



# THE LUTHERAN WORLD FEDERATION

LUTHERISCHER WELTBUND - FEDERACIÓN LUTERANA MUNDIAL - FÉDÉRATION LUTHÉRIENNE MONDIALE

*Office of the General Secretary*

To LWF member churches  
and National Committees

13 December 2000

Dear Sisters and Brothers in Christ,

I am writing to you in this Advent season to express my pastoral support and encouragement for the difficult and courageous work of so many among our churches in ministering to those individuals, families and communities affected by HIV/AIDS. I know that this season will be a very difficult one for many of you as the impact of AIDS is felt in a very personal way in your communities. Too many families have lost loved ones whose absence will be deeply felt this Christmas; many other families will now include orphaned children; and in too many churches Christmas activities will now regularly include caring for those suffering from AIDS-related illnesses and comforting a growing number of bereaved.

As you know, HIV/AIDS is widely acknowledged to be the most serious health challenge facing the world at the moment. It is also, arguably, the gravest challenge to prospects of social and economic development and global security. This is especially true in Sub-Saharan Africa, but south Asia, eastern Europe, the Caribbean, and other parts of the world are also seriously, and increasingly, affected.

We know the statistics well: 21.8 million people around the world have already died of AIDS, over 3.8 million of them children. At least 36 million people are now estimated to be living with HIV and AIDS. Barring a miracle, most of these will die over the next decade or so. The most recent UNAIDS/WHO estimates show that, in 2000 alone, 5.3 million people were newly affected by AIDS, including 600,000 children under the age of 15.

For a great number of our churches, however, especially in Africa, these statistics are measured in different ways: the daily experience of human suffering, caring for orphaned children, the breakdown of family and community life, and the all-too-familiar loss and grief of funeral gatherings.

It is hard to over-estimate the effects of this disease that is expected to kill more than half of the young adults in the countries where it has its firmest hold - most of them before they finish the work of caring for their children or providing for their elderly parents.

This intense burden of suffering is a responsibility of the highest order, and in many countries, it is the greatest contemporary leadership challenge - for governments and especially for the churches.

How the churches, and the communities they serve and are part of, cope with and respond to a problem of this magnitude is of primary concern for the LWF communio.

In Africa and elsewhere, the churches, in their service and outreach roles, have been among the first organizations to respond to the HIV/AIDS pandemic. Many churches, but by no means all, are

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actively and centrally involved in efforts to increase awareness of HIV/AIDS, to change cultures and behaviours that facilitate its transmission, and to care for people living with HIV/AIDS and their families.

This challenge, however, is one that has to be taken up by all of us in this communio. At this time I would like to highlight for you four main concerns which together we must seek ways to address:

- the need to broaden networks of mutual solidarity, support, information and experience-sharing, and common action among the churches and church-related agencies addressing the HIV/AIDS pandemic and its effects;
- the need to counter, especially through such networking, the sense of disempowerment and denial which is too often fueled by the enormity of the crisis;
- the need to be a teaching church, promoting morality and responsibility in a time of HIV/AIDS, drawing upon the very best of our cultural traditions, and leaving behind those obstacles which prevent some churches from being able to openly and frankly address issues related to the behaviours and practices which promote HIV transmission, and the practical and necessary measures for reducing transmission rates; and
- the need to advocate with our governments for the allocation of adequate resources, nationally and internationally, to critical human health needs, rather than, for example, to military budgets.

The HIV/AIDS pandemic has also coincided with the era of economic globalization, which has presented both new opportunities for international solidarity in facing the crisis, and new obstacles to an effective response. Amongst those obstacles are the high cost of and lack of accessibility for poor countries and poor people to new patent-protected pharmaceuticals which could help to relieve the suffering of people and communities living with HIV/AIDS. In our response to the HIV/AIDS pandemic, our witness and our advocacy must address such obstacles as well.

On 1 December 2000, World AIDS Day, former South African President Nelson Mandela described HIV/AIDS as threatening the very fabric of South African society. He stressed the need to destigmatize the disease and to speak openly about it, as a necessary foundation for an effective response to HIV/AIDS and its social impacts. His remarks come in an historical context in which political leaders have in the past often failed to promote open acknowledgment of and discussion about HIV/AIDS. I can only endorse and repeat his words to you, as church leaders.

The challenge of HIV/AIDS to the pastoral and spiritual resources of many of our churches is unprecedented. We know that these difficulties will only increase. As a communio of churches we must seek ways to support and strengthen the leadership role of the churches in this daunting context, even as we accompany, support and console the very many of our sisters and brothers who are living with HIV/AIDS.

Yours in Christ,

Ishmael Noko  
General Secretary

cc: President Christian Krause  
Council members  
Cabinet