

# “AIDS CALLS US TO BE COMMUNITY”

## Declaration of Buenos Aires

*(The following document is the result of an “AIDS Encounter” which brought together some thirty delegates from Lutheran and other churches from Argentina, Uruguay, Paraguay, Chile, Brazil, Peru and El Salvador. Its purpose is to challenge Latin American Lutherans in various aspects of ministry related to AIDS. It is reprinted here in its entirety as a pastoral and prophetic challenge to all churches and as a model for response.)*

Ten years after the publication of the Lutheran World Federation document entitled *Pastoral Work in Relation to AIDS*- for which we give thanks to God for having illuminated us in our understanding of the Gospel, and because we feel increasingly the need to implement it in our own context --we have met at "Case Nazaret" (Nazareth House) in the city of Buenos Aires, 13-15 April 1998, in order to dialogue, exchange experiences and dream together about a world with greater justice and solidarity.

We are called to commit ourselves to such pastoral action. This call arises out of the recognition that a medical diagnosis has often been confused with a moral judgement affecting the dignity of many brothers and sisters. We are moved by the suffering of those persons exiled from family and social solidarity networks, and we are called to be facilitators of the reconstruction of these networks.

We take seriously the profound meaning of the word "epidemic" (epi=over, demos=people) which reveals to us that it is a crisis installed in the midst of the entire society and in all churches.

We want to construct together pastoral action which is not paternalistic, assistential, moralistic, opportunistic, nor one dominated by experts. We seek to create a participatory pastoral ministry, open to dialogue with diverse categories of persons and involving the beneficiaries in the planning, development and evaluation of that action. We seek a pastoral ministry which promotes the development of the potential resources of each person. We want a pastoral ministry which promotes a reading of the Scriptures which is not fundamentalist nor fragmented, but rather one which discovers the liberating theme of the history of salvation reflected in the Word.

This pastoral ministry desires to be, in the midst of this epidemic, a sign of the hospitality which the church must live, so that all feel welcomed by the love of God, who loves us like a father and a mother.

We want to build a pastoral ministry centered on persons and on their stories, not on the virus, medical schemes and labels.

This pastoral ministry is a reflection of the Gospel mandate. The life of discipleship takes us to where nobody wants to go, together with the person with whom nobody wants to be. This option leads us to identify with all those who are exiled from the feast of life and from the communion to which we are all invited (Mt. 28:1 9-20 end Mk. 16:15-16).

This is a pastoral ministry which seeks to imitate the father of the prodigal son, who goes out unconditionally to find

him whose dignity is wounded. He reestablishes it according to his condition of being a free human being. He also invites the other brother to participate in the reunion feast (Lk. 15: 11-31).

Christ continues calling us to conversion today, by means of the excluded: the Samaritan shows us solidarity (Lk. 10:25-37); the widow, generosity (Lk. 21 :1-4); the Canaanite woman, the certainty of faith when faced with the prejudices of belonging (Mt. 15:21-28); and persons in situations of prostitution and tax collectors show us the way of the reign of God (Lk. 18:14).

This pastoral ministry desires to contribute to the reintegration of those who have been exiled, due to our judgements, to the space which belongs to them by virtue of the Gospel: "Come to me" (Mt. 11:28).

We know that the cost of this identification with those stigmatized by our society and by our churches is always very high, but that in faithfulness to the Gospel we cannot avoid it. This price should be paid by all the faithful, and not only by those who are directly involved. We desire that this pastoral ministry be previsionary, while we wait for the entire Christian community to assume it in the near future.

## GOVERNMENTAL POLICIES

We observe that there is a lack of education, information, orientation and conscientization with respect to HIV/AIDS related themes in the entire population.

We observe that with respect to governmental policies, the voices of the population living with HIV/AIDS are not heard. Adequate attention is not paid to the dignity of these persons. There exists, on the contrary, a precarious situation with respect to health services, especially in marginal and rural zones.

We demand of our governmental representatives that joint HIV/AIDS prevention programs be developed, with the participation of organizations from civil society working with this theme, as well as that of the population living with HIV/AIDS. This participation will enable arrival at consensual decisions.

We demand that medical attention not be discriminatory, but rather that it respect individual needs, offering all the necessary and current resources, including tests, medications and hospitalization.

We demand that state budgets for education and health be augmented to confront HIV/AIDS, and that budgets for armaments be reduced, since we desire resources for life and not death.

We demand that the necessary and current resources be decentralized to confront the advance of AIDS on all levels, especially in the poorest zones.

We as church commit ourselves to being vigilant, to being a prophetic voice, so that those Latin American governments which signed the "Paris Summit" of 01 December 1994 fulfill the agreement, and that those Latin American governments which have not signed it adhere to the same.

## HUMAN RIGHTS

We observe that our laws are generalized, and that although they assume universal rights, it is necessary to revise their

specificity in relation to HIV/AIDS.

We observe that human rights organizations have not in practice taken on the problem of AIDS as their own, as one which concerns them in its broad scope.

We observe that our churches continue to live in silence and non-participation in the problem of AIDS.

We observe that blood tests are used as a means of discrimination against all those who have the rights to confidentiality, respect for dignity, work, health care, housing and all other human and civil rights.

We demand specific laws which protect the rights of persons living with HIV/ AIDS, which guarantee the rights to health care, education, housing and employment. In those countries where such legislation already exists, we demand that it be publicized and implemented.

We demand that human rights organizations and churches take on the role which corresponds to them in this crisis imposed by the AIDS epidemic.

We demand that all clinical tests destined to determine the presence of HIV be voluntary, free of cost and confidential. We demand that they not be used as a requisite to obtain employment, nor in other situations which can cause discrimination or exclusion.

We as church commit ourselves to integrating persons living with HIV/AIDS into our communities, defending their rights and protecting the confidentiality of their condition.

We hope that our churches experience a conversion when faced with the problem of AIDS as a permanent challenge of the Gospel.

## POVERTY

We observe that since the beginning of the HIV/AIDS epidemic, cases of infection are concentrated in poor countries and continents, while a serious disequilibrium exists in terms of the availability of resources. The neoliberal model has intensified social inequality, augmenting the great gaps between rich and poor, exposing the majority populations to greater vulnerability with respect to the transmission of HIV/AIDS.

We stress that more global emphases are needed to confront HIV/AIDS, and that this situation of exclusion be considered: "The struggle against AIDS is the struggle against poverty, illiteracy, prostitution, drug addiction and all forms of social inequality" (LWF, 1988).

We demand that the costs of medications and treatments related to HIV/AIDS be lowered, and that government policies have as one of their objectives the avoidance of the enrichment through suffering in which large laboratories often engage.

We request that alternative medicines and treatments which have proven their effectiveness be developed and encouraged, that there be incentives for such research and that they be made accessible to poor populations.

We as church commit ourselves to responding to the call of the Gospel to be an inclusive community in practice and to denounce the prevailing system of exclusion which affects persons living with HIV/AIDS. We raise our voice against such situations, since by remaining silent we make ourselves accomplices to these injustices. As church we must exercise our option for the poorest.

## **DRUG DEPENDENCY**

We observe the rapid increase of cases of HIV/AIDS due to the sharing of needles, a situation which is closely related to the living conditions of these persons. We observe with concern how society responds to this problem with repressive police solutions

We demand, in the face of this social problem, social responses, which include specific prevention and education programs as well as new therapeutic responses.

We as church commit ourselves to going out to meet and integrate persons living with HIV/AIDS due to drug dependencies into our communities, and to support the processes of rehabilitation and/or diminishing the damage.

## **IMMIGRANTS/MIGRANTS**

We observe a continuous movement of the population, due to diverse situations, from rural areas to large cities, as well as between countries. This migrant population is more vulnerable to acquiring HIV/AIDS due to the rupture of their social solidarity networks.

We demand access to health care, with dignified and equal treatment, for migrants living with HIV/AIDS. We condemn the discriminatory use of whatever medical analysis which might impede the free movement, residence and/or documentation of persons living with HIV/AIDS.

We as church commit ourselves to extending fraternal bonds of solidarity among our peoples, avoiding racist and discriminatory attitudes, and offering a welcome and acceptance to migrants and their families.

## **PRISONS**

We observe with deep concern the situation of persons deprived of liberty who suffer serious abuses against their human rights and dignity. HIV/AIDS aggravates this situation.

We demand that programs be carried out which stimulate the prevention of HIV/AIDS and which assure that adequate medical attention be given to affected persons.

We as church commit ourselves to promoting a process of making the penal system more humane, a true space for rehabilitation and reintegration into civil society. We will seriously consider pastoral ministry in penitentiaries as a recognized ministry.

## **EDUCATION**

We observe still today an alarming lack of adequate information and the absence of effective educational programs about HIV/AIDS which encompass either the general population or specific groups.

We demand an educational model for the prevention of HIV/AIDS which goes beyond individualistic emphases, moving on to emphases which give greater power to communities. We demand educational materials for the prevention of HIV/AIDS, easily accessible and understandable, effective among the most vulnerable populations. We demand participatory strategies of peer education among the most vulnerable populations, including the poorest sectors as well as rural and indigenous populations.

We as church commit ourselves to implementing educational programs in HIV/AIDS prevention, delivering clear and precise information, including all the forms of prevention and working closely with non-governmental organizations, groups of persons directly affected and governments.

## **THE MEDIA**

We observe with concern the focus with which much of the mass media treats the problem of HIV/AIDS and persons living with HIV/AIDS, often in a sensational and morbid manner.

We demand that the mass media deliver clear and precise information about the epidemic, as well as about existing resources, using non-discriminatory language and respecting the right to privacy of the persons and families affected.

We as church commit ourselves to raising our voice and making ourselves visible in the media so that the population knows our opinion, which reflects an inclusive and liberating focus with respect to HIV/AIDS, contributing to the building of a society of greater justice and solidarity.

## **WOMEN**

We observe that women in Latin America and the Caribbean have no voice. They have no power to negotiate preventative measures in their sexual relations, thus protecting themselves from infection with HIV/AIDS. We also observe that they continue to be the caregivers in their families, and are often the only economic providers. We see greater feminization of poverty and of suffering, and the devaluation of women as persons. Women are the most vulnerable to infection with HIV/AIDS due to the lack of adequate education and their situation of extreme economic and social marginalization.

We as church, when we seek the truth of God by means of theological methods, cannot avoid an interpretation based on gender roles, giving to women the place which corresponds to them and rescuing their dignity. The reading of life from the perspective of being a woman helps to understand and to go out to encounter other diverse identities, thus facilitating the prevention of HIV/AIDS. Within the prevailing system of globalization, we emphasize the very special and important support of their presence in all social and ecclesiastical structures.

We as church propose the independent and autonomous participation of all women in continuing education and formation so that they might be defenders of life, of the integrity of creation and of justice, and be full participants in society and in the church.

## **SEXUAL MINORITIES**

We demand that all sexual minorities be treated with justice, recognizing their rights and obligations, as with all citizens, not marginalizing them because of their sexual orientation, identity or lifestyle. The dignity of every human being speaks more strongly than the labels which are socially imposed on minority groups.

We as church commit ourselves to educating our members in such a way that they are prepared to respectfully welcome the diversity of identities and cultures.

We as church commit ourselves to going out and encountering the clamor of their needs, opening ourselves to unconditional spaces in which these minorities find room for dialogue and communication, receive accompaniment as well as support in the defense and promotion of their rights.

## **CHILDREN**

We observe that the children of Latin America and the Caribbean are the victims of violence, sexual abuse and labor exploitation. This situation places them at high risk of contracting HIV/AIDS thus aggravating their defenseless plight. We also observe, and this epidemic exposes, the deterioration of the family caused by economic problems. Children are the victims of these problems, which make it impossible to care for them adequately within the family structure.

We as church commit ourselves to providing spaces which protect childrens' rights and identity, and to being a firm voice denouncing all of these negative realities.

We as church commit ourselves to studying seriously the new family models which are emerging from this social, economic and cultural situation, and to supporting an effective presence in the search for new responses.

We as church commit ourselves to promoting the insertion of children infected with HIV/AIDS and/or orphans of fathers and/or mothers who have died because of HIV/AIDS into already existent spaces of solidarity.

## **SEXUAL EXPLOITATION**

We as church commit ourselves to promoting a profound and broad comprehension of the causes which lead a person to a situation of prostitution. We commit ourselves to a search for social responses to this social problem, rather than exclusively moral and/or police responses.

We as church commit ourselves to providing a space for all persons in situations of sexual exploitations, which they can rediscover their dignity, rights and duties. It is necessary to accompany them with an effective educational presence, understanding the cultural codes of these minorities, supporting every action which increases their self-esteem and promoting their protagonism in personal and community growth as the best way of preventing HIV/AIDS.

## **NETWORKS**

To be able to carry out this pastoral ministry, we are conscious of the need to work united in networks, as an

expression of our belonging to one single body, one single baptism, one single faith. This is why we are calling upon the Conference of Bishops and Presidents of the Lutheran Churches in Latin America and the Caribbean, members of the Lutheran World Federation, to adopt this document and motivate the Latin American Council of Churches (Consejo Latino Americano de Iglesias, CLAI), the Latin American Episcopal Conference (Conferencia Episcopal Latino Americana, CELAM) and the Federation itself, to help us to complete this task.

Buenos Aires, 15 April, 1998