

HIV and AIDS Policy of the Christian Conference of Asia*

PREAMBLE

The Christian Conference of Asia (CCA) seeks to act from deep spirituality and theology: loving others as oneself (John 13: 34-35); serving the least of our brothers and sisters (Matthew 25: 31-40); seeing the whole community as part of one body of Christ (1 Corinthians 12:12); nothing can separate us from the love of Christ (Romans 8: 35); Jesus came that we may have life in all its fullness (John 10: 10). Jesus also clearly mentioned the 'other sheep' in John 10:16a and the Church needs to look into the response to these people of God as well.

This policy is built on the Christian principles of peace-making, healing and reconciliation, and aims to equip churches in Asia to be 'HIV competent'. CCA acts as a facilitating agent for dialogue and action on common concerns and for the breaking down of barriers that separate and cause division between peoples. As a common problem, HIV and AIDS is breaking down barriers and enabling various faith communities to come together to find solutions.

Many Asian countries have witnessed the slowing down and reversing of the HIV epidemics among specific populations, for example, children. CCA commits to the prevention of new HIV infections. CCA also commits to slowing down existing epidemics and preventing new epidemics. Christian attitudes and teachings have contributed to stigma and discrimination and we acknowledge that we are part of the problem for a long time. Therefore, CCA commits to removing stigma and discrimination, to empowering individuals, families and communities who are living with HIV to gain access to effective treatment, care and support.

National and ethnic cultures have a strong influence on the practice of Christianity in Asia. The powerful action of Asian cultures often supports harmonious and rich relationships involving Christian individuals and communities. Our cultures also present us with many serious challenges as we reach 'in' to our own Christian communities to mobilize ourselves as best we can to deal with HIV. Theological reflection, scientific inquiry and public opinion all make competing claims on our responses to HIV. HIV competent churches are those which can assess their own capabilities, and which can discern which elements of their local epidemics they will directly engage or not engage.

The following policy is based upon the CCA's Pastoral Guidelines on HIV and AIDS

1. Vision

The active response to HIV and AIDS cuts across fair and respectful relationships, human sexuality, gender justice, human rights and universal access. The ministries of the Churches need to address vulnerable children, orphan children, elderly, young people, women, men and key affected populations.

CCA is called to:

- 1.1 deepen the theology and spirituality of HIV and AIDS and reflect this into the pastoral life of the Church;
- 1.2 assert the roles and rights of affected people in the Church and in its work;
- 1.3 integrate prevention, treatment, care and support;
- 1.4 conduct lobby and advocacy for people living with and affected by HIV and AIDS; and
- 1.5 ensure stewardship of time, finances and resources in the area of HIV and AIDS.

2. Spiritual and Pastoral life of the Church

2.1 HIV and AIDS challenge us to break down barriers between 'us' and 'them' and our judgment that leads to stigmatization, discrimination and the violation of human rights.

2.2 There is a need to examine the liturgical rites in churches, such as the practice of baptism, Eucharist, and funerals to ensure fuller participation of people living with HIV and AIDS in the life of the church

2.3 The active participation of people living with HIV and AIDS in the life of the congregation will enrich our spiritual experience and bridge the gap between our religious teachings and the realities on the ground.

- We will promote HIV- and AIDS-competent Churches in Asia by:
 - preaching and teaching non-judgmental messages about HIV and AIDS in our Sunday Schools, worship, various lay-led fellowship meetings and Bible Studies;
 - conducting community outreach programs, designate special times of healing and prayers;
 - learning from the experiences of positive people and those affected, and inviting them as full participants in preventing the HIV transmission;

- celebrating World AIDS Day every December 1st and AIDS Sunday on the nearest Sunday following
- equipping pupils and students in Church-related and owned institutions, and in seminaries and other formation centres with knowledge, skills, attitudes that will actualize our roles as a healing and reconciling community.

3 Prevention

CCA calls on Member Churches and National Councils to address the prevention of HIV in a holistic manner including encouraging discussion on, and understanding of:

- the social factors that can make us vulnerable to HIV, including how these affect members of our congregations;
- cultural practices within our society that enhance our vulnerability;
- issues such as domestic violence, incest, substance addictions that are often not discussed openly;
- the sacredness of sex and relationships that emphasize mutual respect and honesty within families;
- scientifically proven and evidence-informed methods of prevention e.g. condoms; and
- new and alternative methods of prevention.

4 Treatment, Care and Support

- We commit to enhance access to treatment for all, and those in substance addictions, through efforts such as treatment literacy, awareness workshops, promotion of voluntary confidential counseling and testing (VCCT) dispensing of medicines, treatment of Opportunistic Infections (OIs), Anti-Retroviral Treatment (ART), and post exposure prophylaxis (PEP).
- This includes actively helping individuals to access services that are available from providers other than the Church.
- We will promote scientifically proven methods of care and support as a special ministry of the Church, following the principles of non-discrimination and de-stigmatization, as well as support those looking for alternative treatment and supportive measures.

We will promote policies and dialogue that enhance the human rights and dignity of people living with HIV and AIDS.

- Within our organizations, we will seek to create an environment that empowers people living with HIV and AIDS to communicate with their family and community and openly share their HIV status and co-workers, in order to bear witness and to encourage others to do so.
- We will promote the adoption of policies and practices that protect confidentiality and enable openness between Churches and people living with HIV and AIDS.

5 Advocacy and Collaboration

We will advocate for and with people living with HIV and AIDS:

- to bring about greater awareness of the global HIV and AIDS situation and its root causes;
- to ensure dignity and rights of affected persons, especially to access adequate health care (universal access), education and employment;
- to obtain treatment (medications and laboratory tests) and to ensure access to the full range of education, counseling, voluntary HIV testing and care;
- to allocate adequate resources and provide programs that serve to decrease the incidence and impact of HIV and AIDS in the region;
- to reduce costs of treatment;
- to form partnerships as required: ecumenical, other faiths, other people living with HIV and AIDS networks, civil society, business and government;
- to work with political and other leadership to introduce legislation as appropriate;
- to have more understanding of the scientific findings and reconciling basis of our faith on issues such as human sexuality.

6 Gender Justice

Gender inequality is at the centre of gender-based violence which is a pervasive public health and human rights issue worldwide. Gender-based violence includes domestic violence against women, exploitation of children (child labor, sexual abuse, incest, child marriages), prostitution, human trafficking and unfavorable cultural practices (polygamy, female genital circumcision and cleansing rituals). All these increase the risk of HIV infection.

Therefore:

- We will uphold the ideals of public-spiritedness, social service, family values and traditions that enhance relations and respectful communication with each other.
- We encourage fidelity and the fruit of the spirit, viz: *“love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, gentleness, faithfulness, and self-control.”* (Galatians 5: 22-23)
- We will promote fairness and respect in relations between women and men, boys and girls in society and in the Church, encouraging more equal status, levels of responsibility, access to resources and share in decision-making.
- We will promote discussion on cultural, traditional and our own religious practices which undermine such fairness and respect.

7. Human Sexuality

One of the challenges for what the Churches can do is to seek to understand more fully the gifts of human sexuality in the contexts of personal responsibility, relationship, family and Christian faith. We can no longer ignore the importance of discussing this gift of God in Churches. We can draw some wisdom from the findings of the research of scientific communities on the different forms of sexual practices. We need to be aware that there are different forms of relationships.

8. Stewardship of Time Finances and Resources

To ensure that HIV and AIDS is addressed in the Asian region, CCA is expected to identify staff persons mandated to follow through on HIV and AIDS, and will work with Member Churches and National Councils to do the same. Available structures should be maximally utilized and time provided. CCA will have mechanisms that ensure accountability to the people we serve, and those from whom funds are received.

CCA calls upon Member Churches and National Councils to discuss and disseminate this policy in all official decision making bodies and to encourage concrete action and implementation at all levels.

*Approved by the General Committee of the Christian Conference of Asia, Bangkok, Thailand on 1 October 2009