

Faith groups in Kenya seek to strengthen HIV/AIDS strategies

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Nairobi, Kenya, November 28 (ENInews)--As new HIV/AIDS infections and related deaths decline, Christian and Muslim leaders in Kenya discussed how to improve their strategies at a conference in Nairobi from 23 to 25 November entitled "Doing More, Doing Better: Towards Zero New Infections."

It critically examined faith groups' approaches and concluded that some led to increased stigma, denial and shame. "For the last 30 years or so, religious leaders across the different religions have generally perceived and approached HIV and AIDS as a sexual moral issue," said the Rev. Wellington Mutiso, general secretary of the Evangelical Alliance of Kenya. "This has led to faulty perceptions that individuals, families and communities with high incidences and mortality are most promiscuous, unfaithful and least spiritual."

The conference was sponsored by the National AIDS Control Council (the Kenyan government anti-HIV/AIDS steering body in partnership with the U.K.-based charity ChristianAid), the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) and the United Nations Programme on HIV/AIDS (UNAIDS).

UNAIDS said 2.7 million globally were newly infected with HIV in 2010, down from 3.2 million in 2001. About 33.4 million people globally are HIV-infected. Nearly 1.5 million Kenyans are living with HIV/AIDS.

The religious leaders recommended viewing the disease as a social, economic, political and medical issue. They said comprehensive, integrated and stigma-free approaches should combine moral and public health issues. Past responses have tackled it as a sexual and moral deviance problem, they noted.

"Churches have been stressing ABC (Abstain, Be faithful and Counselling or Condom use) as an approach for some time. This has been very important for the

churches, but we feel should [re-examine] this method. I would say, for instance, it is very important to counsel infected individuals for them to choose whether to use condoms or not," said former Anglican Archbishop Benjamin Nzimbi in an interview with ENInews.

"The church, especially the Anglican church, has been saying the use of condoms is within the context of the marriage. We have stuck to that because if the condoms are given without control, this can mean increased sexual activities among the populations," he said.

Across the country, faith based organizations are leading efforts to provide treatment in mission hospitals. They also run programs that support women, children and orphans. In addition, the groups have promoted behavior changes, which experts say are crucial to reducing HIV infection and transmission.

One-quarter of all support in the area of HIV comes from faith-based institutions, Ana Isabel Nieto, chairperson of the UNAIDS Coordinating Board, told the gathering. "It is not always visible or said; it is silent support that should be recognized," said Nieto, while urging the religious institutions to work with all people regardless of their sexual identity or orientation.

Until recently, mosques could not send messages on HIV/AIDS because leaders viewed it as a sexual sin, according to Sheikh Haidar Kafi, secretary general of the Kenya Council of Imams and Scholars. He said worship houses have since become crucial points for disseminating information on the pandemic.