

# South Asian Churches Engagement with HIV and AIDS: Discerning Signs – Working Towards Informed Responses

We, the participants of the CCA–NCCI South Asia Sub-Regional Consultation on ‘South Asian Churches Engagement with HIV and AIDS: Discerning Signs – Working Towards Informed Responses’, convened online from 25–28 November 2021 and represented different countries (Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Bangladesh, Nepal, Bhutan, and India), denominations, professional backgrounds, and cultures, and who acknowledged that we are part of the Body of Christ, His Church in the world. We recount the personal work of Jesus, who exemplified life as a true champion of justice, dignity, equality, and peace through radical messages and actions of acceptance and love.

## **Discerning Signs**

Even before the emergence of the COVID-19 pandemic, the world was ravaged by a far more serious pandemic of HIV and AIDS, which has caused the loss of millions of lives over the past four decades. We also acknowledge the increasing incidence of new HIV infections in our region and that we are still falling short of achieving the 90-90-90 target in all aspects of testing, prevention, and treatment of those infected with HIV. People living with HIV (PLHIV) and other vulnerable communities continue to suffer not just physical disease but religious and social diseases of discrimination and stigma. We acknowledge that we have been complicit and part of the system that perpetuates this discrimination against PLHIV and other vulnerable communities.

We acknowledge the historic work that has been carried out by National Councils in countries, Christian medical associations, Church healthcare ministries, and other faith initiatives for those infected and affected by HIV in the South Asia region. However, we are challenged to rethink our mission of recognising and attending to the overwhelming suffering of PLHIV and other vulnerable communities yearning for justice and restoration. Although much has been done, there is much more to do.

Just as Jesus was willing to be associated with the stigma of the cross, the cruellest indignity one could suffer in his time, we are called to crucify all forms of stigma that is associated with HIV and stand with those who are infected and affected. Crucifying stigma brings dignity and worth, promotes inclusion and acceptance, and enables the celebration of life in all its fullness by the Church in all its inclusiveness.

We affirm that every human being is made in the image of God, created with dignity irrespective of any personal circumstances, and this is equally true in suffering, disability, or when living with chronic disease. We also acknowledge the vast diversity with human sexualities, including Asian indigenous non-binary identities. Amidst issues which are systemic in nature and legal barriers that increase people’s vulnerabilities to HIV and related

issues, we draw from the Holy Bible where God's promise is clear for all humanity, "that they may have life...life in all its fullness and abundance," (John 10:10), which can become a reality today, through a living relationship with God, with each other, with themselves, and the world.

In light of the above, we the participants of the Consultation hereby commit ourselves towards the following:-

### **Working Towards Informed Responses**

- We reaffirm our commitment to revive and work with more vigour to strengthen our ministries relating to HIV and AIDS, leading us to healing and reconciliation, and place PLHIV and other vulnerable communities at the centre of our holistic initiatives - such as awareness, education, newer modalities of prevention (such as SAVE and PrEP/PEP), advanced treatment strategies (such as U=U), community organising, livelihood support, counselling and care, and public advocacy.
- We reaffirm our commitment to offer our churches as safe spaces for PLHIV and employ our resources (such as our hospital networks, educational institutions, theological colleges, and other community centres) and our competencies for the care, protection, upliftment, and empowerment of PLHIV and other vulnerable communities, especially for women and children, transpeople, intravenous drug users, and commercial sex workers.
- We reaffirm our commitment towards practicing a theology which is free from stigma and judgement, which is life-affirming and life-liberating, reconciling the body with the soul, and that which celebrates gender and sexual diversities.
- We reaffirm our commitment to strengthen our regional and national networks and combine our resources and efforts, to share best practices, model approaches, training modules, leadership and expertise.
- We reaffirm our commitment to explore more avenues of cooperation with existing government and secular programmes within our countries.
- We reaffirm our commitment to partnering with global initiatives in the race to meet 2030 targets, by innovating in our outreach (such as developing virtual interventions in this digital age) and moving from a 'gatekeeper' to a 'bridge' model.

As the world prepares to commit to 'Ending the HIV Epidemic: Equitable Access, Everyone's Voice' this upcoming World AIDS Day, we take this opportunity to express our support for each other in mutual respect, demonstrated by an approach of love, justice, and compassion, our willingness to learn, share, and be a caring and appreciative global Christian community.

