

WCC chief has lost close kin to AIDS: Over 40 million living with HIV worldwide

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Samuel Kobia, a Methodist minister from Kenya and general secretary of the World Council of Churches, has been personally affected by the HIV/AIDS pandemic in Africa. At an event last month marking World AIDS Day organized by Swiss churches in Bern, Kobia told a gathering in front of the Swiss parliament that “within a short span of two years, I have lost a brother, two nieces, a nephew, a sister and brother-in-law, and four cousins” to the disease.

“However, this epidemic goes way beyond any personal tragedy,” noted Kobia. “It has made my consciousness more sensitive to the vulnerabilities and strengths of societies.”

Statistics released by UNAIDS, the joint United Nations program on the pandemic, noted that in some countries adult HIV infection rates had decreased. Still, the number of people living with HIV globally is at its highest level—40.3 million people, up from an estimated 37.5 million in 2003. More than 3 million people died of AIDS-related illnesses in 2005; of these, more than 500,000 were children.

“The people who are living with or are affected by HIV and AIDS and the communities which are vulnerable to the disease are not and should not be perceived as passive recipients of handouts and help,” said Kobia. “They are vibrant resource persons and co-workers with us in this struggle to overcome not only this epidemic, but also to overcome the fundamental flaws in our societies which make us all vulnerable to HIV and AIDS.”

Kobia was among church representatives presenting a petition organized by the Bethlehem Mission Immensee and Swiss Interchurch Aid (EPER), titled “Africa needs medicines. Now!” It was signed by 25,000 people and called on the Swiss government, the pharmaceutical industry and churches to make a far greater effort

to ensure Africans have access to anti-retroviral treatments.

“My presence here with you today demonstrates our strong support for this very innovative and meaningful campaign,” said the general secretary of the council, which brings together 347 churches throughout the world.

He urged churches to “correct the flawed theology and practices that equate sin with disease” and said he wanted to promote open dialogue about questions related to AIDS and sexuality.

“One of the greatest difficulties for churches in dealing with the issue of HIV and AIDS has been our inability to address sexuality in a frank and forthright manner,” Kobia said. “Sexuality is a sacred gift from God—a gift to be cherished and to enrich our lives. It is for us to experience it in a responsible and empowering manner.” - *Ecumenical News International*