

UNITED NATIONS



NATIONS UNIES

THE DEPUTY SECRETARY-GENERAL

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REMARKS TO INTERFAITH PRAYER BREAKFAST:

“A DIALOGUE ON LEADERSHIP:

MOVING FROM COMMITMENT TO ACTION”

New York, 10 June 2011

[Salutations]

I am honoured to join you, distinguished religious leaders of different faiths. You are setting a fine example of what the United Nations is all about: strength in diversity.

Those were very inspiring opening prayers. I thank those who led them.

Many leaders have come to the United Nations this week to talk about AIDS, but you are among the most trusted of all.

That is why your voices are so important. Because of the gravity of the situation, you are being called upon to address issues that are not normally part of our dialogue.

We have to be bold, even if that takes us beyond our comfort zone. This is true for all of us, for me as a mother, for the Secretary-General, for individuals around the World.

You more than anyone can be forceful advocates against stigma.

You are natural activists who can change attitudes.

You know that protecting lives is as important as saving souls.

For those of you in communities where discrimination persists, I urge you: speak out. End marginalization. Make it clear that the doors to your houses of worship are open to all people coping with AIDS.

When you see a family shuns someone because they have HIV, or a community reject a member with AIDS, do not be silent; be a force for reconciliation. Generate understanding so that all people can enjoy the dignity and respect that is their birthright.

All human beings, no matter what their faith, are equally worthy of care. That is why it is so important for you to call for equal access to care for all people – regardless of their religion, circumstances or sexual orientation.

We will also look to you to advocate for people living with HIV to be involved in the AIDS response, especially in your own faith-based activities.

You can make the difference between shame and pride, stigma and acceptance, life and death.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Beyond medical needs, people also have spiritual needs.

Health experts can work hard to heal bodies, but we need you to help heal people's hearts.

I am speaking not only of those who are sick and dying, but also those who are left behind. Young children who lose their parents. Grandparents who must care for their grandchildren.

Religious leaders also provide care and support at times of crisis.

When natural disaster strikes, when poverty worsens, when fighting breaks out – people flock to their houses of worship. You provide shelter and relief.

Thirty years ago, AIDS was a death sentence – and in too many communities, the sentence began with exile to a world of isolation.

No truly compassionate faith can abide adding to the suffering of an ill person by shunning them in their time of need.

The great religions that you represent cherish human life and human dignity, and you must be faithful to that calling.

We have come a long way since the early days of the epidemic, when some religious figure, sometimes out of ignorance but at times out of prejudice, suggested the disease was a punishment from God. But stigma and discrimination still persist.

That destructive mentality can only be fought by love and compassion. No matter what your religion, your faith or your God, these values are universal. Let compassion and care be our guiding spirit as we battle – and beat – this epidemic.

Thank you.

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