

HIV/AIDS report from UN is sobering: Religious leaders urge increased action

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Ten years ago, the World Council of Churches said the AIDS pandemic “exposes the complicity and complacency of churches, challenging them to be better involved, more active, and more faithful.” As World AIDS Day arrived December 1, religious leaders were cautiously optimistic that the moral and political will to fight the pandemic is finally being mobilized.

Statistics in a new report released by the United Nations were sobering, but religious groups vowed to keep pushing politicians toward increased action—and spending—against the disease.

The UN’s 2006 AIDS Epidemic Update said the HIV epidemic is growing, with an estimated 39.5 million people worldwide infected with the deadly virus. In addition, the report said:

- 2.3 million of those living with HIV are children under the age of 15.
- 4.3 million became newly infected last year, 530,000 of them children.
- 2.9 million died of AIDS-related illnesses last year, 380,000 of them children.

“The human toll of the epidemic is undeniable and increasing,” said Manoj Kurian of the World Council of Churches in a statement released by the Ecumenical Advocacy Alliance. “The statistics represent the lives of our families and friends, our faith communities and our religious leaders. We all must do more.”

The report—prepared jointly by UNAIDS and the World Health Organization—found some reason for optimism. It said access to HIV/AIDS treatment has increased; 1.65 million people are now receiving antiretroviral treatment.

While the Geneva-based Ecumenical Advocacy Alliance called the increased access to treatment “good news,” it said in the same statement that “this is still far short of the global need.”

Religious leaders also stressed the need to make pediatric AIDS drugs available. “The pharmaceutical industry needs to make even greater efforts to make these drugs available in better formulations for use with children and to do so at affordable prices,” said Bob Vitillo of the Catholic aid group Caritas. *-Religion News Service*