

**SECAM CONFERENCE OF THE SECRETARIES GENERAL  
THEOLOGICAL AND PASTORAL RESPONSE TO HIV/AIDS IN AFRICA  
CAPE TOWN, SOUTH AFRICA  
26 November – 1 December 2001**

PRESS STATEMENT

We the Secretaries General of Regional and National Episcopal Conferences on the continent of Africa, met under the umbrella of SECAM (Symposium of Episcopal Conferences of Africa and Madagascar) from 26<sup>th</sup> November to 1<sup>st</sup> December 2001 in Cape Town – South Africa. We shared insights, experiences and studied together the Church's theological and pastoral response to the HIV/AIDS pandemic in the whole world with particular emphasis in Africa.

We have noted with concern the deplorable effects of the virus, which has spread to every corner of the continent and beyond. The disease is spreading at an alarming rate. According to the latest UN statistics, it is estimated that around 40 million people in the world have contracted the virus. This disease has robbed millions and millions of lives and it has reverted development, particularly in Africa. It also contributes to widening the gap between rich and poor. It is therefore undermining social and economic security and has resulted in unprecedented trauma to millions of people.

We came out with a very clear conviction that “the Body of Christ in Africa” is deeply inflicted with the scourge of HIV/AIDS pandemic and it requires an urgent response from everyone to take courage and have hope!

We came up with the conclusion, that the church must take a leadership role in fighting HIV/AIDS at all levels, so that she really plays her role of being the voice of the voiceless and hope for Africa.

The vision of the church was seriously examined as that of a continuation of Christ's mission on earth. She is therefore convinced and committed not only to represent Christ but also to render him present in order to continue his mission which includes among others:

1. To give life to the full (Jn.10:10)
2. To relieve people from human miseries, to heal them from infirmities and diseases (Mt.8:17)
3. To heal people from trauma, to comfort the sick, the desperate and to give them hope (Acts. 10:38).
4. To liberate the oppressed people from social economic evils (Lk.4:16-20)

Pursuant of the mission of the Church in the ecclesiology of the Fathers of the Synod of Africa, “The Church as Family of God”, the Conference identified the following pertinent values.

**1. Sacredness of Life:**

We are aware that the HIV/AIDS pandemic has come at a time when life has become cheap and is at times treated like a commodity. The membership of the Church must promote the culture of the sacredness of life and love for life. Therefore a person living with HIV/AIDS has a right to life, integrity, support, treatment, and in particular, compassion.

**2. Compassion**

The Church is called to be disciples of Jesus who was found among the outcasts, and the most vulnerable in society.

The entire membership of the Church in Africa is called upon to make present God's compassionate presence among the most vulnerable members of society, the disadvantaged and suffering. This is a presence which gives hope. We as individuals, and as a Christian Community are called by gospel values to be caring agents of compassion.

### **3. Solidarity**

Like Jesus Christ, whose solidarity with humankind was expressed in becoming one like us, the Church in Africa is therefore called to greater solidarity with all people who suffer from the HIV/AIDS epidemic. We are convinced that the response to the pandemic finds its best expression in simple, caring forms of solidarity by being with those who suffer and by sharing our resources of time, gentleness, food, money and whatever else we have.

**Solidarity through teaching:** We have noted in the Conference that the principle duty of the church is to teach the truth at all times. We believe that the Church membership must come out and firmly teach the authentic values of life, true love and sexuality as well as the sanctity of traditional virginity of boys and girls, and fidelity in marriage as the principle means to curb further infection of the HIV/AIDS pandemic.

We also noted the importance for Church leaders to use appropriate language and presentation of doctrine in order to avoid stigmatising the people affected with HIV/AIDS.

Furthermore we realize the need for the Church leadership to take a leading role in raising a loud and clear voice at every level of society to overcome evil. This evil is personified in materialism and consumerism, which unfortunately dominates our society and therefore enhances the divide between developed and developing worlds, the have and the have-nots. This results in underdevelopment, economic dependency, lack of education and displacement through war.

In a special way we have noted that the Church as a body needs to re-address the place of women and children in society, particularly since they are the most affected by pandemic. We feel that some men in Africa hide behind culture in their degradation of women. Men must be encouraged to respect women and to acknowledge their major role in society.

**Solidarity through church as family of God.** The church is a family and hence a community by its very nature. This is fundamental of traditional African life and culture. We noted with concern the escalating numbers of AIDS orphans becoming overwhelming everywhere. The numbers of street-children and child dropouts are on alarming rate; child-headed households are becoming all too common. There is also an increase in child labour, the family values are lost, etc.. We commend the exemplary work done by church institutions in her support structures for the suffering from the HIV/AIDS pandemic. We are all too aware that more ought to be done.

Ultimately, the local church communities and individual Christian families are called to open their hearts and doors and become more and more part of the family of the AIDS orphans and other vulnerable children.

### **Recommendations:**

We therefore, as we leave for our respective countries wish to recommend the following steps which we are convinced can contribute to reversing the trend of HIV/AIDS and restore the African Traditional value of life.

1. That the church doubles efforts in her leading role to fight against HIV/AIDS pandemic at all levels, in all aspects.

2. That the Church as Family of God commits herself in concrete terms, to promote the Gospel values and attitudes and educates by example to uphold the gift of life according to gospel values.

Further that the church leadership should come up with concrete programmes that focus on sexual health education, behaviour change, HIV/AIDS counselling in order to link prevention with care and support.

3. That the church at the grassroots becomes a true family of God characterized by solidarity, empathy, and compassion.
4. That the church leaders teach their followers by action, in order that they become voice of the voiceless by advocating for the rights of those affected by this disease.
5. That the church as the family of God welcomes the development of new ministries in order to offer effective and efficient services to those suffering from HIV/AIDS pandemic.
6. That the church works in collaboration with other faith based organizations, governments and other bodies to fight against HIV/AIDS.
7. That all efforts be exerted to organise workshops at national, diocesan and other levels of church to increase the knowledge and sensitivity around the issue of HIV/AIDS.
8. That the SECAM Secretariat takes up the role of advocacy and networking with the international bodies on behalf of the church on African continent.
9. We ourselves with the HIV/AIDS regional and national coordinators endeavour to meet at least once a year to review the progress of the church's participation in this important mission.

Rev. Fr. Peter Lwaminda

The Secretaries General of SECAM  
Friday, 30 November 2001