

Inter-Religious Council of Uganda

 Religions for Peace



DIALOGUE ON HIV/AIDS STIGMA

**SENIOR RELIGIOUS LEADERS AND PEOPLE
LIVING WITH HIV IN UGANDA**

Theme:

*Empowering Each Other in Love and Dialogue;
addressing HIV/AIDS Stigma*

COMMUNIQUÉ

5th November 2014

We the senior religious leaders from 6 (six) religious/faith institutions in Uganda namely: Church of Uganda (COU), Episcopal Conference of Uganda (ECU), Seventh Day Adventist Uganda Union (SDAUU), Orthodox Church, Uganda Muslim Supreme Council (UMSC), and the Pentecostal/ Evangelical Churches represented by Evangelical Fellowship of Uganda (EFU); National Fellowship of Born-again Pentecostal Churches (NFBPC); Pentecostal evangelistic Fellowship of Africa-Uganda (PEFA-U); and Born Again Faith in Uganda (BAF); together with people living with HIV from 3 (three) PLHIV networks namely: National Forum of PLHIV Networks in Uganda (NAFOPHANU), National Community of Women Living with HIV (NACWOLA), and Uganda Network of Religious Leaders Living with or personally affected by HIV/ AIDS (UNERELA+); at the invitation of the National Working Group (NWG) of the Framework for Dialogue - consisting of Uganda AIDS Commission (UAC), Uganda Christian ACTION Network (UCAN), Inter Religious Council of Uganda (IRCU), NAFOPHANU, NACWOLA, UNERELA+, Friends of Canon Gideon Foundation (FOCAGIFO), UNAIDS, Danchurch AID, and ICCO Cooperation gathered here at Imperial Royal Hotel on November 5th, 2014 for a dialogue on HIV and AIDS stigma.

Having come together as religious/faith institutions committed in love to the work of healing and wholeness; to creating welcoming communities, and to full respect for the God-given dignity of people living with HIV;

Seeking to ensure that the basic rights of HIV positive people, and people affected by HIV and AIDS are guaranteed

and that all people are granted equal treatment in society including in our churches and mosques; and in our health and education facilities;

Recognizing that, we are all affected by HIV and AIDS. If we are not HIV Positive, we have friends and family members, pastors and priests, sheikhs and imams, co-workers and leaders, in various sectors and at different levels who are either HIV positive or have died from AIDS-related illnesses;

Inspired by, the presence and participation of People Living with HIV/AIDS; we have heard their experiences and come to know (through the Stigma Index conducted by NAFOPNAHU) more about the stigma and discrimination that HIV positive persons and families among us have faced.

Aware of the importance of our speaking “with” people who are positive and not “about” people who are positive; and reject the stigmatizing dichotomy of “them” and “us”;

Acknowledging that together with all people we are one human community, and the physical presence among us of People Living with HIV, their voice, and their experiences are great gifts to our individual and joint efforts to combat HIV and AIDS;

Appreciating the proactive efforts of the Uganda government through the Uganda AIDS Commission and local and international partners to combat the HIV and AIDS epidemic, and the open collaboration with religious

institutions, faith-based organizations, and networks of People Living with HIV;

Reminded that, HIV and AIDS is still highly stigmatized; a reality that is destroying our common humanity by fear based on myths and misinformation. This fear results into discrimination of people living with HIV and their families; causing more pain and suffering.

Understanding the need to find the correct balance between the rights and responsibilities of individuals and communities regarding HIV and AIDS that requires moving beyond the theoretical and legal debates to practical implementation of protecting the rights and dignity of people, families and communities living with HIV and as well promoting their responsibilities;

Guided by our divine calling as leaders of religious/faith communities in Uganda;

Acting on our religious/faith convictions to love, have mercy, act justly and defend the vulnerable and/or disadvantaged, and;

Mindful of our religious duty to love one another and to care for the vulnerable in our midst and to as well ensure that they live responsibly;

We do here by Commit to:

1. Break the Silence about HIV/AIDS Stigma through:

- a) Teaching and providing comprehensive information in our churches and mosques about sex, sexuality and HIV and AIDS; and emphasizing that someone's HIV status reveals nothing of their spiritual status and standing before God;
- b) Changing attitudes that lead to stigma by living out our faith and putting the word of God as written in our Holy books (Bible and Quran) into action;
- c) Changing individual and institutional attitudes in our churches and mosques to fully accept people and families living with HIV in our lives and ministry;
- d) Ensuring that messages on HIV and AIDS are a part of worship and preaching in every church and mosque at least once a month.

2. Facilitate dialogue at different levels within our churches and mosques through:

- a) Contributing to and deepening theological reflections and understanding of the challenges of HIV and AIDS and to help religious leaders at different levels within our structures to separate 'sin' from 'HIV infection' ;

- b) Creating safe environments in our churches and mosques for people and families living with HIV to talk openly about their challenges, their fears, anxieties, hopes and breakthroughs;
- c) Overcoming stigma and discrimination by replacing ignorance with knowledge, shame with solidarity, and fear with hope;
- d) Adopting a gendered response to HIV/AIDS that:
 - (i) addresses the unique issues of girls and women;
 - (ii) communicates the different modes of HIV transmission beyond sex;
 - (iii) clarifies that 'faithfulness' will not always translate into 'safeness' particularly if one or both partners are already HIV positive; and
 - (iv) addresses risky environments and contexts that make girls and women more vulnerable to HIV.

3. Spear head Advocacy Efforts for Safer and Healthier Living through:

- a) Joining in collaboration, partnership and coalition building efforts for universal access to HIV prevention and AIDS treatment with particular attention to:
 - (i) mobilizing resources and
 - (ii) increasing full access to basic medications to address opportunistic infections and anti-retroviral drugs;

- b) Take steps to de-stigmatize voluntary testing - mandatory testing is not an acceptable option because counseling and treatment are not universally available, and stigma and discrimination remains widespread.

4. Change how religious leaders and People Living with HIV relate by:

- a) Encouraging mutual respect, honor and dialogue on the difficult issues related to HIV/AIDS;
- b) Treating people living with HIV with unconditional love, untiring care, and unfailing affection that is non-judgmental and respects human dignity;
- c) Giving careful attention to non-verbal expressions and the language that we use when speaking of HIV and AIDS, of people who are HIV positive and of their families and communities. Our language will be non-judgmental, and welcoming;
- d) Listening and learning from People Living with HIV who (like every one of us) prefer to be “respected, loved and accepted” while being counseled, cared for and/or treated or while journeying with others in their places of work, worship, residence, or education;

- e) Shaping our response, programs and services on mutually agreed needs and/or lived experiences of religious leaders and people living with HIV along with their families.

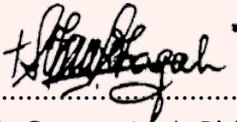
We are deeply committed to working on an interfaith and multi-religious basis in response to HIV and AIDS. With sensitivity and care, a common message can save lives and build deeper understanding and cooperation.

We will seek out opportunities for multi-religious exchange and networking related to HIV and AIDS at both national and local (grassroots) level. Whenever possible, we will work together in our efforts around awareness, prevention and advocacy.

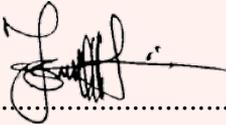
Networking will give greater strength and swifter results to our common work. Therefore we will share information and experiences openly; that we might enhance each other's work and learn from each other.

We will bring the conclusions of this dialogue and these commitments to our churches, mosques, partners, and networks to build awareness, capacity, and action to protect the dignity of People Living with HIV to reach zero new HIV infections, Zero Stigma and Discrimination and Zero AIDS Related Deaths.

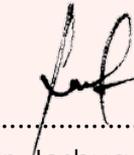
IN SOLIDARITY:



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His Grace Arch Bishop Stanley Ntagali
Archbishop of Church of Uganda
Ag. Chairperson, IRCU Council of Presidents



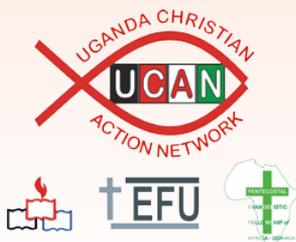
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Bishop Joshua Lwere
Chairman, National Alliance of Pentecostal and
Evangelical Churches in Uganda (NAPECU)
Chairperson, UCAN Council of Presidents



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Mr. Joshua Kitakule
Secretary General, IRCU



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