Watch People of Faith Renew Their Fight Against HIV—and COVID-19

Their global conference also launched the 13 Million Campaign, an effort to get health services to those with HIV and not on meds.

October 8, 2020 By Trent Straube

HIV advocates across the globe who are also people of faith met virtually for a three-day conference at the end of September to renew their commitment to fighting the virus, learn about the latest advancements and share best practices for providing HIV services during the COVID-19 pandemic, reports the Joint United Nations Programme on HIV/AIDS (UNAIDS).

More than 1,000 people participated in the HIV interfaith event "Resilience & Renewal: Faith in the HIV Response" spearheaded by the Interfaith Health Platform. UNAIDS posted videos of conference speeches, statements, prayers and interviews, including those with the Rev. Christo Greyling of the Dutch Reformed Church; AIDS United CEO Jesse Milan Jr.; Ambassador-at-Large Deborah Birx, MD, the U.S. global AIDS coordinator (whom you likely recognize from her work with the White House Coronavirus Task Force); and the event's keynote speaker, the Most Rev. Dr. Thabo Makgoba, Archbishop of Cape Town (you can view his speech at the top of this article; a short opening statement by Birx and an interview with Greyling are below).

Launched at the conference, the 13 Million Campaign references the 13 million people worldwide who are living with HIV but don't have access to lifesaving medications. The campaign encourages faith leaders and communities to promote access to health services and HIV antiretrovirals.

The campaign stresses the importance of HIV testing and care and notes that HIV is "a justice issue," in that most people living with the virus globally are in low- and middle-income countries that lack access to care and treatment, a situation exacerbated by COVID-19.

Courtesy of Interfaith Health Platform

“Faith communities and leaders have a moral responsibility to act to promote access to prevention, treatment, care and support to all,” states the 13 Million Campaign. “Their position of trust and respect within their faith communities and society at large enable them to reach people from the ‘halls’ of political and policy-making power to the grassroots level. Religious and spiritual leaders can be a strong voice in favor of supportive legal, regulatory and social environments that advance human rights, gender equality [and] social justice goals and call for successful strategies for HIV prevention, testing, treatment, care and support.”

You can endorse the campaign by signing Our Promise to Action.

“More than ever, it is important that faith communities and leaders are strong voices for people,” said Shannon Hader, UNAIDS deputy executive director in the UNAIDS article. “This means, in a time of COVID-19, recognizing that a call to action on COVID-19 and a call to action on HIV should be complementary and synergistic—they are not in opposition to each other. We will rely on faith partners to be strong and true voices of support for people living with HIV.”

“When our faith in systems and society is shaken,” added AIDS United’s CEO Jesse Milan Jr., “our faith community is needed even more.”

In related news, the last Sunday of August marks the National Faith HIV/AIDS Awareness Day. Read about this year’s activities, and watch several of the virtual events in this POZ article. For more information, visit FaithAIDSDay.com.

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