



Evangelical Lutheran Church in America

God's work. Our hands.

**World AIDS Day 2013 Joint Statement
The Evangelical Lutheran Church in America
and
The Episcopal Church**

World AIDS Day, December 1, is both an annual commemoration of those who have lost their lives to the deadly pandemic, a time to stand with all persons living with HIV, and an opportunity to recommit to a future without AIDS. This year, World AIDS Day falls on the First Sunday in Advent, the first day of a new church year. Like Advent, World AIDS Day invites us to consider the ways in which we live between the tension of the present, in all its brokenness, and hope and expectation for a transformed future.

Signs of hope abound. Investment by the United States and other global partners is slowly but surely helping change the face of HIV and AIDS in the developing world. Earlier this year, Secretary of State John Kerry announced the birth of the one millionth baby born HIV-free as a result of our nation's landmark global AIDS initiative created by President Bush ten years ago. That initiative, which generated significant debate when created in 2003 and renewed by Congress in 2008, was just last week reauthorized for another five years by towering bipartisan congressional majorities. Though the road to eradication of the pandemic around the world remains long, the signs of hope are clear.

Similarly, our nation's shared efforts to transform the face of HIV and AIDS in the United States offer much promise even as they invite further commitments to action. We are now three years into this nation's first comprehensive HIV/AIDS strategy, aimed at reducing new infections, increasing access to care, and eliminating HIV-related health disparities. The implementation of the Affordable Care Act (ACA), though challenging in ways worthy of continued government attention, offers new opportunities for access to health care and prevention and treatment services for millions of Americans, especially those most at-risk for HIV transmission. Changes to lifetime limits on insurance claims, the impact of pre-existing conditions as a consideration in insurance coverage, and other shifts resulting from the ACA will mean that many with HIV and AIDS will be eligible for care they were previously denied.

In ways that did not seem possible ten years ago, we can now see through the brokenness of the present toward a future without AIDS. It would be a mistake, though, to be complacent about the urgency of the work that remains before us. The present continues to challenge us to respond boldly and courageously.

Stigma remains a substantial issue in nearly all contexts around the world and at home, including in our own church communities. Are we truly welcoming to all people? How do we communicate our welcome to people who are not already part of our communities?

The disproportionate impact of the disease of ethnic minority communities presents a similar continuing challenge. African Americans account for almost 50% of all new HIV infection cases, and Hispanics account for 20%. Native Hawaiians and Pacific Islanders are less than 1 % of the population, but their infection rate is twice that of the white population. American Indians/Alaska natives have a 30% higher rate of HIV/AIDS infection than the white population.

Attitudes too present a challenge. Polls show that Americans increasingly see HIV as a manageable chronic infection rather than an urgent health crisis. This is leading to increased infection rates in many parts of the country, even as state funding for AIDS programs is declining in many places. Clearly, significant community education remains an imperative.

We are convinced that churches can be significant leaders in education and awareness, welcome and care, advocacy and ultimately the transformation of this disease's impact.

Both The Episcopal Church and the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America have resources available to those committed to this work. The National Episcopal AIDS Coalition recently published *HIV, Health, and Holiness: A Guide for the Episcopal Church* (http://neac.org/files/documents/hiv_health_and_holiness.pdf) to help communities engage. The Evangelical Lutheran Church in America has developed a comprehensive denominational strategy for HIV and AIDS. (<http://www.elca.org/Our-Work/Relief-and-Development/HIV-AIDS-Ministry>)

Additionally, each church continues to be active in advocacy – both domestic and global – for an end to HIV/AIDS. Please join the Episcopal Public Policy Network (episcopalchurch.org/eppn) or the ELCA E-Advocacy Network (elca.org/advocacy) to get connected.

Finally, we invite Episcopalians and Lutherans to consider increased congregational cooperation in this work. Our churches' full-communion relationship is more than ten years old, and local communities are now collaborating in varied and exciting ways. Can shared strategy toward AIDS-free communities be a part of this? Could congregations challenge themselves to see the National Week of Prayer for the Healing of AIDS – observed annually beginning the first Sunday in March – as an opportunity to begin?

“You know what time it is,” St. Paul writes to the Romans in the Epistle reading for this coming First Sunday in Advent and World AIDS Day, “now [is] the moment for you to wake from sleep.” In anticipation of the coming Redeemer, Advent invites us to keep alert, awake, vigilant and ready so that the comfort of the moment does not occlude our vision of the transforming and healing Sun of Righteousness dawning upon us. In the same way, let us recommit this World AIDS Day to activity and vigilance in order to hasten the coming of the transformation that is the future God dreams for all creation.

God's blessings,

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