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# Theological Perspective on HIV and AIDS: Summary Statements

Edited by Rich Harrell, Committee Chair

Held 28 May – 1 June 2012 at NEGST/AIU, Nairobi, Kenya

**Introduction:** We, the assembled believers in Jesus Christ, serving throughout sub-Saharan Africa as pastors, medical workers, community developers and theological educators, participants in the Theological Perspective on HIV and AIDS Conference, thank God for this opportunity to address this issue that has so deeply affected every area of life among the peoples of Africa. We have been challenged in our thinking and in our faith to find concrete ways of founding our actions in sound theology and practical expressions of God's love toward the individuals among whom we seek to serve to God's glory. Therefore, we wish to declare our observations and commitment at the end of our conference.

1) **Grace:** Grace and Peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ! Grace is a central theme in addressing HIV and AIDS biblically. Having understood the HIV and AIDS situation, the church's first reaction to HIV and AIDS should be of compassion and acceptance, not condemnation. Stigma and judgment are symptoms of a bigger problem – a deficiency of grace in the church's communal life. A lack of awareness of both our sinfulness and the immensity of God's saving grace contributes to this problem. The journey from judgment to grace needs to be made deliberately, one step at a time. Christ's people must extend the grace they have received to the infected and affected and to one another.

2) **Practical Theology/Pastoral Circle:** Practical Theology means presenting the Gospel in ways that are relevant to the life of the people with whom the church is in relationship. This is crucial. The Pastoral Circle is a tool used in this regard and involves identifying and analyzing practical problems/experiences encountered by the church, reflecting biblically upon them, and then responding wisely, holistically, and effectively. Practical theology should be contextual, communal, gender sensitive, and open to informal expressions (such as prayer, music, drama, and dancing) in addition to formal ones.

3) **Christology/God's Character:** Our attitude towards the sick and marginalized in society (such as those with HIV and AIDS) should be the same as Christ's, who was full of grace, compassion, mercy, and love. Jesus was most critical of the hypocrites and the judgmental but 'a friend to tax collectors and sinners' (Mt. 11:19). The parable of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10) illustrates His character. Teaching and endeavors in HIV and AIDS ministries must be grounded in a thoroughly biblical theology.

4) **Family priorities:** Biblical principles of marriage and parenting must be taught in the church and modeled in the lives of believers. Our God-given priority is to our spouse and children. Children need the love, teaching, and mentoring of their parents in order to be able to avoid many of the traps that lead to a life-style that is prone to HIV and AIDS.

5) **Behaviour change:** Changing sinful attitudes and behaviours necessitates courageous biblical teaching about taboo issues, such as sex, combined with godly role models. With behavior issues it is helpful to ask, "Why are you doing this?" or "What does it mean?" People need to understand what is at the root of their behavior and take ownership in changing it. We must all remember that Christ through the work of the Holy Spirit in the believer's life is the one who performs the internal transformation necessary to bring about behaviour change. Authentic transformation results in repentance, forgiveness and reconciliation.

6) **Gender issues:** Each gender has its own distinct and equally challenging issues when facing HIV and AIDS, so a unique and yet balanced approach is required for both sexes.

7) **Church's response:** A helpful progression in responding to HIV and AIDS involves sensitizing the congregation towards HIV and AIDS; mobilizing its people; advocating for those infected with and affected by HIV and AIDS; and building capacity, policies, and strategies that lead to intervention programs. The church, and in particular its leadership, need to receive training on HIV and AIDS and need to interact with those infected. Practical HIV and AIDS training should be integrated into theological education at Bible colleges and universities. The church has a biblical mandate to live out care and concern for widows, orphans and vulnerable children. The response of the church has been too often judgmental, anemic, or cautious, but it must change and become gracious, wholehearted and holistic.

8) **Opportunity:** HIV and AIDS should be seen as an opportunity rather than a burden for the church. God often uses adversity to draw us to Himself. The church should be a place of refuge where people want to come in their time of need. It provides a unique opportunity for the church to display Christ's love and to pursue increasing conformity to the image of Christ. "If the church of Jesus Christ rises to the challenge of HIV/AIDS it will be the greatest apologetic the world has ever seen!" (Theologian Ravi Zacharias)

**Conclusion:** Therefore, in light of our faith in Jesus Christ and our commitment to call people from among all the Gentiles to the obedience that comes from faith, we resolve to implement the recommendations in these summary statements and to encourage other believers to join us and instruct them in the implementation of these principles and practices by God's grace and through His power for the glory of name in this world and the next.