

**Statement by Harold Robinson, UNFPA Representative for
Office of the English and Dutch speaking Caribbean at
PANCAP-FBO Meeting on November 22, 2005**

UNFPA Office for the English and Dutch speaking Caribbean welcomes this invitation to participate in this PANCAP-FBO meeting. It's a great opportunity to build partnerships as we continue to fight HIV/AIDS and in particular stigma and discrimination that create the enabling environment for the disease to spread.

Since the start of the HIV/AIDS epidemic an estimated 60 million persons worldwide have been infected with HIV, some 20 million of whom have already died. The rate of new HIV infections continues to climb every year, with an estimated 4.9 million people having been infected in 2004.

The situation demands urgent action!

Issues relating to reproductive health and rights including HIV/AIDS are very sensitive but if we are to combat the disease we cannot and should not avoid speaking about them because they are matters of life and death.

These issues go to the very heart of human existence and to the centre of human relationships-both the intimate relationships that we have in our lives and also the relationships we have with the broader society. For reproductive

health is not merely an individual matter, neither is HIV/AIDS. They are matters that involve the community and the society. They touch on issues of culture and religion, as well as values, traditions and practices.

Talking about sexual health is widely regarded as taboo this is even more-so where adolescents are concerned. This approach to the issue inadvertently contributes to the spread of the disease as it dives the epidemic underground. Additionally, in some societies patriarchal and male-centered attitudes, rooted deeply in cultural practices also serve to encourage stigmatization of people living with HIV and AIDS.

Stigma and discrimination are allies of the epidemic, so too is ignorance. The disease thrives on these negative elements.

All of us have to begin to place HIV/AIDS on our public agenda. We need to create opportunities to discuss the extent and impact of the disease on individuals, families, societies and nations. As community leaders you can help your congregations to understand their sexual and reproductive health and rights. You can help to provide them with information about HIV/AIDS.

Promoting greater public awareness of the disease, how it is transmitted and how it can be prevented is the strongest weapon against ignorance, inaction, stigma, and discrimination: the key forces that allow the epidemic to flourish.

I would also like to stress the importance of reaching out to people, listening to their concerns even whilst articulating positions that can bring about serious change in the behaviours of individual women and men, family members and members of the community.

As people who command the respect and attention of your respective congregations and constituents you can bridge the gap between the sensitivity of cultural practices and religious interpretations and issues of reproductive health including HIV/AIDS through the positions you take. You also play an important role in creating an enabling environment for the promotion of tolerance and in transforming the value systems that allow discrimination to exist.

Additionally, you offer the social support that women and girls need to empower them to insist on safer sex and to reject unwanted sexual advances that can result in higher vulnerability to HIV.

Worldwide women and girls are identified among those persons most vulnerable to infection due to widespread inequalities and economic, political, social, cultural and security factors. They have less power to negotiate consensual safe sex practices and to refuse unwanted and unsafe sex. In order to foster change in this area we need to draw attention to the deep seated causes of women's vulnerability to HIV.

Lobbying for more opportunities and greater equity in education and employment for women, young people –particularly young males- and marginalized populations, who are particularly vulnerable to HIV, and also for the elimination of violence against women are other strategies that we must undertake in the fight against this disease.

Historically religious and traditional family values have contributed to the care and support of persons infected with HIV and their families. This is a strong foundation upon which to build those positive values that would help fight the epidemic and eradicate stigma and discrimination against those infected and affected. Religious and Faith Based Leaders have always led the way in speaking loudly about compassion and solidarity among people and in the delivery of care and services to people infected and affected by HIV/AIDS.

This is a tradition that we expect –we know- will continue in relation to the fight against HIV/AIDS stigma and discrimination.

UNFPA reiterates its commitment to your work, looks forward to the deliberations of this meeting and to the subsequent activities emanating from it.

Thank you.