

**Launch of the HIV/AIDS Brochure ‘Exploding the Myths’
the Pacific Theological College Fale
by Rev Amy Chambers, Principal of St John’s
Theological College (Anglican Church),
Tuesday 21st March 5.00 pm Suva, Fiji**

The Rev. Dr. Feleterika Nokise, Principal PTC; Mr. Feiloakitau Tevi, Executive Secretary WCC Office in the Pacific; Mr Steven Vete, Asia Pacific Leadership Forum on HIV/AIDS, Mr James Bhagwan, President PTC Student Body Association, church leaders, theological students, UNAIDS reps, community workers and friends.

The World Council of Churches Office in the Pacific has directed its efforts in addressing HIV/AIDS as a pastoral issue for Pacific Churches. This not only focuses on combating the spread of HIV/AIDS but also in the care and support for people living with HIV/AIDS.

In March 2004 the World Council of Churches Office in the Pacific organized the “Pacific Churches Consultation on HIV/AIDS” and also officially created the People Living With HIV/AIDS (PLWHIV) internship. The Consultation recognized the need for the churches to play a more creative role in efforts to minimize the impact of HIV/AIDS in the Pacific community - by creating a more caring, nurturing and supportive environment. The Consultation brought together 36 people from the Pacific Island Countries. The participants took up the challenge - to agree upon the importance of establishing a closer working relationship with those already engaged in the battle against HIV/AIDS. The consultation ended with Pacific Churches pledging to “undertake to promote education about HIV/AIDS and open discussions on the issue of sexuality that will equip communities to prevent this eminently preventable disease.” The pledge, known as the Nadi Declaration further stated that, “it is unethical not to engage with and work to overcome the ignorance, silence and fear.” Pacific Churches have now dedicated themselves to “instead of cursing the darkness, light the candle,” with regards to the issue of HIV/AIDS.

In last two years the WCC Office in the Pacific has been actively working with churches, governments, agencies and non-governmental organisations on the issue of HIV/AIDS with marked success of its initiatives. On the 23rd of May 2004, the Fiji Council of Churches and Fiji Network for People Living with HIV/AIDS coordinated the candlelight ceremony with the support of the World Council of Churches Office in the Pacific

- In memory of those who have died from HIV/AIDS
- To pledge to support positive people
- To raise the awareness, and
- To mobilize community and churches involvement in the fight against HIV/AIDS.

In 2005, through the World Council of Churches’ HIV healing desk in Geneva, the HIV interns from the Pacific office including Emosi Ratini, HIV AIDS Positive intern - attended the WCC Central Committee Meeting in Geneva - to present on the reality of HIV/AIDS in the Pacific Region. They received tremendous support. The WCC Office in the Pacific is the only WCC office to employ a HIV-positive person and this is cause for celebration.

The significance of launching the brochure in Brazil was not lost on the members of the Pacific Churches’ delegation to the World Council of Churches 9th Assembly – with twenty five church leaders taking copies back with them to their islands, their churches and their towns and villages - to talk about the myths.

The launch in Brazil and now in Fiji helps us spread the message that Pacific churches are addressing the issue in our way - so that the global ecumenical movement knows that we are contributing to the fight against the spread of HIV/AIDS.

The brochure being launched here today is collaboration between the Asia Pacific Leadership Forum on HIV/AIDS and Development - the Secretariat of the Pacific Community and the WCC Pacific Office. It is titled, *Exploding the Myths*, and was produced by Steven Vete of UNAIDS. *Exploding the Myths* contain statements by Pacific Churches and other leaders demythifying issues on sexuality that are killing Pacific youth. These are myths dealing with HIV/AIDS and sex. It is giving the truths and encouraging more discussion on sexuality and in particular HIV/AIDS. This is about church leaders and Pacific Island leaders being forthcoming about the issue.

I quote some offering from “*Exploding the Myths*”

HRH Princess Nanasipau’u Tuku’aho of Tonga says, “*Although it is good to be culturally sensitive about such things [as sex], the priority is doing whatever must be done to stop the spread of AIDS.*”

And from The late Bishop Patelesio Finau of the Catholic Church in Tonga
‘Because of ignorance and irrational fear, there can be a stigma and discrimination against AIDS patients and their families. Many patients die of loneliness before they die of AIDS. As Christians, our first response to AIDS sufferers must be one of acceptance and care. We are challenged to this by the example of Christ and the long tradition of the church.’

I want to touch on the significance of this afternoon’s event.

The launch of the brochure has been timed to coincide with a theological discussion on the issue of HIV/AIDS. Organised by the Pacific Theological College Student Body Association, this *talanoa* will be preceded by the screening of a documentary, “A Closer Walk” which puts a human face to the issue of HIV/AIDS. This *talanoa* is especially poignant for Bachelor of Divinity students here at PTC, who next term will take a course on HIV/AIDS based on a curriculum developed by the South Pacific Association of Theological Schools.

As Principal of a theological educational institution and an educator, I applaud this brochure. As a mother, grandmother and caregiver I am deeply humbled with this offering for HIV/AIDS is not only a social, economic and political crisis. It is a spiritual crisis that touches the core of Christian spirituality. It is a spiritual crisis of enormous proportion that the churches can no ignore it or be judgmental about it. HIV/AIDS courses must be taught in all theological institutions. This is a reality in which theological students will exercise their ministry.

To church leaders I say, you can be instrumental in eradicating the stigma and discrimination faced by people living with HIV/AIDS. As trusted and respected members of society who are influential in shaping social values and public opinion, you must take up this challenge. Begin by breaking the culture of silence that often surrounds HIV/AIDS in a lot of our communities.

- Conduct prayer or meditation services for people living with HIV/AIDS
- Add HIV/AIDS topics to prayers, sermons and discussions at regular religious meetings and other religious forums
- Lead discussion on HIV/AIDS with groups in your congregation

If you haven’t started, don’t wait for tomorrow, now is the time. Reach out in compassion to the excluded and rejected for you have the power to end guilt, denial, stigma and discrimination and open the way to reconciliation and hope, knowledge and healing, prevention and care.

With these words, I have much pleasure in launching the HIV/AIDS brochure, “Exploding the Myths”