



Opening Remarks – Faith-Based Organizations Meeting

30 July 2008

Buenos días and bienvenidos a todos.

Distinguished colleagues,

Faith plays a critical role in the lives of billions of people throughout the world – faith in God, in humanity, in science, in love. It is our undying faith, in whatever form it takes, that brings us hope, and gives us energy to carry on, and to believe that, however dire our circumstances may be, the future can bring brighter times, healthier times, happier times.

What we call “faith-based organizations” in the HIV response, the groups of people from various religious affiliations – whether the “great religions” of Christianity, Judaism, Islam, Hinduism, or Buddhism or smaller religions and spiritual groupings – have been active in the HIV response since the beginning of the epidemic. It is well-documented that a significant portion of HIV prevention, treatment, care and support is provided through faith-based organizations, to different degrees but substantial in all parts of the world. Particularly in the area of care and support, many faith-based organizations have been at the frontline of the response to HIV since the very beginning and challenged those who were not. In the early years of the epidemic, some were the only groups willing to provide solace for the dying. When many others shunned those living with HIV/AIDS, many Christians and people from other religions reached out with compassion to those in their communities who were in need. In the era of increasing access to antiretroviral therapy, faith-based organizations throughout the world play a substantial role in delivering treatment and care to their communities. Increasingly, they are engaged in HIV prevention activities as well.

And yet, there remain considerable tensions between people working in secular and faith-based approaches to prevention, care, treatment and support. Particularly in the area of HIV prevention, there remains a disconnect between the moral teachings of some of the great religions regarding such topics as homosexuality, polygamy and the use of condoms and the reality of people’s day-to-day experience, both clients and service providers of faith-based organizations. Many members of the most marginalized and HIV affected communities, such as gay men, sex workers and drug users, feel shunned by their religious leaders. Some have abandoned their religion entirely, even if many of the services provided by faith-based organizations are done so without prejudice or judgment.

At the same time, the significant proportion of HIV services that are delivered by faith-based organizations throughout the world is often not reflected in

their influence globally, regionally and nationally on policy-setting and regulatory processes. This must change.

The gulf between secular and faith-based approaches to HIV must be bridged. This will take considerable effort on the part of many individuals and organizations working in HIV in both faith-based and secular organizations. At the IAS, we believe that all scientific evidence must be implemented into effective policy and programming. In HIV prevention, for example, young people must be provided with all the relevant information to protect themselves against HIV infection. This includes the knowledge that delaying sexual initiation and then having sex with only one partner is an effective means to prevent infection. It also includes the knowledge that condoms are an highly effective way of preventing HIV infection, and education is required for young people to know how to use condoms properly. All information must be provided for people to make informed choices. Young people also need to know, from their secular as well as religious teachers, that homosexuality as well as heterosexuality have existed throughout the world for all time and will continue to exist, that love between human beings takes many forms, that love is to be respected in whatever form it takes, and that discrimination against sexual minorities, or against women, or on the basis of race, culture or religion is against the teachings of Christ and the laws of progressive societies.

Faith-based organizations must be allocated a larger seat at the table in determining overall HIV policy nationally and internationally. Governments must ensure that there is consistent quality of service across all sectors engaged in implementation of prevention and treatment – within the public sector, through NGOs, in the workplace, and through faith-based organizations.

Many have called for compromise on the issues of greatest tension between secular and faith-based approaches to HIV prevention, treatment, care and support. I call for dialogue and mutual respect.

This Ecumenical pre-conference has an impressive 3-day agenda that includes a number of renowned experts from across the response to HIV. I wish you well in your deliberations and in the main conference 3-8 August. Though there are differences of approach across the response to HIV, we are all united in our desire to end the scourge this disease brings on individuals, on families and on societies throughout the world. The International AIDS Conference creates a world within a world. The conference brings together some of the most powerful and influential individuals and organizations with some of the poorest, most marginalized and most oppressed individuals and grassroots groups working to end AIDS. With love in our hearts and a clear sense of purpose, all groups can overcome their differences and work together for an AIDS-free world.

Thank you for listening.