

## **A Dialogue on Leadership: Moving from Commitment to Action Interfaith Prayer Breakfast during the 2011 UN Review on AIDS, New York, 10 June 2011 at the Ford Foundation<sup>1</sup>**

On the final day of the United Nations High Level Meeting on HIV and AIDS, 10 June, the Ecumenical Advocacy Alliance co-organized an Interfaith Prayer Breakfast with UNAIDS and UNFPA, in collaboration with other religious organizations. The event was hosted by the Ford Foundation in New York and was attended by approximately 150 religious leaders and faith-based organization representatives, governmental leaders, senior UN officials, civil society representatives and people living with HIV.

**Rabbi Julie Schonfeld (Rabbinical Assembly, New York) and Bishop Gunnar Stålsett (European Council of Religious Leaders) served as Co-Moderators.** Rabbi Schonfeld welcomed everyone to the interfaith prayer breakfast. She expressed her deep gratitude for those present that had come to continue the discussion that started in March 22-23, 2010 in the Netherlands, where religious leaders from around the world gathered in active dialogue with people living with HIV and especially young people who shared their lived experience and challenges. She noted that these religious leaders from across many traditions discussed how they can all can work together to bring greater access to health care and treatment for people living with HIV and AIDS, bring dignity and well being to those living with HIV and reduce stigma. She emphasized the need to seek cooperation across sectors in government, civil society, and religious communities.

**Ms. Marta Tellado, Vice President of Communications at the Ford Foundation** welcomed everyone to the Ford Foundation. Ford is celebrating 75 years this year. She expressed her appreciation for the shared commitment to fairness and equity that continue to inspire and guide their work and renews the convictions to stay in the frontlines of social justice and the fight for human rights. She noted that faith-based commitment is crucial in efforts to stem and improve life, as well as in fighting stigma and discrimination. She thanked everyone for their demonstrated courage and commitment to those who lack a voice.

### **Opening Prayers**

Opening prayers were led by:

#### **Rev. TK Nakagaki, Interfaith Center of New York.**

Rev. Nakagaki's prayers highlighted three main points:

- The importance to respect life and remember lives lost due to HIV and AIDS
- Interdependence – that humans are not alone. We live and work together, hence respect self and others
- Not to forget beginners/pure mind

**Rabbi Rolando Matalon, Congregation B'nai Jeshurun,** offered a prayer for the people living with HIV and AIDS who live in pain and are marginalized and stigmatized. He prayed for wisdom to form global durable partnerships and also courage to sustain efforts and bring healing, well-being and joy.

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<sup>1</sup> Report compiled by Christine Mangale and Anne-marie Coonan, Rapporteurs.

### **Imam Abdul-Malik Ali, Masjidut-Taqwa, Trenton, New Jersey**

Imam Abdul-Malik Ali prayed for blessings, for healing of minds and hearts and souls in this challenging time of HIV and AIDS. He prayed for energy and motivation so as to inspire solidarity among religious leaders as they influence and educate masses. He noted that each one is a mirror image of the other, brothers and sisters.

### **Opening Panel**

#### **Speaker 1: Dr. Asha-Rose Migiro, Deputy Secretary General of the United Nations**

Dr. Migiro expressed the importance of religious leaders' voices and faith based organizations in the response to HIV and AIDS. She said that faith leaders are the most trusted of all and have a huge role to play in minimizing stigma and discrimination against people living with HIV in communities. She urged them to speak out because protecting lives is as important as saving lives. During times of crisis people often flock to houses of worship to seek understanding and support, and a positive HIV diagnosis could often be one of these moments.

Most importantly, she stressed that religious leaders are natural activists who can change attitudes, that all human beings are worthy of care, equal access for all regardless of faith or sexual orientation. She noted that religions cherish human life and dignity and faith based organizations provide care and support and relief during natural disasters. Because stigma and discrimination still persist, universal values of love and compassion should be guiding principles. Dr Migiro also noted the immense progress that has been made in the faith response, from once considering HIV to be a punishment to now the current, engaged response.

#### **Speaker 2: His Excellency Ratu Epeli Nailatikau, President of the Republic of Fiji Suva**

The President of Fiji spoke of the importance of leaders working together to build stronger partnerships so universal access becomes a reality. He said the declaration needs to be turned into action. He also pointed out that religious leaders' voices and influence is important and shapes public opinion, has the capacity to generate, break the silence around HIV and end stigma and discrimination that is still present in many communities today. He noted the importance of faith based organizations in providing services in hard-to-reach areas within developing countries, such as in rural settings. He cited as an asset, examples of how religious leaders run health care institutions for voluntary counseling and testing, and treatment, care, and support.

He noted that faith based organizations have learned hard lessons that others could learn from such as overcoming stigma, integrating services, maintaining volunteers even in the face of huge burdens, working with parents and families, and encouraging and listening to young people. He stressed that, although there was not agreement of every point with faith leaders, discussion could be encouraged to achieve consensus, as was the norm within the Pacific way of doing things.

He also posed questions for reflection for discernment and to learn from previous experiences so that the same struggles are not repeated again: "What has worked well, what has not gone so well, how did young people teach tolerance, what might government, NGOs, people living with HIV learn from these lessons? Where do we need to draw on the skills and specific expertise of each other?" He encouraged the diverse group of people present to use areas of tension to grow, develop and shape a future together.

**Speaker 3: Her Excellency Callista Mutharika, First Lady of the Republic of Malawi**

The First Lady noted the important role that faith based organizations play in providing services in rural settings, providing 37 percent of all services in the country. In Malawi, the Government has set up the Malawi Interfaith AIDS Association (MIAA) to help to coordinate the faith response to HIV within the country. In Malawi, faith based organizations were some of the first to provide prevention, treatment, care and support in communities. They were also critical to spiritual and psychosocial counseling for those living with and affected by HIV and AIDS. There is also an annual interfaith prayer breakfast for people living with and affected by HIV in Malawi.

She expressed her concern on the budget cuts that threaten to reverse gains and the impact on programs. She also noted that maintaining the highest political will be a catalyst for funding. She stressed her faith and belief that it is an opportune moment for people of faith to turn to God for divine intervention and guidance as the world seeks a cure for HIV and AIDS.

**Speaker 4: Bishop Yvette Flunder, City of Refuge United Church of Christ**

Bishop Flunder's remarks were drawn from her experience working with African Americans affected by HIV and AIDS in the US, Mexico and Africa. She spoke of the role of faith in the human rights and religious values movement surrounding the AIDS pandemic. She cited statistics from the United States that 20% of those living with HIV do not know their status late diagnoses are common; African Americans are disproportionately represented in this statistics and late diagnoses could lead to less effective treatment and eventually death. Late diagnoses could also lead to an increase in transmission of the virus to other, as proper precautions would not be taken.

According to Bishop Flunder, although there can be many barriers to finding out HIV status, one of the most prevalent was fear of the stigma and discrimination that would come with a positive result, including fear of stigma within faith communities. While there are struggles within the faith response to HIV, there is a need to provide treatment without judgment. Even though faith communities may struggle with issues such as condoms and needle exchange, she encouraged all participants to focus on life over political struggles. She noted the incredible power of faith communities to reach out to networks, to inspire volunteerism, and to reach families and communities with their messages.

She said that the prayer breakfast was an example of a growing movement towards the importance of life and compassion. Despite disparities within religions, love is a family value that exists in every religion, and religious institutions that provide much-needed services should be an entry point of network connections to services for all. She noted that often it is the poorest people, who tend to be more religious, who are more vulnerable to HIV. She encouraged faith communities to reach out to the farthest edges of communities, to those most vulnerable. For example, in San Francisco, Bishop Flunder reaches out to transgendered people and provides healing untied to judgment but tied to justice. The community has formed a gospel choir, which has been visited by representatives of the Vatican. She encouraged all faith leaders to continue to work together until there is a cure for HIV and AIDS.

**Speaker 5: Mr. Pablo Torres Aguilera, YPLHIV Office, dance4life**

Mr. Torres Aguilera, a young person living with HIV, was moved by the previous speakers' powerful words. He urged all to seize this amazing opportunity to take messages and commitments back to their countries and communities and to make sure the commitments are met. He also said that it is time to recognize what needs to be done, but also to recognize what has already been done. He urged attendees to think about what roles they will play in the work of the HIV and AIDS response and that it is the opportune moment to develop a dialogue and work as a team to end stigma and discrimination. The main tasks are to open communication with people living with HIV and AIDS, women, youth, men

who have sex with men, drug users, sex workers and all the key affected populations.

Based on his experience working at the community level, Mr. Torres Aguilera gave examples of the great achievement and impact he had witnessed when religious leaders worked together at the community level with people living with HIV and also worked to eradicate homophobia and echoed earlier sentiments calling for healing without judgment. People living with HIV are still religious and spiritual beings and need to be within faith based communities and included in faith work.

Bishop Gunnar thanked all speakers for being specific and giving voice to those who are often anonymous in these discussions. The panelists helped to break the barrier at the Interfaith Prayer Breakfast the way it was being broken and included in the political declaration coming out of the United Nations General Assembly Special Session. He noted that this prayer breakfast was a continuation of a series of meetings to discuss how we can strengthen and build partnerships to mobilize people.

### **Table Discussions and Report Back**

Attendees then participated in a fifteen minute table discussion at their respective tables to discuss the question: "How can we strengthen and build strategic partnerships across our respective sectors of the HIV response so that Universal Access becomes a reality for all in our countries by 2015?" After the small group discussions, the co-moderators invited each of the 14 tables to share one main idea to all attendees. The following are the key points shared by each of the tables.

1. All humans deserve dignity, without discrimination, without borders (social, political, and geographical), through creation of a comprehensive health care system for people living with HIV and AIDS.
2. Compromise and respect without judgment for justice.
3. We can build special partnerships with and between most at risk groups: men who have sex with men, commercial sex workers, prisoners, and injecting drug users, and contribute to the UNAIDS strategy of zero new infections, zero deaths, and zero discrimination.
4. Engage with communities and people through coalitions of faith-based organizations committed to non-judgmentalism and promote justice without judgment using information, education and social networks.
5. Bring the debate to local communities and develop resources to help religious leaders start the conversation.
6. Come out of the box. Come out of the comfort zone. Roll up our sleeves. Go out there. Come out of our suits. Be of service to the communities.
7. Healing without judgment and being open to and knowing the needs of the others. It is what it is.
8. Recalling the parable of the lost sheep, we must always look for the individual within all of us.
9. Transform laws and hearts to build an integrated network for healing without judgment. Integrated health, based in interaction with young people in partnership with everyone. Promote the unconditional love.
10. We need to push collaboration further than only linkages. There is the need to create real partnerships and create universal access, with those and for those who need it most: men who have sex with men, injecting drug users, sex workers, and others at risk. We need a common understanding of human rights.
11. After being inspired in this meeting, when we go home alone, worn out– how do we take the global commitment like we have here into our local context towards zero infection, zero stigma

and zero AIDS-related deaths?

12. We need to engage in our shared responsibility and commitment to a comprehensive approach, which includes naming the issues, the populations, people who are affected, money, and faith issues. We need to be specific, transparent, public and accountable.
13. We need partnerships across sectors. Religious, governmental, and health-based organizations must all work hand-in-hand together to combat the disease. HIV and AIDS must not only be considered a sexualized disease, but rather de-stigmatize the language of testing. HIV is a virus, not a moral issue.
14. Build capacity through faith-based organizations and leaders to capitalize on their constituencies. Evangelicals and conservatives have huge access to influence and to funding. Unity in our voice is what will end stigma.

## **Closing Remarks**

Closing remarks were offered by Bishop Gunnar. He urged participants to continue to hear voices and share suffering. He also spoke of prayers and the hope represented in those prayers for those living with and affected by HIV and AIDS. He noted, “We are all standing in the need of prayers, everyone in high position, marginalized, carrying the cross on suffering from whatever stigma is put on them, all need prayers.” Religion is in our lives for better or worse, but this prayer breakfast is certainly from the better side – the side that unites, cures, heals, deals with people’s wounds as they are and not as we wish them to be.

He expressed gratitude to all those who had made the gathering possible, to the speakers and to the Executive Director of UNAIDS. He said UNAIDS is a “carrier of hope, [a] global instrument that unites us, makes it possible for us to look forward to the future, [a] formula of hope and cure.” He closed by noting that saying Amen is easy, doing Amen is the hard part.

## **Closing Prayers**

**Mr. Homi D. Gandhi, Zoroastrian Association**, offered a prayer expressing that there are different types of healers, including a surgeon who heals with a knife. Among them, the leader of all is the one who heals with the holy words. Prayer is for the whole harmony of humankind. All should be united and be one with all religions, and be united in goodness and free of deceit. The religions are truly blessed, and find salvation through righteousness. They are in communion with the wise laws.

**Swami Pragyapad, Art of Living Foundation, India** offered prayers for protection, nourishment and strength – so that all may experience the brilliance of spirituality and not oppose each other, so that there can be peace on this earth. He also said prayers so all can be happy, joyous, and free from sorrow.

**Fr. Leonid Kishkovsky, Moderator of *Religions for Peace***, prayed for blessings and sustenance of leaders and communities of faith as they reach out with care and support for the sick and the suffering. He asked for blessings for the collaboration and partnerships with the leaders of nations and international communities, so that the partnerships can express the wholeness and well-being of the whole human family, persons and communities suffering from HIV and AIDS.