

FIVE WAYS TO END THE HIV AND AIDS EPIDEMIC IN THE PHILIPPINES

Speech presented by Rev. Dr. Donald E. Messer, Executive Director, Center for Health and Hope at the HIV AND AIDS EDUCATION AND PREVENTION FORUM, Wesleyan University in Cabanatuan City, Nueva Ecija, Philippines
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“HIV is spreading faster in the Philippines than anywhere in the world,”
The Wall Street Journal (October 3, 2019)

As is quite evident, I am not a young man—I’m old! I spent most of my life as an educator—serving 29 years as a university and seminary president. After I retired, I founded the Center for Health and Hope, focusing on global HIV and AIDS. Our mission as a Center for almost 20 years has been to support and advocate for persons infected and affected by HIV and AIDS through programs of education, prevention, care and treatment.

Why I Am Involved

I have never earned a salary in my role as an AIDS educator. I am a volunteer and I have chosen to come to the Philippines because I want to promote education and prevention. I want every Filipino person—whether young or old, rich or poor, straight or gay, Catholic or Protestant, Christian or Muslim, female, male or transgender—to live what Jesus called a “life abundant.” I believe stigma and discrimination are contrary to the Christian gospel, and, as a United Methodist pastor, I champion acceptance, understanding, and inclusion of all persons.

People sometimes ask me a version of the question “how did you get involved in promoting HIV and AIDS education and prevention?” My journey and exposure to HIV and AIDS began in 1985 when I was asked to preach a sermon at an AIDS conference. I soon realized I didn’t know enough to speak.

So, I went to my friend, Rev. Dr. Charlie Aerhart at the Denver Rocky Mountain Metropolitan Church. He offered to introduce me to six gay Christian men from his parish who were dying from AIDS in local hospitals. I say “dying” because there was no effective medicine. These young men helped me write my sermon as they told me their stories and shared their experiences of stigma, mistreatment, and ever-increasing suffering such as blindness and open wounds.

But what I learned from them was not just their pain, but their unwavering hope that a cure was just around the corner: they wanted to be the last to suffer. They urged me to warn others and to promote care and compassion. I’m promised them I would tell their story as they were men of courage and compassion. So, in response for 35 years, I have been witnessing to their bravery and sounding their warning—there is still no cure or vaccine; we must be vigilant promoting education and prevention and vigorous in championing health and hope.

Rising Epidemic in the Philippines

Thirty-five years ago, people weren’t concerned about HIV in the Philippines. In fact, only in recent years has the country begun to realize they face an epidemic that is growing. Unlike most countries in the world, where infection and deaths are decreasing, the Philippines has demonstrated steady growth in recent years. In fact, “HIV is spreading faster in the Philippines than anywhere in the world,” according to the *Wall Street Journal* (October 3, 2019). Since 2010 new infections have escalated by 170%! (Avert) I commend the university, local authorities, and the church for becoming increasingly involved in HIV and AIDS education and prevention.

The number of new infections has more than doubled since 2014. UNAIDS estimates 77,000 living with HIV in the Philippines. More than a quarter million will be infected by 2030. At least 32 new infections are diagnosed daily (about 1,000 per month), but many more are suspected but unrecorded because of lack of testing and verification. This surge contrasts with most of the world where the rate of infections appears to be declining. Three-quarters of the people diagnosed since 1984 were registered in the last five years.

Some 96% became infected due to sexual encounters. An overwhelming percentage are gay and bisexual men between ages of 15 to 24.

HIV and AIDS are treatable but many infections are not discovered soon enough or people are not getting treatment. Therefore, the number of deaths from AIDS also is rising unnecessarily in the Philippines. There have been at least 2,303 deaths, but again this is believed to be vastly underreported. In the first eight months of 2017, for example, there were reported 891 AIDS cases and 334 deaths. (The RIJN Foundation for Women)

What Can I Do?

Some day they will build a museum or monument in the Philippines that celebrates how HIV and AIDS was conquered in this country. The Nobel winning economist from Bangladesh, Mohammed Yunus, says someday humanity will build museums about how poverty was ended in the world. In the future, he says, people will “wonder why poverty continued so long in human society—how a few people could live in luxury while billions dwelt in misery, deprivation, and despair.”

The time is not yet when we can build such a museum about overcoming poverty. Neither have we reached a time to build such a monument about ending AIDS, but hopefully that day will come. It can, however, happen when Filipino leaders and individual citizens are committed to educating people on how to avoid HIV and insist all people should get available protection and medicine. But that day will not come until people insist on greater financial resources and an end to stigma and discrimination.

Five Ways to Create An AIDS-Free World

Several years ago, I wrote a short book entitled “*52 Ways to Create An AIDS-Free World*” in which I argued that every person is called to take personal and social responsibility for HIV and AIDS education and prevention. The good news is that the disease is not generic; it is completely preventable. There is no known cure or vaccine, but there are steps everyone can take to reduce and eliminate transmission of the virus. Each of us can make a difference.

Today I am not going to repeat all 52 ways—but I am going to lift up five ways that you can protect yourself and your loved ones. Five ways that will help change the course of history in the Philippines from a rising epidemic to a declining one. My goal today is to be candid, not controversial. Yet I realize that some of what I say may be upsetting to some people because of their religious, political or personal views. But stopping the epidemic requires truth-telling and honest conversation.

❖ *Hate the disease, not the people infected.*

First, hate the disease, not the people infected. Too often people infected are treated as pariahs, scorned by family and friends, marginalized and stigmatized by church and society. The virus is our enemy, not the people infected and affected by the disease.

Fear and mistreatment of persons living with HIV continues to spread the disease in the world. People don't get tested or treated because of how they think people will react. Repeatedly I have been told by people living with HIV that “worse than the disease is how people treat you.”

Just this week I read in the *New York Times* (10/27/19) about the serious outbreak of HIV in the small city of Ratodero, Pakistan. Nine hundred children have been tested for HIV. Further testing suggests that one in every 200 citizens is infected. Panic and fear are spreading. Some are claiming it is “God's affliction” on them. One man killed his infected wife by strangling her. Another woman was tied to a tree by her family to shame her.

Effective education and prevention do not involve shame and blame, but compassion and care, testing and treatment. As Mother Teresa once remarked: “If you judge people, you have no time to love them.” HIV does not spread easily or casually by sneezing, touching or coughing, so it is safe to shake hands, exchange hugs, and share meals. Welcome persons infected by HIV into your classrooms, churches, and lives. Stand with them and encourage them to get proper medication. People living with HIV can get

married and have babies that are infection free. People with HIV can live long and abundant lives. People living with HIV who get proper medication do not spread the disease.

Treat people the way you would want to be treated. The Golden Rule is not passé': "Do unto others as you would have them do unto you."

❖ ***Avoid Unprotected Sex—Use Condoms & Advocate PrEP***

Second, avoid unprotected sex; use condoms and advocate PrEP. HIV can be transmitted in various ways—like blood contamination, by injecting drugs with unclean needles, and in a mother's milk for her infant. But the primary method of transmission worldwide remains unprotected sex.

Refraining from sexual relationships, or abstinence, obviously eliminates the possibility of getting HIV from sexual intercourse. But a universal ban on sex or widespread abstinence is unrealistic and undesirable. In the Philippines, an estimated one-third of young people between the ages of 15 and 24 have pre-marital sex. Some 78% report not using a condom.

Since it is obvious that many people are going to have sex, it is a matter of public health that we want to encourage the correct and consistent use of condoms. As a Christian, I say "thank God for condoms;" otherwise, there would be far more than 37 million people living with HIV in the world today. As Melissa Gates said, "In the fight against AIDS, condoms save lives. If you oppose the distribution of condoms, something is more important to you than saving lives."

It should be noted that women are more vulnerable to HIV than men because of biology, social conditions, and religious traditions. Unfortunately, female condoms, are not as easy for women to use or even to obtain.

Besides condoms there is PrEP—pre-exposure prophylaxis medication that is effective in stopping almost all transmissions. This medicine, however, is expensive and not readily available to most people. Even those who use Truvada (the most common type), are encouraged to use condoms, since the medication does not prevent other sexually transmitted diseases. PrEP, I believe is an answer to our prayers and its widespread distribution and use is to be advocated.

❖ ***Tackle the taboos of culture and churches***

Third, let us tackle the taboos of culture and churches. Every culture and religion have its own set of traditional taboos prohibiting sexual education and preventing HIV education. Breaking the silence of sexual health is happening today in this conference, but too often the subject is not addressed in our schools, universities, churches, or civic conversations.

An AIDS-free world requires challenging certain cultural taboos or traditions. In parts of sub-Saharan Africa widows are expected or even compelled to endure "widow cleansing," meaning they must have sexual intercourse with their brother-in-law or a professional "widow cleanser." Other traditions like early marriage of girls, demand for dry vaginal sex, prohibitions against condoms, or inadequate sexual education are taboos that need to be addressed world-wide.

Sex is a basic human drive and to be celebrated as God's gift for both procreation and pleasure. Responsible use of this gift means one can have frisky, but not risky or dangerous sex. A slogan might be to "enjoy but not endanger" another person.

Respect the right of people to say "no." Too many societies and religious groups demean women and do not ensure equality. Oppose all forms of violence or non-consensual sex. The RIJN Foundation for Women in the Philippines estimates "five out of ten females are sexually assaulted in in the Philippines and that a growing number of males are victims of this crime, especially children." Rape needs to be reported and punished. Stand firm against sexual harassment or intimidation.

Promote safer sex practices so HIV does not spread to others. By overcoming "AfrAIDS" and knowing how to prevent HIV and AIDS, we build a better university, church and society.

❖ **Encourage Volunteer Counseling, Testing, and Treatment**

Fourth, we end the HIV pandemic by encouraging volunteer counseling, testing, and treatment. Because of stigma and discrimination, many people—especially men—avoid getting tested for HIV. Also, many people worldwide, even after testing do not get treated. The good news is that 60% of the 37 million people infected in the world are getting anti-retroviral drugs, but the global scandal is that 40% of those infected do not have the medicine. The percentage not being treated in Asia is higher than 40%.

UNAIDS uses the slogan “treatment is prevention.” By that they mean that if a person receives effective anti-retroviral medicine, then the virus become undetectable in the human system. Another slogan says “Undetectable equals untransmittable.” In other words, a person getting treatment cannot give the virus to their sexual partner. This is great news and is one of the reasons one can dream of an HIV-free world.

The country of Australia now has a vigorous plan for eliminating HIV by a combination of methods: educating, testing, treating with PrEP and antiretroviral drugs, free condoms and lubrication, etc. Remember persons living with HIV can live long and productive lives. HIV is a chronic disease like diabetes—not easy, but manageable. Always better to prevent HIV, but not the end of life if one is infected.

❖ **Stamp Out Stigma and Discrimination**

Fifth, stamp out stigma and discrimination. What fuels the pandemic of HIV and AIDS throughout the world is the persistent tendency of human beings to mistreat persons infected by HIV and those most vulnerable to the disease. There is no pill to remedy stigma and discrimination; it is a matter of changing the human heart and expanding the human mind.

Religious people can be both the most compassionate or the most condemning. They can be the most loving or hateful. They can be the most helpful or the most harmful in the struggle against HIV and AIDS. What we need are people of goodwill, religious or non-religious, Christian or Muslim or Hindu or whatever, who truly love their neighbors as they love themselves. We need humanitarians of every age, who respect and advocate for the human rights of all people.

As Christians, let us promote anti-stigma programs as central to the mission and ministry of Jesus Christ, who engaged in healing persons with all types of medical problems. Perhaps some were sexually transmitted; the Scripture does not say. but never once does Jesus stigmatize or demonstrate discrimination. Illustrative is his ministry to persons with leprosy: a model of courage and compassion. Each of us can choose to love all people, overcoming our fear of HIV positive people and abandoning homophobia. Each of us can be witnesses to care and compassion, not indifference, judgement and condemnation.

Let us not fear to identify and name bigotry whenever people and policies deny human rights or promote stigma and discrimination. Let us proclaim that homophobia, not homosexuality, is a life-style choice. We do not choose our sexual orientation, but we do choose whether we are going to be friendly, hospitable, accepting, kind, generous, and understanding. Efforts to change a person’s sexual orientation is inevitably harmful and unsuccessful.

What is truly “incompatible with Christian teaching” are not same-sex, age-appropriate, mutually-consenting relationships, but lives lacking love of God, neighbor, and self. What is important is not the sexual orientation of another person, but whether their lives reflect integrity, responsibility, honesty, kindness, compassion, and love.

The reason that HIV and AIDS continues to flourish is because the world has failed to effectively deliver messages of education, prevention, and healthcare to LGBTQ persons. Too often, because of stigma, authorities do not reach out to key groups of persons who are excluded, such as commercial sex workers, injecting drug users, people who are incarcerated in jails and men who have sex with men (MSM). Until exclusion stops, then HIV and AIDS cannot be curbed.

In Closing

In closing, let me again commend Wesleyan University and all of you for daring to be on the cutting edge of this epidemic facing your nation. Your leadership can make a difference in what happens in this country during the next decade and beyond. Now is the time for action, not complacency.

You can help reverse the Filipino HIV epidemic. Hate the disease, avoid unprotected sex, tackle the taboos, encourage testing and treatment, and stamp out stigma and discrimination.

Above all, protect yourself and your loved ones. There is a popular song that goes "Let there be peace on earth, and let it begin with me." Likewise, when it comes to this topic, "Let there be an end to HIV on earth, and let it begin with me." And you!