

**Remarks of Rev. William G. Sinkford
World AIDS Day Interfaith Observance
Foundry United Methodist Church
Washington, DC
December 1, 2008 from 6:00 p.m. to 7:30p.m.**

Today we mark the 20th anniversary of World AIDS Day. For twenty years, people in this country and around the world have withstood the scourge of HIV/AIDS and cried out for solutions. Yet the virus continues to ravage communities, killing millions of adults and children, and leaving many more bereft.

Despite the knowledge and tools we now have to prevent transmission of HIV, the virus continues to spread. According to the Center for Disease Control, about 56,300 Americans are infected with HIV every year, far more than we had first realized.

Among African American women 25-34 years of age, AIDS is the leading cause of death. You're hearing a lot of statistics today, but please take a moment to think about this one. Young African American women, in the prime of their lives, are more likely to be killed by AIDS than by anything else. That's a shocking reality, and it's one that we can no longer ignore.

Earlier this month, the Forum for Collaborative HIV Research meeting reported that most emergency rooms fail to test for HIV/AIDS in patients who are not critically ill – despite the ease and low cost of testing. Inadequate testing must be understood in the larger context of our broken health care systems.

HIV/AIDS gains a foothold in the places where information and resources are scarce, but one of the most significant factors in the spread of HIV/AIDS is our failure to speak honestly about how the risk of transmission can be reduced.

The truth – that condom use is highly effective in reducing the risk of HIV/AIDS transmission – could save millions of lives. But the abstinence-only programs sponsored for years by the U.S. government have failed to deliver this simple, life-saving message. These programs withhold from our brothers and sisters, in this country and around the world, the most crucial facts about protecting themselves. It is a terrible sin of omission.

I recently returned from Africa, where I met with secular and religious HIV/AIDS prevention advocates. The story I heard was familiar: Cultural opposition and funding restrictions hinder the delivery of life-saving information. But the leaders with whom I spoke continue to look for every available opportunity to share the truth about HIV/AIDS prevention. This includes reaching out to gay and lesbian communities, and explaining the efficacy of condoms.

The building blocks of a successful strategy are comprehensive education, increased access to testing and treatment, and better services to marginalized populations -- including full legal rights for bisexual, gay, lesbian, and transgender people. President-elect Barack Obama has supported initiatives in each of these areas, and I am hopeful his presidency will mark a turning point in the fight against HIV/AIDS.

These next four years will call for different things from the progressive religious community. Rather than railing against unsympathetic political leadership, we will need to cultivate the capacity for honest support, which maintains a prophetic voice calling for action and comprehensive solutions.

There will be political pressure to pick and choose among our policy objectives. But a piecemeal approach simply won't work. We can begin winning the fight against HIV/AIDS only by telling the full truth about the causes of the epidemic and by offering effective solutions to people at risk.

Every December 1st I come to Washington to bear witness on World AIDS Day. I consider it a religious duty. But my friends, I do not want to be here twenty years from now. And I know you don't either.

If we are armed with the truth, and inspired by compassion, we can stop the spread of AIDS and save countless lives. Let's end this pandemic now.