

AIDS - A CHALLENGE TO UNCOMPROMISING LOVE

QUEENSLAND AIDS COUNCIL

WORLD AIDS DAY 1 DECEMBER 1991

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Michael Kirby*

I was in Canada when I was invited to support the idea of a Queensland-wide appeal to collect funds for a project to sustain the struggle against HIV and AIDS in Africa.

The request came by fax when I was attending a conference on air and space law in Montreal. Fax, telecommunications, aviation, space. Humanity can walk on the moon and conquer space. But we are humbled by a microscopic virus which now takes a terrible toll on the human family in every continent.

The latest figures from the World Health Organisation (WHO) show the continuing rapid rise of reported cases of AIDS throughout the world. In the last quarter the biggest increase was in Tanzania. WHO estimates that close to 1.5 million people have already acquired AIDS. Of them about half a million are children. WHO also estimates that between 9 and 11 million people are infected with HIV. It predicts that 30 to 40 million people will be infected with the virus by the end of the century. AIDS will wipe out most of the

health gains achieved in Africa. It will devastate our blue planet.

I have suggested that we single out for support the AIDS Support Organisation (TASO) in Kampala, Uganda.¹ After such a terrible time with Ide Amin, Uganda, like large tracks of Central Africa, now faces a second mortal tragedy. The Director of TASO, Noreen Kaleeba is, with me, a member of the WHO Global Commission on AIDS. TASO goes into the villages of Uganda to find local storytellers who are educators in the African tradition. They are trained about AIDS and their vivid messages may help to save lives. There would be hundreds of similar projects in Africa and in many other lands. But TASO is an illustration of practical self-help. In Uganda, they need all the encouragement and support we can give.

Support should not, of course, be confined to those far away. I was disheartened, on my return to Australia to read the report on the research of the National Centre for Epidemiology and Population Health in Canberra.² It shows that there is very little sympathy throughout Australia for people who have acquired AIDS from sexual activity or drug abuse. The director of the survey reported that, ten years after the AIDS epidemic began to emerge, people had "formed their own ideas on the issue and were unlikely to be budged".

This is not good enough for a society whose shared moral principles still rest mainly on the teachings of Jesus Christ. It is necessary to say this in the present context.

It is easier for some to feel compassion and love for a child suffering because of AIDS. It is also easier to feel

compassion for people in far-away Africa. Their very distance from us makes it easier to accept an obligation to respond to the impact on them of this devastating virus. Distant love may be easy on occasions. But it is insufficient. We must also extend our love to those suffering in our midst, in Australia. We must extend our compassion and support to homosexual and bisexual men with HIV. We must reach out to IV drug users in practical gestures of help and understanding. We must extend the hand of assistance, and throw no stones at sex workers. We must be tender to the haemophiliacs who became infected in the early days of the epidemic. We must be there when *anyone* with HIV or AIDS seeks our help. Nothing short of this will do for people of our religion.

It is a religion of love, reconciliation and charity. And the greatest of these is love. That is what we have been taught from Sunday School, from our churches and from the Gospel. Sadly, it would seem that the lesson has not been learned by many of our fellow citizens.

This message may seem uncompromising. But people of the Christian religion were never promised an easy road. The test for taking a moral position really only comes when it seems difficult. Now we are all being tested by our attitude to people living with HIV and AIDS. This is the really big AIDS test. It is one which we must *all* take. It applies to our attitude to people in far-away Africa and closer at home in Australia. This is the AIDS test we must all hope to pass. For it is a test of our true acceptance of the instruction of uncompromising love which lies at the heart of the message of Jesus Christ.

FOOTNOTES

* The Hon Justice Michael Kirby AC CMG, President of the New South Wales Court of Appeal. Member, WHO Global Commission on AIDS. Trustee of the AIDS Trust of Australia.

1. "An African example" in *The Economist*, 21 September 1991, 24.
2. Report of a National Survey on Attitudes to HIV/AIDS conducted by the National Centre for Epidemiology and Population Health. See *Sydney Morning Herald*, 30 September 1991, 5.