

- *The HIV/AIDS Policy and Action Plans Consultation “Building a Faith-Based Response to HIV/AIDS in the Caribbean” was held at the Umana Yana, Georgetown, Guyana, January 17 – 20, 2005. It commenced at approximately 7:45 in the evening of January 17, 2005 with an official Opening Ceremony chaired by Ms. Rosalind Saint Victor, former employee of the Caribbean Conference of Churches, recent retiree of UNAIDS and a current CCC volunteer.*
- **OPENING CEREMONY:**

Following a musical presentation of the Guyana National Anthem, Ms. Saint Victor introduced officials at the head table as follows:

- *His Excellency Bharrat Jagdeo: President of the Republic of Guyana*
- *Dr. Oluwakemi Banks: President, Caribbean Conference of Churches*
- *Bishop Juan Edghill: Assistant Chairman, Guyana Council of Churches*
- *Mr. Gerard Granado: General Secretary, Caribbean Conference of Churches*
- *Recognition was extended to the delegates, specially invited guests and distinguished ladies and gentlemen.*

Ms. Saint Victor warmly welcomed officials, delegates and staff to the Opening Ceremony of the Policy and Action Plans Consultation CIDA/CCC, “Building A Faith-Based Response to HIV/AIDS in the Caribbean.” She acknowledged divine guidance and the hand of a mightier being for enabling the developmental process of the project and invited representatives from the various Faith-Based organizations to invoke God’s blessings on the ceremony as follows:

- *Pandit Chrisha Persuad of Guyana : Hindu*
- *Major Vevene Jonas : Salvation Army*
- *Mr. Noble Khan : Inter-religious Organization of Trinidad and Tobago*
- *Mr. Yacoob Ali : Muslim Community, Trinidad and Tobago*

**Generally, blessings were invoked for:**

- *The goodness and greatness of God as Creator*
- *The Canadian International Development Agency – CIDA : Funding Agency*
- *The Caribbean Conference of Churches – CCC : Organizers*
- *The Republic of Guyana : Host Country*
- *The Government and people of Guyana : Hosts*
- *Sufferers of Disasters - locally, regionally and internationally*
- *Faith-Based Organizations*
- *PLWHA and those affected by the condition*
- *Those who have died because of AIDS*

- *Organizations united in the cause of HIV/AIDS*
- *Individuals and institutions caring for PLWHA*
- *Guidance for the success of the Consultation*
- *Delegates and their families*
- *Protection, safety and comfort*
- *Vision to implement the Policy and Action Plans.*

- **WELCOME REMARKS:**

- *Dr. Oluwakemi Linda Banks, President, CCC focused her opening remarks on:*

*Look for the hidden opportunities in every adversity*

- ◆ *Flood reminders:*

- *Flood waters were a unifying and life sustaining presence even though it could be a destructive force to Caribbean people*
- *Flood waters were reminders of the recent Tsunami in Asia*
- *The universality of our vulnerability as human beings*
- *The importance of focusing attention on HIV/AIDS, an unwelcome presence in the Caribbean, forced the coming together of Faith-Based Organizations to strategize for survival – the purpose for our presence in Guyana*
- *CCC's mission as a religious organization in addressing the developmental needs of Caribbean people over the past three (3) decades*
- *CCC's obligation and mandate to accompany member Churches in partnership with various entities in the struggle against HIV/AIDS with a faith-based perspective*
- *Each person was viewed as a unique creation of God with a unique contribution to the world*
- *Faith-Based Organizations upheld the core value of life*
- *The Consultation was designed to present a draft document entitled "Guidelines For Caribbean Faith-Based Organizations In Developing Policies And Action Plans To Deal With HIV/AIDS" with the intention of facilitating the formation of a*

*strategic alliance among FBOs in order to strengthen the Faith-Based response to HIV/AIDS in the region.*

- *The draft document resulted from the hard work and dedication of an HIV/AIDS Policy And Action Plans Committee which commenced deliberations in March, 2004*
- *Welcome to Guyana and specifically to the Opening Ceremony – despite the flood waters - was presumptuously extended*
- *Mention was made of Dr. Banks personal injury received during a fall at the entrance to the hotel during the early afternoon which did not prevent fulfilling of her task at the ceremony.*
- *Appreciation and thanks to the President of the Republic of Guyana, His Honour Bharrat Jagdeo for his presence, consent to host the launching of the Policy and Action Plans Document and his willingness to deliver the keynote address despite the disaster in the country.*
- *God's blessings were beseeched for the country on behalf of the peoples of the Caribbean.*

- **GENERAL REMARKS:**

These were made by Mr. Gerard Granado, General Secretary, Caribbean Conference of Churches. Following established protocol, the following was emphasized:

- *Endorsement of Dr. Banks welcome on behalf of the Caribbean Conference of Churches*
- *The two (2) day event was indeed historical as it was the first time that a gathering of such a composition had converged at the regional level to treat with a challenge presented by HIV/AIDS in the Caribbean region*
- *The significance of the convergence of persons from different faith traditions, meeting to explore together prospects of joint and complimentary actions in the wake of HIV/AIDS in the Caribbean*
- *Reference to recent publication in an Ethic and Development Seminar in Washington, sponsored by the Inter-American Development Bank and the Government of Norway*

- *The featured speaker, Nobel Laureate, Economist Amartya Sen, referred to the recent earthquake Tsunami in Asia and lifted out “Learning” which he considered as the deepest lesson of that event.*
- *“Learning” was identified as the indivisibility of the human predicament – the oneness of human predicament*
- *The predicament of HIV/AIDS was no respecter of person, class, creed, or otherwise*
- *The purpose of the gathering as men and women of faith was in order to make a response emerging from commitment*
- *In 1998, the CCC began in earnest its exploration of a response to HIV/AIDS. Out of this, there had been several facets to that response – too many to document*
- *In 2001, while visiting the World Bank in Washington, his attention was drawn to an important reference in a 2000 country study undertaken by that agency which stated:*
  - ◆ *“Religious institutions represent a major resource in the efforts to prevent the spread of HIV/AIDS in the Eastern Caribbean. Following the example of the Caribbean Conference of Churches, which is engaged as part of the Caribbean Task Force in HIV/AIDS, the creation of fora and formal alliances among the various religious organizations involved, the effort to combat the country level ought to be given priority.”*
- *The Caribbean Conference of Churches had harkened to the purpose for the Consultation*
- *The general objective of the Consultation was therefore to formulate a policy with which Faith-Based Organizations in the Caribbean could identify and utilize as a springboard for the implementation of other action plans.*
- *Reference was made to a quotation from the Draft Policy and Action Plans Document in support of the collaborative effort: “Caribbean FBOs are called upon to discover and develop strategies which would lead to sustained and responsible behaviour change.”*
- *Mr. Granado took responsibility and tabled two (2) reasons for hosting the Collaboration in Guyana:*

(1) *In 2004 both His Honour, President Bharrat Jagdeo and he discussed issues and challenges relating to HIV/AIDS. The President expressed desire for a Consultation between Churches, Faith-Based Organizations, through CCC, the Government of Guyana, and the wider region.*

(2) *Guyana was seriously affected with the condition.*

- Expressions of gratitude to the:

- ◆ *President of Guyana for accepting and responding to the invitation to be the key note speaker while his country was faced with a most disastrous situation.*
- ◆ *Policy and Action Plans Drafting Committee for their faithful commitment.*
- ◆ *Young persons for their presence, interest, support and representation.*
- ◆ *CCC staff for their faithfulness and cheerfulness*
- ◆ *Specially invited officials, guests and delegates*

## • KEYNOTE ADDRESS:

The President of the Republic of Guyana, Honourable Bharrat Jagdeo was introduced and invited to deliver the keynote address. Following the established protocol, President Jagdeo welcomed the delegates to the Consultation organized by the Caribbean Conference of Churches. He appealed for empathy and solidarity with the people of Guyana as they endeavoured to understand and cope with the present disaster. He informed the gathering that the rainfall had tripled the monthly average of seven point three (7.3) inches. It soared to twenty-four (24) inches on 16<sup>th</sup> January with a forecast of six (6) times the normal monthly average by the end of January. This predicament had drained their capacity which compounded by the fact that Guyana was below sea level. Normally, water was pumped out to the sea and during low tide; the cokas (dykes) were opened to drain the country. Currently, thirty (30) pumps were in operation but proved inadequate because of the volume of water.

The President apologized for his anticipated early departure from the ceremony due to his coordination and involvement in relief efforts with the army, police, Faith-Based Organizations and the Red Cross. They were organizing accommodation, food and health care. However, he

stated that a silver lining was behind every cloud. He was applauded for initiating dialogue with the Leader of the Opposition regarding the disaster and the unifying of strategies for the relief efforts and plans for the country.

Gratitude was expressed to the CCC – the region’s foremost ecumenical body - for its solidarity during the struggle for economic freedom. The CCC was one of the strongest regional advocates for bread and justice for the people of Guyana during struggle for democratic freedom. The immense popularity for the CCC regional paper “*The Caribbean Contact*” was recalled. More copies were sold locally compared to the rest of the region because it gave Guyanese the opportunity to share news and views which were at that time forbidden in Guyana.

Participants and invited guests were welcomed to the Umana Yana – “*Meeting Place for the People*” – symbolic of the place where the Amerindians gathered to discuss their views and concerns. The gathering, under the expansive thatched roof, was for a very important process as the spread of HIV/AIDS was of extreme concern to the government and peoples of the region.

It was the President’s hope and trust that the deliberations would be marked by both openness and urgency, since HIV/AIDS was generally recognized as the most serious threat facing the peoples of the Caribbean. Unless contained, HIV/AIDS would devastate the population and render asunder the very social fabric of the society. It was placing great strains on the health care and social support systems while fracturing the most important of all social organizations, the family. The spread of HIV was also leading to stigmatization and discrimination forcing victims into unemployment at a time when they needed as much financial assistance as they could secure. The spread of the disease was also leaving behind orphans, rejected victims and a reduced life expectancy in many countries.

In an effort to reiterate the significance of the gathering as well as the impact of HIV/AIDS, the President further emphasized the following statistical data:

- *The Caribbean was the second (2<sup>nd</sup>) most affected region in the world*
- *An estimated two percent (2%) of the population was reportedly infected with the deadly virus in the region*
- *An estimated forty-five to eighty thousand (45 – 80,000) persons become newly infected each year*
- *At the end of 2003, between three hundred and fifty thousand to five*

*hundred and ninety thousand (350,000 – 590,000) persons in the region were reportedly living with the virus.*

It was also claimed that:

- *HIV/AIDS had become a social, economic and security concern within the region*
- *It was from the perspective of the Church – the pastoral concern – that would assist in the support and care of PLWHAs*
- *The Church in the Caribbean could not close its eyes to the growing epidemic*
- *Curtailing the spread of HIV was tied to the very survival of the human race*
- *The Church was entrusted to guard the dignity and sacredness of humanity*
- *Anything which affected that dignity was of legitimate concern for the Church*

The President expressed pleasure that:

- the ecumenical movement within the region was asserting its duty to address the epidemic
- in so doing, it recognized the importance of consultation with its membership

He advocated that the ecumenical movement did not divorce itself from the involvement of other stake holders including governments in developing synergies to comprehensively address the spread and prevention of HIV/AIDS. He reminded the gathering of the regional HIV/AIDS strategy and that most CARICOM countries had national plans. Within Guyana, they had collaborated with international and non-governmental organizations including the Church in developing a four (4) year national strategic plan.

The ecumenical movement, no doubt, recognized the need for a document to guide its membership and decided to create a template for Faith-Based Organizations. The initiative was commended as an avenue for all stake holders to identify their specific role both nationally and regionally in an effort to combat HIV/AIDS. The process undertaken by the CCC should therefore not be seen as independent of national and regional strategies and synergies that could develop with faith-based plans.

Faith, was believed, could move mountains and the presence of such a diverse grouping of FBOs suggested that despite the gloom and doom surrounding the presence of HIV/AIDS within the region, hope was alive. The regional ecumenical movement could, and must play a pivotal role in rescuing the Caribbean from the rising prevalence of HIV/AIDS. This was a task which the regional government could not shoulder independently. They needed the support of FBOs if the battle was to be won against the HIV/AIDS epidemic. There was faith in a higher being from which strength and guidance could be drawn. The hope was that regional religious organizations would build partnerships with other stake holders and governments in the crusade against the spread of the deadly virus.

Presently, the best efforts of the scientific community have failed to find a cure for HIV/AIDS, thus making the task more difficult. Fervent prayers were therefore necessary for the diligent efforts of the scientific community to yield a cure in the not too distant future. The failure to find a cure meant giving priority to preventing the spread of the disease and mitigating the efforts of those already infected.

Public education must therefore be an ongoing process. The more educated people were about the disease, the better they would be able to take steps to avoid being infected. The more educated citizens were about the disease, the greater chances of success to end stigma and discrimination. In Guyana, the HIV/AIDS education programme was taken into schools, work places and even places of worship. Through education, it was hoped that those at risk would be encouraged to adopt safer and healthier lifestyles, thereby reducing the possibility of the infection and the spread of HIV.

However, no matter how hard, safer and healthier lifestyles were encouraged, unless these were accompanied by moral values, the fight against HIV/AIDS would go no where. There would be no sustainable progress unless changes in lifestyles were reinforced by changes in values.

This was precisely the pivotal role of all the religious groups in the region – to have a pivotal role in preventing the spread of HIV/AIDS. Governments could not legislate morality, nor could they legislate values. If sexual responsibility and sound morals were to be encouraged, it must be done with the support of all religious groups, as many were ashamed that they contributed to the disease while others wrongly viewed the illness as a curse.

It was against that background that the pivotal role of all Faith-Based Organizations came into action in the fight against HIV/AIDS. At times, the promotion of public good, by governments, conflicted with religious modes and codes. However, the efforts of Faith-Based Organizations thus far, in the spread of HIV/AIDS were appreciated. It was mentioned that some religious

groupings experienced difficulties in endorsing the unqualified appeal for the use of condoms as a preventive measure, since many viewed sexual relations outside marriage as being sinful. Some churches felt that the use of condoms even within marriage undermined the sacredness of the conjugal act. These issues should be resolved through dialogue since the unified goal – the reduction of HIV/AIDS - was being sought. Difficult challenges were faced in an effort to contain the spread of HIV/AIDS which included:

- the practise of many in the society to conceal their illness

All involved in the challenge of the AIDS Ministry were admonished to work vociferously to remove the veil of secrecy and enable persons living with the disorder to understand that there was nothing to be ashamed of for having contracted the virus. Concealment of the illness engendered difficulty in addressing the spread of the disease.

The President was impressed and applauded the example of the former President of South Africa, His Excellency Honourable Nelson Mandella, for disclosing that one of his sons recently succumbed to AIDS. By that public revelation, President Mandella was setting an example which needed to be emulated by admitting that loved ones were infected. In removing the veil of secrecy, great opportunities would be opened for curtailing the spread of the disease as well as for compassionate treatment for those infected.

It was revealed that one of the sad tragedies surrounding the AIDS epidemic was the alienation suffered by the countless persons living with the disorder. In the absence of a cure many would eventually succumb. Those children of God deserved to be treated with dignity, not only when they were active, but also during confinement to bed during final days here on earth. The abandonment of the infected persons, treated as outcasts within the society was stressed. It was felt that the snubbing of someone within the society was a terrible thing and that the tragedy was compounded by neglect when love and attention were most needed.

Through legislation and public education, the arguments within the region were continuing to urge an end to stigma and discrimination. It was also of equal importance that those infected did not succumb to hopelessness. The opportunity must be extended for them to lead productive lives. They must be assured of the support of family, friends and the wider community, should they become confined to bed. Those who would succumb must be allowed to die with dignity, enveloped in love and solidarity. They must not die neglected and alone.

AIDS remained a potent threat within the region. It demanded a Ministry underscored by the respect for the dignity and sacredness of life. It required a Ministry imbued with compassion and love. Careful consideration of the roles that the Church could, and must play, as it addressed the HIV/AIDS pandemic during the two (2) days' Consultation was of utmost importance. There was confidence that the gathering would emerge energetic to shoulder an effective and assertive role in the AIDS Ministry. Wishes were expressed for a successful Consultation with the hope - the outcome of stronger partnership - might

emerge between the Church and regional governments. Through this witness of the Church, the spread of HIV/AIDS would be controlled within the region.

General applause greeted the President's keynote address:

Thanks were extended to President Jagdeo for his presence, commitment and keynote address. Regrets were expressed for his premature departure due to urgent Presidential duties. It was also stated that the President was prepared to deliver his address on schedule at 6:30 in the evening and had to be persuaded to time postponement. His address was a personal testimony of his feelings and actions on the important subject of HIV/AIDS. The Presidential Commission on HIV/AIDS in Guyana was formed by President Jagdeo of which he was the Chairperson.

He was publicly acknowledged and thanked for his alliance with Faith-Based Organizations. From his inauguration as President, he requested an alliance and relationship with religious leaders requesting that the various communities work together for the good of the people. He was thanked for his availability, delivery of the keynote address, and continued working relationships with the government of Guyana and by extension, the various governments of CARICOM, to ensure that CCC and other Faith-Based Organizations embraced the trust as the serious pandemic of HIV/AIDS was dealt with in the Caribbean.

The presence of the Minister of Health was acknowledged. Thanks were conveyed to him for his role in leading several national initiatives on HIV/AIDS and for participating and accompanying the President to the Opening Ceremony of the consultation. Participants and invited guests were thanked for their presence and visitors were encouraged to return to Guyana during normal times in order to relax and enjoy the beauty of the country.

## **CULTURAL INTERLUDE:**

BARCAM, a cultural group from Trinidad, dramatized a presentation entitled **“REMOVE THE STIGMA: END THE DISCRIMINATION.”** The scene was in a doctor's waiting room where a young man, waiting to see the doctor, reacted negatively and in a very strong and forceful manner to someone who entered the office but with whom he had no acquaintance. From the person's appearance and behaviour – thin, coughing, crying – it was apparent that she was someone living with HIV/AIDS. The message moved into original song with a variety of contemporary Caribbean rhythms addressing the theme of - “Removing the Stigma.”

## **CLOSURE:**

Ms. Saint Victor, Chairperson, thanked the members of BARCAM for their talent and contribution. She reminded the participants of their commitments during the two (2) days' consultation and anticipated a fulfilling exercise because of the multi-disciplinary approach to the activity – multi-island, Caribbean and multi-religious. She eagerly awaited the reality – the coming and working together of those organizations within the context of HIV/AIDS. She expressed delight for the support given to the Opening Ceremony despite the disaster.

## **HOUSE KEEPING:**

Ms. Elizabeth Nicholas, Regional Co-ordinator, HIV/AIDS Programme, informed the participants that all meals would be served at the Umana Yana. Participants would be collected from the hotels at 7:30 the following morning. Breakfast and registration would commence at 8:00 in the morning.

## **CLOSING REMARKS:**

Mr. Gerard Granado, General Secretary, CCC, thanked Ms. St. Victor for ably chairing the Opening Ceremony. He thanked the officers involved in the CIDA/CCC HIV/AIDS initiative for their devotion to the programme and introduced them as follows:

- *Ms. Elizabeth Nicholas* : *Regional Programme Co-ordinator, Head Office, Trinidad*
- *Mrs. Evelyn Smithen* : *Programme Officer, HIV/AIDS, Antigua Programme Centre*
- *Mr. Ainsley Reid* : *Programme Officer, HIV/AIDS, Jamaica Programme Centre*
- *Mrs. Nadine Lewis-Agard* : *Programme Officer, Head Office, Trinidad*
- *Mrs. Tricia Syms* : *Administrative Programme Assistant*

## ESTABLISHED EVENING'S PROTOCOL

1. Ms. Rosalind St. Victor : Chairperson
2. His Excellency, Bharrat Jagdeo : President, Republic of Guyana
3. Dr. Oluwakemin Banks : President, Caribbean Conference of Churches
4. Mr. Gerard Granado : General Secretary, Caribbean Conference of Churches
5. Honourable Dr Lesley Ramsami : Minister of Health, Guyana
6. Bishop Juan Edghill : Assistant Chairman, Guyana Conference of Churches
7. Bishop Francis Alleyne : Roman Catholic Bishop, Georgetown, Guyana
8. Dr. Edward Greene : Assistant Secretary General, Human and Social Development, CARICOM
  
9. National Co-ordinating Team :
10. Members of the Policy :  
Drafting Committee
11. Media Personnel
12. Specially Invited Guests
13. Staff and Colleagues of the  
Caribbean Conference of Churches
14. Participants
15. Ladies and Gentlemen