

**WCC Study Document 1997 — Facing AIDS: The challenge — the churches' re-sponse**

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**Reviewer: Rev P de Kock**

The central committee of the World Council of Churches, meeting in Johannesburg, South Africa in 1994, mandated the formation of a consultative group to conduct a study on HIV/AIDS. The aim was to help the ecumenical movement to shape its response in the areas of theology and ethics, pastoral care, and justice and human rights. The study should challenge the churches to be more honest, more faithful and better informed, and to become communities which are safe places for people living with HIV/AIDS.

The book consists of the following chapters:

- \* Why this study was prepared
  - \* Facing HIV/AIDS
  - \* Theological perspectives
  - \* Ethical perspectives
  - \* Human rights, responsibilities and HIV/AIDS
  - \* Pastoral care and healing community
  - \* Conclusion: What the churches can do
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- Appendix I: The impact of HIV/AIDS and the churches' response
  - Appendix II: An HIV/AIDS glossary
  - Appendix III: Persons involved in the HIV/AIDS study process

The study contains useful scientific facts as well as a lot of statistics regarding HIV/AIDS. *The World Health Organization* estimated that by mid-1994 the number of persons infected with HIV was about 17 million. The total number of persons infected by the virus was put at some 28 million by mid-1996, and it is estimated that 7000 new infections occur each day. Research has shown that messages using fear and negative images of AIDS have not been effective in producing or sustaining changes in behaviour. The study supports the view that the safest options for the prevention of HIV transmission is sexual abstinence or mutual faithfulness in stable sexual relationships.

It is noteworthy that factors which have been identified as having a causal role in the spread of the virus include gender — more specifically the economic, social and cultural lack of autonomy of women, which places them at risk of infection — poverty, and social exclusion (the absence of economic, social and political rights). According to the study the time has come for the church to examine and assess the extent of its complicity in upholding the social structures that perpetuate women's subordination.

One finds sound theology in the study. In referring to the tsetse fly that carries a parasite which may produce disease in cattle, the study convincingly shows that the possibility of the HIV virus has come out of the freedom which God has given the natural world to develop. It is injurious to humans and causes great suffering; yet for all the pain and problems that result, the virus is not something outside creation, nor is it a 'special' creation of God's intended to punish human beings. According to the study God will not remove the freedom given to the human and non-human creation. Out of a desire for a real

relationship, God will not use power to dominate and control; indeed, such behaviour would be foreign to God's own nature.

The document mentions that, of the many factors related to the pandemic, sexuality has perhaps received the least attention in ecumenical discussion. Further study in this area is essential for a deeper understanding of the challenges posed by HIV/AIDS. There is a continuing debate about the origins of sexual identity, that is, whether it is genetically 'given' or learned through social development. But it is certain that belief in, and adherence to, moral behaviour are developed in social interaction. From this the study justly concludes that the Christian faith and the churches clearly have an important role in influencing how this interaction occurs, and in the development of personal and community beliefs.

In an effort to demonstrate what the churches' attitude should be, the study quotes Romans 3:23: *All have sinned*. No one escapes this situation. According to the study a recognition of our common sinfulness may not only prevent feelings of personal superiority but also lead to mutual forgiveness and make spiritual growth possible. The document then continues to state that the response of Christians and the churches to those affected by HIV/AIDS should be one of love and solidarity, expressed both in care and support for those touched directly by the disease, and in efforts to prevent its spread.

The document states that churches in particular are looked to for moral guidance, and that they have a unique opportunity to convey to the world a relevant message in a time of moral crisis. Sound ethical principles — the infinite value of each person, the gospel imperative for reconciliation, the call to responsible life within community — seem to be applied to the concrete challenges posed by HIV/AIDS. These ethical principles require that no one be discriminated against because of attributes such as race, gender, religion, or being affected by a particular disease. Confidentiality should be maintained as far as possible and the churches should take responsibility in facilitating sound, well-resourced sex education. It clearly states that condoms are only one of a range of methods to prevent HIV transmission. The study maintains that the primary aim must still be to change behaviour and social conditions in a way which puts people at a lower risk of coming into contact with the virus.

According to the study the AIDS pandemic should be regarded as a unique opportunity to revive and reinforce the values of responsibility, sexual integrity, healthy relationships, human dignity and mutual respect. Unfortunately, the reaction of many Christians and church members to HIV/AIDS has hardly been different from that of society in general — and sometimes has been even worse.

The book is written in understandable English and contains practical guidelines for churches who accept the challenge of HIV/AIDS. It is a highly recommended work.