

**Report of the Joint Consultation of Theological Educators
and Church Leaders in North East India on HIV and AIDS
Jorhat, Assam (7-9 March 2008)**

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Northeast India is today severely threatened by HIV & AIDS. Of the seven states in the region two states namely Manipur and Nagaland have the distinction of having the highest rate of HIV & AIDS prevalence in the region. In this region there are about 50 Theological Institutions training church leaders and theological educators for tomorrow. The attempt of the Working Group so far has been to mobilize all theological colleges in the region to come together to combat this pandemic through theological education. The past two years' attempt has seen more than a dozen theological institutions in the region offering a course on Ministerial Formation and HIV & AIDS.

The task still remains to get the other theological institutions in the region to come forward too. For this more theological consultations need to be organized and at the same time there is a growing need for a joint consultation of theological educators and church leaders to come together to discuss the matter seriously so that the church can also start addressing the issue openly instead of waiting for the present theological students to graduate and take up leadership tomorrow. Therefore, keeping this in mind the Working Group of Theological Educators in North East India on HIV & AIDS organized a *Joint Consultation of Theological Educators and Church Leaders on HIV & AIDS in North East India*, at the Eastern Theological College, Jorhat from 7-9 March 2008, which is a part of our three years project on HIV & AIDS. The Working Group of Theological Educators in North East India on HIV and AIDS was formed in June 2006 basically to bring all theological institutions in the region to come together to combat the HIV pandemic which has entered the region in a severe way.

The main objective of the consultation was to get the theological educators and church leaders to come together and build a common platform from which they can start addressing the pandemic as co-partners. If theological institutions and the churches come together they can form a formidable team against the pandemic in the region. The gathering was a success with both the theological educators and churches leaders expressing the need for the two bodies to come together to combat the pandemic jointly.

The participants felt that even as we need to continue to organize joint consultation of such kind until we are able to bring all churches and theological institutions in the region into a common platform, we also need to take the next step forward.

Some suggestions made to continue forward:

1. The participants shared the opinion that theological community must participate in awareness campaign.

2. It was also suggested that practical ministries of final year students to rehab centres must be organized for field experience before entering into full time ministry.
3. Joint consultation of church leaders and theological educators was seen as extremely important event which must continue to bring the two bodies together.
4. The need to redefine mission in the context of HIV & AIDS pandemic thereby creating a holistic approach to mission.
5. Theological institutions must offer compulsory subject on HIV & AIDS to train the students to take up the issue relevantly when they graduate from the college.
6. The institution can offer a short term counselling course to tackle this particular issue. The course can be offered in the pastors' refresher course.
7. The church should come forward to sponsor theological institutions for HIV cause.
8. Theological institutions can also take up publications related to HIV pandemic such as periodicals, magazines, books etc.
9. Send students for further studies in HIV – Diploma/degree course.
10. The members also affirm that pulpit must be used effectively to create awareness and conscientize members of the church on HIV pandemic.
11. The church must allocate fund in their yearly budget for HIV cause. This fund can be used for the welfare of the widows and orphans etc.
12. Cultural roots that may aggravate the spread of the pandemic must be reigned in.
13. Impart awareness regarding HIV & AIDS to the senior Sunday school student in such away that they will be aware of the present realities.
14. Invite PLWHA and people working with them to share their first hand information on the issue whenever a consultation is organized.
15. Theological institutions should take initiative in bringing the church leaders in organizing seminars.
16. Women and the youth should be given the opportunity in addressing this kind of issue because they are more vulnerable.
17. The churches should come together to organize seminar where leaders can come together the discuss HIV & AIDS issue.
18. The church should sponsor and support rehab centres
19. The church must collaborate with the state government and NGOs and take up certain seminars, camps etc., to create awareness to the common people.
20. The church should reinterpret the Bible to include raising modern issues.
21. Church can conduct awareness camps in the rural areas, giving them lessons about the causes of HIV & AIDS. Show visual pictures etc.

Resource people (in alphabetical order) and Topics

- Sunil Batra (Advocate, Delhi High Court) – Legal aspects
- Dr Banner Makan (Executive Director CANA) – Key note address
- Greg Manning (Project Officer (HIV), Micah Network) – HIV spread and prevention, and HIV in North East India
- Dr Peter Okaalet (Senior Director, Health, HIV and AIDS Policy, MAP International) – Stigma and Discrimination, and the Role of the Church

- Dr Razouselie Lasetso (Convenor, Working Group of Theological Educators in North East India on HIV & AIDS) - Bible Study
- Dr S. Shimray – (Asso. Prof. of Christian Ethics, ETC-Jorhat) - Bible Study
- The gathering also had two resource persons from the NNP+ and New Life Ministries sharing their work are peer educators.

We are thankful to all participants and especially the resource persons for coming and making the gathering a successful one.

Conclusion

Let me conclude, in the words of Mr Greg Manning, “The consultation concluded with a strong sense that Churches and theological educators needed to respond urgently to HIV in the region. In the light of this ownership of responsibility, demonstrated by the participants, this consultation has laid a strong platform for the discussions to come. It has also identified and fine tuned some of the processes, which can continue to support that discussion.”