

May 8, 2006

The Right Honourable Stephen Harper
Prime Minister of Canada
Office of the Prime Minister
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Dear Prime Minister Harper:

As national leaders of Canadian Churches and members of the Canadian Council of Churches, we are extremely concerned about the human impact of the global AIDS pandemic. Currently more than 40 million people are infected with HIV. Last year, over 3 million people died as a result of AIDS. There are 15 million child orphans because of AIDS. These statistics speak powerfully to the human cost.

Our first response to the depth of this tragedy is compassion. We suffer with those who suffer, and work to ease that suffering. We support the many members of our Churches who dedicate themselves to caring for persons living with HIV and AIDS.

Compassion and care alone are not enough. This threat to life is, at its core, an issue of faith. We believe in the fullness of life for all human beings for they are the bearers of the image of God. Our mandate to proclaim the good news of God in Christ compels us to action to address the issues at the root of this pandemic—the source of so much suffering and death. Until we transform the structures that contribute to the spread of AIDS, the crisis will continue. For us the call of Isaiah 58 “to break the bonds of injustice and to set free the oppressed” rings out clearly in this moment. The world can wait no longer for action to end HIV and AIDS.

Struck as we are by the magnitude of this challenge, we are not without hope. The courageous and dignified actions of those affected by HIV and AIDS in Africa and around the world inspire us. We see that the progression of HIV to AIDS can be slowed where access to antiretroviral (ARV) treatment and adequate nutrition are available. Yet at the end of 2005, only 17% of Africans and 16% of Asians that need antiretroviral treatment were receiving it.

Opportunities to demonstrate leadership

Canada has made commendable contributions to the fight against HIV and AIDS. Yet much more needs to be done at home and abroad. This year there are three opportunities for the government to exercise leadership on behalf of all Canadians.

The first occasion will be your address to the United Nations Review of Progress on the Implementation of the 2001 Declaration of Commitment on HIV/AIDS that takes place between May 31 and June 2, 2006.

The second event will be the Group of Eight Summit in St. Petersburg, Russia, from July 15-17, 2006. The Summit will assess progress since last year's meeting in Gleneagles where the G8 pledged to "implement a package for HIV prevention, treatment and care, with the aim of as close as possible to universal access for treatment for all those who need it by 2010." The G8 leaders also promised to work with African partners "to ensure that all children left orphaned or vulnerable by AIDS ... are given proper support.... [and] to meet the financing needs for HIV/AIDS, including through the replenishment this year of the Global Fund to fight AIDS, TB and Malaria."

The third opportunity will occur when Canada hosts the Sixteenth International AIDS Conference from August 13-18, 2006 in Toronto.

Current obstacles

UNAIDS reports that the financial resources needed by low- and middle-income countries for prevention programs, treatment and care and support for orphans, will fall short by US\$6 billion in 2006 and by US\$8.1 billion in 2007.

Moreover, the AIDS epidemic cannot be overcome unless its roots in poverty are eradicated. Providing medicines, doctors, nurses and pharmacists will not be enough unless adequate assistance is also given to agriculture, nutrition, clean water, housing, education, and long-term development.

Low-income countries cannot achieve sustainable, long-term development as long as they are burdened by heavy external debts. At Gleneagles, the G8 leaders promised to cancel the debts owed to three multilateral financial institutions by a few developing countries. However, as of mid-2006, the G8 plan will lead to the cancellation of only about 13% of the debts of the 62 countries most burdened by AIDS, debt and poverty.

In addition, the policies imposed by international financial institutions on countries seeking loans or debt relief constitute severe obstacles to the provision of the life-saving

health care and educational services needed to roll back the AIDS epidemic and to give orphans opportunities to live full and productive lives.

Immigrants and refugees in Canada with HIV and AIDS are denied care under certain circumstances depending on their status.

Six Canadian initiatives

Accordingly, we urge you to announce six initiatives when you address the UN General Assembly, the G8 Summit and the International AIDS Conference:

1. A Canadian led multi-lateral initiative to cancel 100% of the bilateral and multilateral debts owed by countries with HIV rates above the world average of 1.1% of their adult population.
2. A Canadian initiative to untie debt remission from International Monetary Fund and World Bank conditions that involve forced privatization of health care services, limits on hiring of health care workers and user fees for public services.
3. A Canadian contribution of five per cent of the funds needed by the Global Fund for AIDS, Tuberculosis and Malaria as well as a timetable for increasing Canada's Official Development Assistance to 0.7% of Gross National Income by 2015.
4. Amendments to Canada's pharmaceutical laws to remove disincentives for exporting less expensive medicines to countries without pharmaceutical production capabilities.
5. A commitment to give priority to women and children in all efforts to address HIV and AIDS, and to address the fundamental gender and age inequalities that fuel the pandemic.
6. Measures to ensure adequate health care for all people in Canada with HIV including immigrants and refugees.

Finally, we request an opportunity to meet with you prior to the finalization of Canadian policy initiatives to be announced at the UN Review of Progress.

Please be assured of our continued prayers for you and for all government leaders facing such urgent challenges as the HIV and AIDS crisis. May the words of Isaiah inspire you and all our representatives to take action for justice and mercy.

I'll tell you what it really means to worship the Lord. Remove the chains of prisoners who are chained unjustly. Free those who are abused! Share your food with everyone who is hungry; share your home with the poor and homeless. Give clothes to those in need; don't turn away your relatives.

- Isaiah 58:6-7 CEV

The Most Reverend Andrew S. Hutchison
Primate
The Anglican Church of Canada

His Grace Bishop Bagrat Galstanian
Primate
Armenian Holy Apostolic Church, Canadian Diocese

The Rev. Dr. Kenneth Bellous
Executive Minister
Baptist Convention of Ontario and Quebec

The Right Rev. Maurice Hicks
General Superintendent
British Methodist Episcopal Church

+ André Gaumond
Archbishop of Sherbrooke
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The Rev. F. Thomas Rutherford
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The Rev. Fr. Marcos Marcos
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The Rev. Fr. Messale Engeda
Presiding Priest
Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church in the Western Hemisphere

The Rev. Raymond Schultz
National Bishop
Evangelical Lutheran Church in Canada

His Eminence Metropolitan Sotirios
Archbishop
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The Rev. Henry Krause
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The Right Rev. Seraphim
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The Rev. Zbignew Kozar
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St. John's Cathedral Polish Catholic Church

The Rev. Jean Morris
Moderator, 131st General Assembly
The Presbyterian Church in Canada

Commissioner M. Christine MacMillan
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The Rev. Dr. Jim Sinclair
General Secretary
The United Church of Canada

CC: Members of Parliament