

Speech by Stephen Lewis, UN Special Envoy for HIV/AIDS in Africa, at the African Religious Leaders Assembly on Children and HIV/AIDS, Nairobi, Kenya, 10 June 2002

Your Eminences:

I feel entirely privileged to address this meeting; it's actually the first time that I've ever addressed a large gathering of religious leaders, and I am appropriately chastened by so auspicious an occasion. What's more, I want to speak with direct and sometimes uncomfortable frankness, so I appeal to all of you, at the outset, to let the milk of human kindness flow through your veins and to treat me with compassion.

Your eminences, the direct impact of the pandemic on children, in all its aspects, will be set out for you later this morning by Carol Bellamy, the Executive Director of UNICEF. She is obviously the right person to do so. For my own part, suffice to say that there are now estimated to be 13 million children orphaned by AIDS in Sub-Saharan Africa, with the number almost certain to double by the end of the decade. In human terms, in the history and literature of vulnerable children, there's never been anything like it. In fact, of course, there's never been anything like the HIV/AIDS pandemic. Comparisons with the Black Death of the 14th century are wishful thinking. When AIDS has run its course --- if it ever runs its course --- it will be seen as an annihilating scourge that dwarfs everything that has gone before.

What it leaves in its wake, in country after country, in every one of the countries you represent, are thousands or tens of thousands or hundreds of thousands or, eventually, even millions of children whose lives are a torment of loneliness, despair, rage, bewilderment and loss. That doesn't mean orphan children can't be happy; it simply means that at the heart of their individual beings there is a life-long void.

The numbers are overwhelming, the circumstances are overwhelming, the needs are overwhelming.

Nor do I intend to quote, in a pretend-learned fashion from religious texts. It would be presumptuous and foolhardy on my part. That is your collective world, not mine.

Rather, I would wish to suggest to all of you, as religious leaders drawn from across the continent, that it is time, it is well past time that you summoned your awesome reserves of strength and followers and commitment to lead this continent out of its merciless vortex of misery. There is no excuse for passivity or distance. No excuse for immobility or denial. No excuse for incremental steps when you, collectively, have the capacity to rally both Africa and the world if you choose to do so.

The timing could not be better. Let me tell you why, and bare my most protected inner thoughts in the telling.

I think we may have reached a curious and deeply distressing lull in the battle against AIDS. Over the last two years, much has happened. The political leadership of Africa has come alive to HIV/AIDS, conferences have been held in profusion, from Durban to Addis to Abuja to New York to Ougouadougou. PLWAs have raised powerful and insistent voices, the Global

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Fund has been established, goals and targets have been set, drug prices have been driven down dramatically by generic manufacturers, there are more data and analysis and reports and commentary and studies and sheer newspaper copy available than any library on earth could accommodate, and significant numbers of modest interventions are being pursued.

So it isn't that things have ground to a halt; it's just a cumulative feeling of inertia rather than energy, of marking time, of oh so slowly gathering forces together for the next push, of incrementalism raised to the level of obsession. The Global Fund has received no new sizeable contributions for many months. The G8 Summit later this month in my country, Canada, has made it clear in advance that significant additional money will not be forthcoming. The NEPAD document --- the new partnership for Africa --- which is the heart of the G8 discussions, and the centrepiece for the future of Africa, deals hardly at all with HIV/AIDS. A series of reports to be released in the near future, just prior to and during the international AIDS conference in Barcelona next month, will acknowledge progress made, but at the same time recite blood-chilling statistics on the situation of youth and children ... statistics which make you wonder whether the world has fallen into a stupor of indifference.

It's not only that we can't rest on our laurels; it's the fact that the laurels are fig-leaves. Let me be brutally honest: in the dead of night, I sometimes think to myself that we're losing the war against AIDS... although I do recognize the feeling for what it is: an unwarranted moment of despair. What we need is another massive shot of adrenalin to take the battle to the next level, and you, your eminences, the representative religious leadership of Africa ... you are the shot of adrenalin, the energizing force, the catharsis of faith, hope and determination which can propel us forward.

That's the reason for this conference. As always, children and women carry the burden of abandonment, vulnerability, stigma, shame, poverty and desperation. They constitute, for you, the cause you must lead. You constitute, for them, the meaning of salvation in terms both spiritual and practical.

Who else, beyond yourselves, is so well-placed to lead? Who else has such a network of voices at the grass-roots level? Who else has access to all communities once a week, every week, across the continent? Who else officiates at the millions of funerals of those who die of AIDS-related illnesses, and better understands the consequences for children and families? Who else works on a daily basis with faith-based, community-based organizations? In the midst of this wanton, ravaging pandemic, it is truly like an act of Divine intervention that you should be physically present everywhere, all the time. I ask again: who else, therefore, is so well-placed to lead?

So where is that leadership? Dare I say that the voice of religion has been curiously muted? There are notable exceptions as there always are. Some of the finest work combating AIDS on the continent is done through religious communities. But you will admit that, overall, the involvement of religion has been qualified at best. I haven't the slightest interest in recrimination or finger-pointing. My interest, our interest, should only be, where do we go from here?

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I want to suggest, in the strongest possible terms, that you should resolve, at this conference, in the name of all the children, infected or affected, to seize the leadership, re-energize the struggle, and turn the pandemic around. I want to suggest, in the strongest possible terms, that you leave Nairobi this week, with a solemn pledge to yourselves, that you will never again tolerate, even for a moment, lassitude or passivity in the face of so monumental a catastrophe. I want to suggest that the draft declaration of the conference, when definitive, be embraced as though it were legally binding.

All of us, who are your friends, understand the difficulties. We know that certain of the faiths have problems around sexual activity and the use of condoms. We know that there are internal struggles around the leadership roles of women . . . not to be taken lightly when gender is such a visceral part of the pandemic. We know that the religious leadership at all levels of society needs training, in order to do an effective job in educating your adherents. We know that even amongst religious leaders, there are numbers who are HIV-positive, and have themselves felt the lash and pain of stigma from colleagues. Religious leaders are human; they face the same challenges and foibles as other mortals.

But religious leaders invoke a higher level of morality; that's why every contentious issue must be treated afresh. The sacred texts, from which all religion flows, demand a higher level of morality. And if ever there was an issue which bristles with moral questions and moral imperatives it's HIV/AIDS. The pandemic, in the way in which it assaults human life, is qualitatively different from all that has gone before. There is no greater moral calling on this continent today than to vanquish the pandemic.

No one expects you to do it, one faith at a time. Somehow, you must come together, in a great religious partnership, so that everyone is involved, at every level. You should formalize the arrangement; you should create an actual structure. Your draft plan of action mandates the World Conference on Religion and Peace to make it happen. Let it be done.

Nor can you do it by faith alone. You have to extend the partnership to representatives of civil society, to associations of PLWAs, to the UN family, to women's groups everywhere, to the private sector and to government itself. The pandemic demands that you move beyond the protective insularity of religion. It is often argued that there must be a separation of church and state, that is to say, the religious and the secular. But AIDS puts the argument to the rout. If the church or the mosque or the temple don't work in concert with the state, then death is the victor.

Let me take it further. There should be a series of targeted interventions. Religious communities provide vital care to the ill and the dying at village level. Somehow, the individual projects must be taken to scale across the countries themselves. Religious leaders can confront stigma from every religious podium in every community, changing the values of the community through repetition and education, week in and week out. Religious leaders should lead a campaign to abolish school fees throughout the continent, because whether it's fees, or the costs of registration, books, or uniforms, vulnerable and orphaned children, invariably penniless, are denied the right to go to school. You want a moral issue: why should a just society, a society which has ratified the Convention on the Rights of the Child, allow such a state of affairs? One

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visit to the slums of Kabera, here in Nairobi, will reaffirm the sorry consequences for children. It is entirely consistent therefore, that religious leaders should throw themselves behind the Hope for African Children Initiative because there is no dilemma more urgent, more demanding, or more intractable than the dilemma of orphans.

Let me take the argument further still. Religious leaders must do something about the mothers who are infected and are dying prematurely, leaving behind those orphans who wander the landscape of Africa, soon to be an entire generation seething with resentment and fear. May I strike a personal note? The thing I find by far most emotionally difficult as I travel through Africa, is meeting with young women, stricken by AIDS, who know they're dying or soon to die, with two or three young children, and they ask me, frantically, "what's going to happen to my children when I've passed ... who will look after them?" And then, in an understandably accusatory tone, they say to me "What about us"? And then they add, without using these exact words, but the meaning is clear: "You Mr. White Man, you have the drugs to keep us alive, but we can't get them. Why? Why must we die"? And I want to tell you: I don't know how to answer that. I have never in my adult life witnessed such a blunt assault on basic human morality. In my soul, I honestly believe that an unthinking strain of subterranean racism is the only way to explain the moral default of the developed world, in refusing to provide the resources which could save the mothers of Africa.

But right now, as I stand before you, I want to know: what will the religious leaders do about it? Surely, in the face of such a violation of fundamental moral tenets, you have an obligation to intervene.

And that takes me to my final proposition. In the last analysis, religious leaders are the best chance to influence the political leadership of the North as well as of the South. You have contacts everywhere. You have brother and sister churches and mosques and temples on all the continents. They support you, they often fund you, they show solidarity with you. Your religious sway is not just Africa, it's the world. And what politician would refuse to meet with you? Who turns down a request for a meeting from a religious leader? You have an entry to the citadels of secular power that none of the rest of us enjoy.

What does it mean? It means that you should have a say in the Global Fund ... you should storm the rhetorical ramparts and demand that the major OECD countries contribute the money which they have promised --- the famous .7% of GNP --- but never delivered. You should have some sort of collective standing or voice at the G8 meeting. You should have a separate session at the Barcelona AIDS conference in July. You should have a presence in international decisions, wherever those decisions are made. You want a precedent?: the Vatican has observer status at the United Nations, and often speaks, including at the UNICEF Executive Board; no government on that Board, at least while I was there, ever took exception to the Vatican's right to participate.

Religious communities historically have followed one of two tracks. There was the religious leadership which successfully fought for the eradication of slavery in the Congo; the eclectic leadership which supported the conscientious objectors in the Vietnam War and helped,

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thereby, to bring that foul war to an end; the Islamic and Hindu leadership which supported UNICEF's immunization campaigns in Asia and the Middle-East, overcoming the fears of the citizens, and doubtless saving millions of children's lives; the Judeo-Christian leadership that resisted the infant formula companies and supported the right to breast-feeding.

And then there was the other, woeful track; the religious leadership that supported apartheid; the religious leadership that was complicit in the genocide in Rwanda; the religious leadership that was silent during the holocaust.

No one wants a choice between the two. It's simply that when the history of the AIDS pandemic is written, you want it said that every religious leader stood up to be counted; that when the tide was turned, the religious leaders did the turning; that when the children of Africa were at horrendous risk, the religious leaders led the rescue mission. It's what all of us beg you to do; I submit to you that it's what your God, of whatever name, would want you to do.