

THE UGANDA DECLARATION (<http://www.welcomingresources.org/uganda.htm>)

Introduction and Background

In the very first years of the HIV/AIDS pandemic across the world, people with AIDS were shunned by their families, religions and communities. It wasn't long, however, before faith communities began to reach out to support orphans, provide medical care, engage in grief ministries and more. Stigma and discrimination of HIV positive people declined and grassroots leaders and experts emerged in Africa, Asia, Europe and the Americas inspiring millions to work for prevention. Whole cultures shifted and paired traditional music, storytelling and healing models with medical models to stem the spread of HIV.

Today, this progress is being threatened by increasing homophobia in the name of religion. When religion is quick to judge, condemn and reject rather than love, inspire and bless, it becomes a damning force rather than a life giving one.

Uganda's harsh "anti-homosexuality" bill originally proposed the execution of lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) people and became a widely publicized example of state sanctioned persecution of people based on sexual orientation and gender identity. The bill included penalties for giving information about homosexuality, even life-saving HIV/AIDS prevention information. Pro-LGBT leaders from Uganda and across the world spoke out and pushed Uganda's parliament to reconsider their actions. But, even if this draconian bill is defeated or modified, life imprisonment is already a punishment for LGBT people under Ugandan law. Sexual minorities there have few rights and live in constant fear. Uganda is not alone in its criminalization of LGBT people. Seven countries allow the death penalty for homosexuality and 73 more have laws that make people criminals because of who they love or who they are. These laws combined with religious persecution based on sexual orientation or gender identity are the backdrop for so much violence. For example:

- In Malawi, a couple was imprisoned for announcing their engagement.
- Lesbians in the townships of South Africa can still expect to be raped as a "cure."
- Young gay men in the privacy of their own home in Jamaica were attacked with machetes.
- Transgender women and men are often targets for violence in the United States.
- In Pakistan, lesbians may face "honor" killings, and gay men are targets for police actions.
- Since November 2008, at least 8 transgender people have been murdered in Turkey.

With the increase of religiously based homophobia and violence against gay people, the infection rate around HIV/AIDS also increases. People are afraid to be identified, to get tested, and to be treated.

Uganda's culture, like many the world over, is a faith-based one. Its population is over 40% Catholic and 35% Anglican. Core Christian values of love of neighbor and welcome of strangers are part and parcel of the culture's fabric and do not allow for the persecution of LGBT people. All religions hold human beings as worthy of respect. And, despite consistent condemnation of LGBT people, even Vatican officials could not rationalize the imprisonment or execution of LGBT people and publicly announced its support for the decriminalization of homosexuality in 2008 and 2009. Tragically, no

further statements or actions have followed—in Uganda or anywhere. Protestant national and international groups also have policies in support basic human rights for all people. Because of fear of controversy, too often leaders in denominations and faith traditions do not speak out.

Today, we speak out because 80 countries criminalize people based on their sexual orientation or gender identity—and 7 of those countries include the death penalty. Public law must protect the vulnerable and stop the misuse of power in society, no matter its basis or source. People must not be imprisoned or executed because of who they love or their gender expression.

The Uganda Declaration:

As faith leaders from many traditions, we, the undersigned, commit ourselves to:

- Pray for God's peace between all nations, peoples, traditions and cultures and all the diversity of God's creation;
- Teach the simple spiritual truth that loving, not hating or harming our neighbors, is the will of God in all things, including for people living with HIV/AIDS and people who are sexual minorities;
- Apply existing statements on human rights in our own faith traditions to lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people in policies and programs, in congregations, national and global agencies and partner groups;
- Advocate for the elimination of all laws which criminalize people based on sexual orientation or gender identity;
- Push for prosecution of crimes committed because of perceived sexual orientation or gender identity.