



**ICRW Gala 2007: *Champions for Change*
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Prepared remarks

Remarks by Reverend Johannes Heath of ANERELA+:

HIV is a virus, not a moral condition. This may seem the most obvious thing to many of you, but the reality on the ground for the majority of people living with HIV is that they experience judgment and rejection from people around them simply because they are HIV-positive. A first reason for this is because the initial response to HIV and AIDS 25 years ago, a demon which still haunts us was, "AIDS is God's punishment for sin." This is not a secular statement; this is a religious misinformed statement!

A young man in rural South Africa is going forward to his rights of passage into adulthood. He will be circumcised in the traditional way by the elders of his tribe – a common blade is used for every initiate. He has no idea that he is at risk of HIV infection from the blade as he passes into adulthood.

A young woman is eagerly awaiting her marriage to the love of her life. She has followed the teachings of her church from youth and she is still a virgin. She has no idea that her marriage bed could also be the place not only where her love is consummated but that she is infected with HIV.

A young mother has just given birth to a healthy baby. The nurses tested her and found her HIV+. She received Nevarapine just before delivery, and her baby was given Nevarapine syrup at birth. She can however not afford to follow the advice of the nurse that she should only bottle feed her child – that would mean everyone knows!

An older man goes to sit in a barber's chair to get his head shaven. He has no idea that the razor blade being used nicked the man just before him. He has no idea that today he will leave the barber shop with more than a haircut.

A young girl runs to school – she has no school books. Someone drives past her and offers her not only school books but a pretty dress too. All she wants is just to fit in. But the price is so much higher than she imagined.

I could go on and on. These are not hypothetical scenarios – these are the daily lives of millions of people in the world, ordinary people just trying to get by, ordinary people ignorant of the risks they face. In countries like Swaziland, the HIV prevalence is now close to 40 percent, but in the age group 15 – 24, it can be as

high as 57 percent. As a religious leader when I stretch my hands over a young couple in marriage and say, "Go forth, be fruitful", if I have not also told them the importance of knowing their own and each other's HIV status, I have failed, and have condemned yet another person to HIV infection.

The main factor which is driving the HIV pandemic is the simple reality that 90 percent of people in the world who are HIV-positive don't know it. Unless we can seriously challenge this figure, tomorrow only holds more of the same for us.

If it is as simple as that, why don't people just go and get tested? Because of two main reasons, firstly the stigma still keeps the vast majority of people from going to find their HIV status. Secondly, because the simple reality remains that for the vast majority of people in the developing world, testing HIV-positive is still a death sentence. Over the past number of years, many have made the claim that HIV is just like any other chronically manageable illness. Nothing can be further from the truth:

- People don't get stoned to death for having high blood pressure.
- People are not thrown out of their marriage homes for having diabetes.
- People are not locked up like animals in a shed, left to die because they have kidney failure.

The reality is that HIV is not like other chronic manageable illnesses. The stigma, shame, denial, discrimination, inaction and misaction around HIV and AIDS make it very different, far more sinister.

Tonight I am privileged as a person living with HIV to accept this award on behalf of all those who live in silence.

Tonight as a religious leader I am privileged to accept this award on behalf of all people of faith everywhere who are trying to make a difference in HIV and AIDS.

Tonight as a member of ANERELA+, I accept this award on behalf of all members of ANERELA+ pledging ourselves to work with everyone who believes that by working together we can make this world a better place for all, challenging all forms of stigma, discrimination and marginalization.

I salute ICRW on the remarkable work you are doing and I thank you.