

Working Together for HIV and AIDS

By: Tarmizi Taher

In March 2006, I was invited by UNAIDS to attend a consultation of Islamic and Christian leaders on responding to HIV and AIDS at the Windsor Castle, one of the residences of Queen Elizabeth, in Windsor, England.

As a human being who constantly thinks, there is no adversity that one cannot learn from and human adversity such as HIV and AIDS is no exception.

During the consultation meeting, Tale, a beautiful Muslim woman (Muslimah), was called to the podium to recount her heart-breaking story of being lured by love. For the past thirteen years, the Arab-Lebanese woman has lived nightmares that resulted in her getting HIV. During a consultation with a doctor, she was diagnosed with HIV. Her entire life shattered by a pothole in her love path.

This woman, however, was very "special". Her name was Aminah. As an educated Muslimah, she realized that being a person living with HIV should bring her closer to God. Kneeling before God, she wept and prayed, "Dear loving and merciful Allah, bless me in my despair."

After living with HIV for a few years, the beautiful Lebanese Muslimah sought out two imams (Islamic priests). The first imam she met was old and did not understand the meaning of living with HIV or how HIV could become AIDS. What the old imam said to her could not console her misery. Disheartened by the advice, she went to see a younger imam who was more knowledgeable and his kind words gave her hope. The young imam said, "God loves you, my sister, God is simply testing you and forewarning you."

In a moving reminiscence, the beautiful Muslimah who had been infected by HIV said, "The spiritual change in my heart brings me closer to the loving and forgiving God. It also has made me feel closer to deprived people and orphans. I now regularly put aside a portion of my income for my fellow people with HIV who live in misery and poverty." The Muslimah from Lebanon has now become an activist, reaching out to help drug users and people living with HIV.

After this heart-breaking story from the beautiful Lebanese Muslimah, the library of the Windsor Castle where 25 Islamic and Christian leaders met for the consultation was silent. So moved by the story, everybody in the room held back their tears and was subdued. Everyone can be affected by the same challenges in lives. They can happen to anyone, whether Muslim or Christian.

Compassion and Suffering

When a young man dressed in a clerical robe took the podium and told us that he had lived with HIV for ten years, the room in Windsor where the three-day consultation meeting for 25 Islamic and Christian leaders took place- once again went silent.

Since Africa was hit by the HIV and AIDS epidemic, the young pastor had actively worked for children losing their parents to AIDS. His work eventually exposed him to HIV infection.

Observing this phenomenon, what rights do we have to admonish people living with HIV in the society? All Islamic and Christian leaders in the meeting were surprised when the pastor presented the fact that not all people living with HIV were infected through their sinful behavior.

In the era of globalization and the global village, Islamic and Christian leaders are often sitting idle when confronted with human suffering. Religious leaders must wake up and work together to respond to the HIV and AIDS epidemic.

Syaikul Azhar Thantawy, Qardawy, and Father Desmond Tutu call on us as religious leaders to wake up and more assertively mobilize mankind to prevent the spread of HIV and AIDS, not only in our sermons but also directly by providing basic information and awareness about HIV and AIDS.

The increasingly secular world of science expects support from religious leaders to face up to HIV and AIDS. HIV and AIDS do not only affect people without religious convictions or those who are remote from their religions. Now, even religious leaders can get HIV.

Theology in Response to HIV/AIDS

PLHAs, or people living with HIV and AIDS, are models who can touch our humanity and belief. During several meetings of religious leaders in Indonesia, among people living with HIV who have often been invited to speak there were also family members of prominent religious leaders. These members of the younger generation got HIV when injecting drugs with HIV contaminated needles and after ten years, they developed AIDS.

In this era of globalization, mankind is threatened by a number of diseases such as HIV and AIDS, bird flu and sexually transmitted infections (STIs). In the case of STIs, the history of the western society reminds us the rate of infections increased in 1960-1970 primarily due to two factors: people became sexually active at a much younger age and they had more sexual partners.

In 1962, Prof Castairs, a professor in psychological medicine from Edinburgh, observed several social changes in England; the change of women's role in sexual behavior and the loss of belief that chastity is a supreme moral value. The sexual revolution or what may indeed be called 'bed olympics' has also changed the United States and has quickly spread around the world.

Apparently, the culture of changing sexual partners has contributed significantly to the increased rate of STIs in society. The book, *Sexually Transmissible Infection* (A Millan, Sanders 2002), has made us reflect and think about how permissive our society is.

As a doctor and a religious leader facing our future as a global generation, and the fate of our nation's children and our grand children, allow me to quote a contemporary philosopher, *Toward: Where, we are heading for?*

In Indonesia, in our religious society, an estimated 10 million people are having sex outside marriage. Why is it hard for us to resolve this problem? What is the problem?

Poverty is the problem, not only material poverty in terms of lack of property but also spiritual poverty. In the midst of our development progress, with rooted structural and inherited poverty, it will be hard for Indonesia to overcome these diseases.

Religious leaders can play significant roles in working with young people to encourage prevention, morals and ethics. In our everyday lives, we find an increasing number of dysfunctional or broken homes that widen the generational gaps. The number may not yet be as large as in the West, but the mass media generally helps promote the magnitude and the spread of such negative news within a short span of time.

Most Islamic and Christian leaders in the meeting declared that people get HIV because of their own sinful behaviors. However, upon hearing direct testimony from people living with HIV, we were all moved. How these people had face challenges even in their own families, isolated or dismissed from work and even often considered as 'garbage' in society.

Isolated, dismissed from work and considered as "garbage" in society are stigmas felt by people living with HIV in society (both Islamic and Christian) But the loving and caring God has made the disease to cleanse our sins.

Crisis in Humanity

In this era of globalization and the global village, we face a dilemma: the revival of religions and the new chapter of holy wars where we kill each other for the sake of religion. But it is not religion that is wrong; it is the people who dare to claim that they kill in name of God (terrorists).

We must think deeply. We hope that modernization will bring us more happiness in our lives. Instead, it only provides us with more comforts but we are not happier than we were before.

UNAIDS has seen the potential of religion to fight HIV and AIDS and the role of social and cultural leaders. We have been dealing with drug abuse, HIV and AIDS for two decades but we have not yet been achieved success.

Shouldn't religion eventually serve mankind and humanity? Who has made religion become cruel? Isn't that cruelty created by humans? Only God knows.

Let us learn from the ever increasing diseases that threaten human lives. Religious leaders should work together to respond to all these diseases, especially HIV and AIDS.

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