by example, to reclaim the dignity of sex and sexuality, and to view HIV as a justice issue to which religious leaders should appropriately respond by addressing the structural injustices that make people vulnerable. In this regard she identified six ‘evils’ that need to be addressed – Stigma, Shame, Denial, Discrimination, Inaction and Mis-action (SSDDIM). She urged participants to stand in solidarity with those affected by HIV.

The consultation also welcomed Dr Luiz Loures, Deputy Executive Director, UNAIDS who gave the closing address. He encouraged religious leaders to remain committed to the very bold recommendations. He pointed to his association with PANCAP from its inception and pleasure that it continues to be the glue around which creative ventures like this could galvanise the regions stakeholders including governments, NGOs, religious groups, private sector, youth, civil society and parliamentarians. He pledged UNAIDS’ continued support to the Caribbean partnership and pointed to the 2015 Memorandum of Understanding between UNAIDS and PANCAP aimed at collaborating in the venture to fast-track the end of the AIDS epidemic.

Perspectives of Religious Organisations on the prospects for ending AIDS

Three country presentations from Belize, Jamaica, and Trinidad and Tobago illustrated some best practices to inform the dialogue within the working groups. They were complemented by a special session led by Dr Nyambura Njoroge, Programme Executive, World Council of Churches (WCC), on that organisation’s ecumenical campaign “Thursdays in Black: Toward a

World without gender-based violence and rape.” A background paper on PANCAP pointed to best practices and together they formed a useful basis for dialogue around treatment as prevention within three working groups.

Recommendations

Two extended periods of working groups and discussions by religious and lay leaders resulted in the following actions:

- Supporting the “Fast-Tract Targets” in the 2016 UN High Level Political Declaration to fast-track the end of the AIDS epidemic by 2030;
- Promoting healthy living of people at all ages of the life cycle by placing emphasis on plugging the Prevention gaps that include stressing family values, age appropriate sexual education, and creative ways of communication and dissemination of information to reach various audiences;
- Facilitating best practices through the process for effective support and leadership in the area of treatment and care;
- Paying particular attention to actions that address the reduction of violence against women, girls and adolescents and the inclusion of men and boys in this venture;
- Seeking to secure sustainable technical and financial resources for programmes led by religious groups through shared responsibility and collaboration with government and non-governmental stakeholders and development partners;
- Exploring the short and medium actionable recommendations of the PANCAP Justice For All (JFA) Roadmap, especially in so far as they enable religious groups and organisations to effectively address the gaps in prevention and treatment interventions and continuing the dialogue on how to proceed with those elements yet to be resolved;
- Establishing the foundations of a Network of Religious Leaders interconnected with national focal groups to achieve a more consolidated approach to ending AIDS with a mechanism for effective communication and dissemination of information;
- Seeking to engage representatives of key populations including men who have sex with men, sex workers and injecting drug users and others in programmes aimed at identifying respective rights and responsibilities involved in the process toward the elimination of AIDS-related stigma and discrimination;
- Noting areas of litigation that may challenge religious values and the responses required to harmonise principles and practices around human rights, human sexuality and human dignity.
- Reach out to other FBOs who were not included in the discussion to get their feedback on the matters raised.

Next Steps

Religious Leaders agreed to:

- Establish a Regional consultative group working virtually toward the implementation of the recommendations;
- Discuss the recommendations for action with their national religious councils and provide a progress report to the regional consultative group by 1 July 2017;
- Share information on activities initially using the PANCAP website;
- Consider the possibility of follow up regional workshops, 'think tanks' and consultations.

Expressions of Gratitude

Commendations were extended to the Chair and Planning Committee, the Keynote and Featured Speakers, the PANCAP Coordinating Unit and collaborating partners, The Global Fund, AHF and UNAIDS, the media and the management and staff of the Hyatt Regency Trinidad.

We remain grateful to God for the vision provided religious leaders and other stakeholders for coming together in this fashion to deliberate on matters of faith and practices. As religious leaders, we are committed to the fight against HIV and AIDS and we are convinced that with God all things are possible in the march towards the realisation of our full humanity in God and with each other.