

Good News about HIV Treatment, Cure, and Healing

Conversations between Faith Leaders and Communities in Nigeria
A Discussion Document

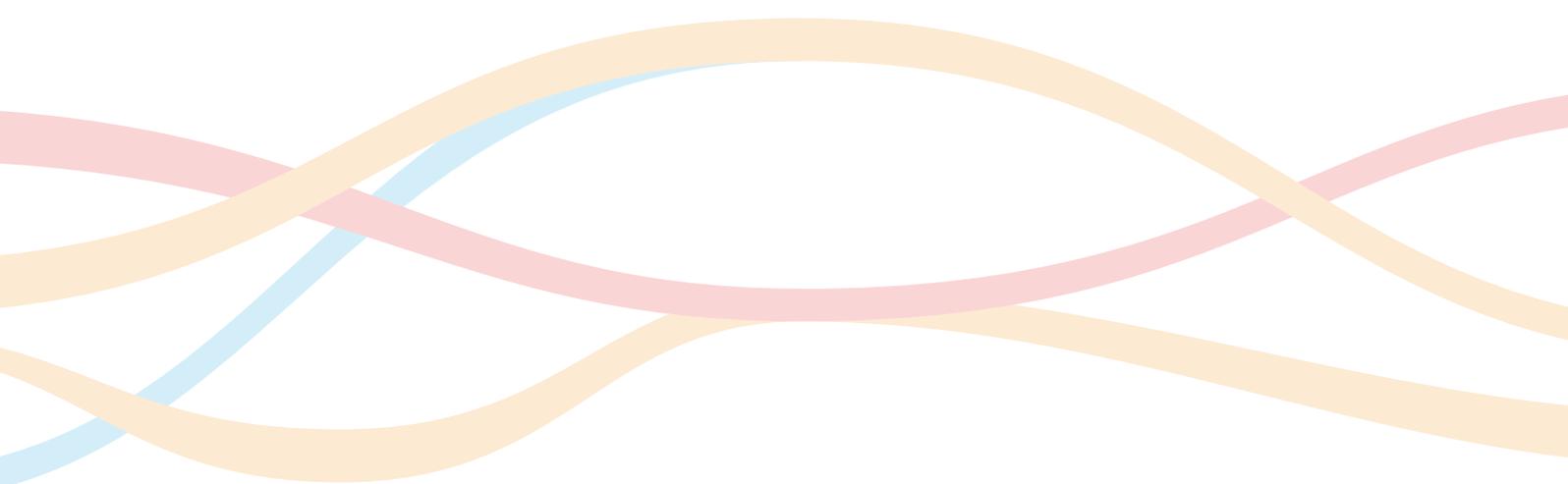


Gracia Violeta Ross
Wushishi Yussuf
Yusuf Saidu Mohammed

Good News about HIV Treatment, Cure, and Healing

Conversations between Faith Leaders and Communities in Nigeria
A Discussion Document

Gracia Violeta Ross
Wushishi Yussuf
Yusuf Saidu Mohammed



Good News about HIV Treatment, Cure, and Healing
Conversations between Faith Leaders and communities in Nigeria

Gracia Violeta Ross, Wushishi Yussuf, Yusuf Saidu Mohammed

Copyright © 2024 WCC Publications. All rights reserved. This publication may be reproduced in English with full acknowledgement of the source. No part of the publication may be translated without prior written permission from the publisher. Contact: publications@wcc-coe.org.

WCC Publications is the book publishing programme of the World Council of Churches. The WCC is a worldwide fellowship of 352 member churches that represent more than half a billion Christians around the world. The WCC calls its member churches to seek unity, a common public witness and service to others in a world where hope and solidarity are the seeds for justice and peace. The WCC works with people of all faiths seeking reconciliation with the goal of justice, peace, and a more equitable world.

Opinions expressed in WCC Publications are those of the authors.

Scripture quotations are from the New Revised Standard Version Bible, © copyright 1989 by the Division of Christian Education of the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the USA. Used by permission.

This publication was produced with the support of Kerk in Actie (KiA), Fondation pour l'aide au protestantisme réformé (FAP) and UNAIDS-PEPFAR Faith Initiative.

Production: Lyn van Rooyen, coordinator WCC Publications

Image credit: WCC, Grégoire de Fombelle, Albin Hillert

ISBN: 978-2-8254-1856-7

World Council of Churches

42 Chemin du Pommier, P.O. Box 2100

1211 Geneva 2, Switzerland

www.oikoumene.org



Contents

Acknowledgements	1
Introduction	3
What Is Treatment?	5
What Is the News about HIV Treatment?	6
What Is a Cure?	7
What Is the News about HIV Cure?	8
What Is Healing?	10
What Is the News about HIV Healing?	13
References	16



Acknowledgements

This document is the result of a collaboration between various role players.

We would like to convey our special thanks for the initial inputs on the document to Rev. Achisan Agoh, Revd Samuel Kehinde Asegbe, Canon S. R. Ehinola Esq., Rev. Danjuma Micah Akalenyi, Rev. Danjuma Micah Akalenyi, Ven. Rotkang Josph Wambutda, and to the thirty-eight theological students from Nigeria who reviewed the first draft.

Our gratitude to all reviewers of previous drafts of this document:

Rev. Dr Kenneth Mtata, Dr Manoj Kurian, Dr Mwai Makoka, and Rev. Dr Benjamin Simon from the World Council of Churches (WCC)

Very Rev Dr Evans Onyemara and Nkechi Oseni from the Christian Council of Nigeria (CCN)

Prof Mohamed Karama from Islamic Relief Kenya (IRK)

Dr Jacek Tyszko and Francesca Merico from the Joint United Nations Programme on HIV/AIDS (UNAIDS)



Introduction

On the cover of this publication, you see an image taken on World AIDS Day 2016 when the World Council of Churches (WCC) Ecumenical Advocacy Alliance launched the campaign “Leading by Example: Religious Leaders and HIV Testing” at the Ecumenical Centre in Geneva. This image creates the impression of a pathway or a journey. The WCC has been on a long journey dealing with HIV, stigma, treatment, and healing. This is the next step on this journey towards healing.

This publication is the result of several trainings that were held from August to November 2023 with leaders from different faith traditions and most affected communities, including those living with HIV. The ideas presented here are meant to open your mind and start conversations about HIV treatment, cure, and healing in your community. You don't need to be a scholar to start this conversation. However, you need to be informed and willing to listen and to engage.

The HIV and AIDS epidemic continues to affect the most vulnerable communities. After more than forty years of the HIV response, the UNAIDS 2023 update reports that of 39 million people living with HIV globally, 29.8 million are receiving life-saving treatment.¹

There has been significant progress towards ending AIDS. However, not everyone is benefiting from this progress. In 2022, 71% of people living with HIV (76% of women and 67% of men living with HIV) globally had undetectable viral loads. Viral load suppression in children living with HIV is only 46%, a reality that needs urgent attention. Barriers remain, and, they are often related to gender inequality and HIV stigma and discrimination. AIDS claimed a life every minute in 2022.²

Nowadays, treatment for HIV is very effective: people with HIV can live long, productive lives. However, out of ignorance or prejudice, some faith leaders spread messages that promote prayer as an exclusive source of cure and, thus, ask people living with HIV to stop their medication as proof of their faith in God. Usually, this has the sad consequence of people abandoning their HIV treatment, increasing the risk of opportunistic infections and possible death.

The World Council of Churches (WCC), aware of the seriousness of this topic, trained religious leaders across Africa to address this misconception. WCC-guided trainings explain that God gave us faith healing, treatment, medical science, and the knowledge to solve health problems, affirming that all these are signs of God's healing touch.

In this document, we summarize discussions among Christian and Muslim leaders in HIV training activities held in Nigeria in 2023. The main concepts explored include treatment, cure, and healing in the context of HIV.

We would love to know if you have more questions and if this material was useful for you. Please send your questions and comments to healthandhealing@wcc-coe.org.

We hope this will inspire similar conversations in different contexts.

Gracia Violeta Ross, HIV and AIDS, Reproductive Health, and Pandemics, WCC

Rev Wushishi Yussuf, Peace Building in Africa, WCC

Imam Yusuf Saidu Mohammed, Jama'atu Nasril Islam

1. UNAIDS, *The Path that Ends AIDS: UNAIDS Global AIDS Update 2023*. (Geneva: Joint United Nations Programme on HIV/AIDS, 2023), Licence: CC BY-NC-SA 3.0 IGO, <https://thepath.unaids.org>.

2. UNAIDS, *The Path that Ends AIDS*.



What Is Treatment?

HIV is not a death sentence for anyone. People with HIV can live well, (be) healthier and be stronger with the medicine.

Rev Samuel Kehinde Asegbe, United African Methodist Church, Lagos, Nigeria

In the *Health Promoting Churches* series, WCC defines treatment as “something that health care providers do for their patients to control a health problem, lessen its symptoms, or clear it up. Treatments can include medicine, therapy, surgery, or other approaches.”³

However, healthcare providers are not the only ones who can administer treatments; we regularly treat ourselves and others for many health problems. We learn most of these treatments from our families, cultures, and experiences.

During the trainings, Rev. Dr Ibrahim Wushishi Yusuf, WCC’s programme executive for peacebuilding in Africa, said many Christians believe in the importance of seeking medical treatment and care, which they view as a means through which God’s healing power can work. They see healthcare professionals as instruments of God’s healing. The Bible recorded the use of substances in the context of healing both in the Old and New Testaments. It is important to note that these practices were specific to the cultural and historical context of the time, and interpretations of their relevance in modern healthcare may vary depending on the context. The following are examples of Bible verses where different treatments were used.

- **Oil:** (James 5:14) was recommended as a treatment for the sick and for the healing of wounds (Luke 10:34, Parable of the Good Samaritan).
- **Wine:** (1 Timothy 5:23) Paul advises Timothy to use a little wine for his stomach problems.
- **Balms:** (Jeremiah 8:22) In Gilead, a balm was used for healing.
- **Spices and Herbs:** (Exodus 30:23-25) God gave Moses a recipe for oil containing various spices and myrrh, which was used for anointing priests and for healing purposes.
- **Clay:** (John 9:6-7) Jesus used clay made with saliva to anoint the eyes of a blind man, who then washed in the pool of Siloam and gained his sight.

Ven. Rotkang J. Wambutda, bishop of Crowther College of Theology, from Okene, Nigeria, said the notion of some faith leaders that HIV medications are contrary to faith should be challenged as it might hinder the effectiveness of HIV treatment, give wrong information and lead people away from health care services.

Islam teachings also contain various texts on health, disease, and treatment. Imam Yusuf Saidu Mohammed, Jama’atu Nasril Islam (JNI), reminded participants that the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) guided Muslims to seek treatment because Allah provided treatments or cure for all diseases, except for old age, as the Hadith explains: “Seek treatment, oh servants of Allah, for Allah does not create any disease, but He also creates with it the cure, except for old age.”⁴

This highlights the importance of using available treatments while relying on Allah’s decree. The combination of physical remedies and spiritual supplications is emphasized for overall well-being.

3. Mwai Makoka, *Health Promoting Churches, Volume I.* (Geneva: WCC, 2020), <https://www.oikoumene.org/resources/publications/health-promoting-churches-vol-1>.

4. Sahih Al Bukhari, Hadith 5678 of *The Book of Medicine, Chapter 77, IslamicFinder*, <https://www.islamicfinder.org/hadith/bukhari/medicine/5678/>.



What Is the News about HIV Treatment?

Training participants agreed that there is much good news about HIV treatment:

HIV changed from being a lethal virus to a **manageable chronic health condition**. It is possible to live long, productive lives with HIV.

There is **broad coverage of HIV treatment**. Currently, 29.8 million of the 39 million people living with HIV globally are receiving life-saving treatment.⁵

HIV treatment today is **effective, tolerable, and has fewer side effects**. At the beginning of the epidemic, most medications were toxic, and some of them were used for other health problems; nowadays, the medications are specifically developed for HIV.

Gracia Violeta Ross, WCC programme officer for HIV & AIDS, Reproductive Health, and Pandemics and a Christian woman openly living with HIV from Bolivia, tells of her experience with HIV treatment:

HIV, in its initial encounters with humanity, caused disease and death. In the early years of the HIV epidemic, many people died. I personally buried too many young people and attended too many lonely funerals. When I started taking HIV medications, I used to take sixteen pills a day; today, it is only one pill per day, which I consider a miracle.

Nowadays, some formulations of HIV medications include injections that can be administered once every month or two.

HIV treatment is HIV prevention. The improvements in HIV medications and the advances in science have proven that any person living with HIV who takes the medication regularly and has an undetectable viral load can no longer transmit HIV.

When HIV medications are taken every day, the viral load can become undetectable. This means that copies of HIV are less than 40/ml, and HIV cannot be transmitted. This strategy is called U=U, meaning Undetectable HIV is Untransmittable HIV.⁶ This is good news!

Viral load is the number of copies of the HI-virus in every ml of blood. People living with HIV should have a viral load count test every six months.

The **price** of some HIV **medications has been reduced**. Thanks to the international pressure placed on pharmaceutical companies that used to hold monopolies over production and commercialization, the costs of some medications have been reduced, making them more accessible to developing countries. However, the reduction of costs does not apply to every country; the pricing of medicines depends on international trade agreements, the income of the country, and laws and regulations that enable universal access (access for all) to medical treatment and care.

5. UNAIDS. The Path that Ends AIDS.

6. UNAIDS, "Undetectable = Untransmittable: Public Health And HIV Viral Load Suppression," *UNAIDS Explainer (Geneva: UNAIDS 2018)*, https://www.unaids.org/sites/default/files/media_asset/undetectable-untransmittable_en.pdf.



What Is a Cure?

The science that excites me the most is the one toward the HIV cure. I wait to see the day that I benefit from this science.

Gracia Violeta Ross⁷

During the trainings in 2023, faith leaders and communities living with HIV in Nigeria defined a cure as a definitive and complete resolution of a disease or medical condition, leading to the restoration of normal health and the absence of any signs or symptoms of the ailment.

Signs are what the medical personnel can see. **Symptoms** are what the person feels. The combination of signs and symptoms is called a **syndrome**.⁸

When a person is considered cured, they no longer require ongoing treatment or intervention to maintain their health. A cure implies completely eliminating a disease or ailment, often through medical intervention. Not all conditions can be fully cured; however, many can be managed adequately enough to allow affected persons to lead productive and fulfilling lives.

From a Muslim perspective, Imam Yusuf Saidu Mohammed reminded participants of the Quran's teaching, "And when I am ill, it is He [Allah] who cures me,"⁹ highlighting the belief in Allah as the source of all cures and ultimate healer. For Islam, cure is integrally connected to seeking healing through supplications, recitation of specific verses, and trusting in Allah's mercy for recovery.

Prof Mohamed Karama, Islamic Relief Kenya, said that the Qur'an's teachings about a provision of a cure for all diseases, except old age, became real when a few people with HIV were cured. This is an encouragement and represents hope that one day, there will be a cure for all people living with HIV. Faith leaders must make congregants appreciate the great strides already made in the management, prevention, and control of HIV.

7. International AIDS Society, *HIV Unmuted: The Breaking Science, July 2023*. See Gracia Violeta Ross at 3:44. https://open.spotify.com/episode/4TOtQ4xq2A3Zi3cvMtA3c3?si=838CmhbESE2YappZVm_tHg&nd=1&dlsi=30254247f26d4bea.

8. *Merriam-Webster Dictionary*, s.v. "syndrome," <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/syndrome>.

9. The Quran 26:80 (*Surah ash-Shu'ara*), *Quranic Quotes*, <https://quranicquotes.com/2021/01/29/364-quran-surah-shuara-80/>.



What Is the News about HIV Cure?

Training participants agreed that there is good news about an HIV cure. They shared some of the news that made them excited

There are **six cases where people have been declared cured of HIV; this means HIV is no longer found active in their laboratory tests.** According to scientists, this means the plasma HIV RNA has remained undetectable for an extended time after stopping medications for HIV.¹⁰ This also means that the low levels of HIV DNA found in lymph node tissue and blood CD4+ T-cells could not replicate.

CD4+ T-cells, or helper T-cells, are one type of lymphocyte that helps coordinate the immune response against infection and disease. They interact and activate other cells in the immune system.

RNA is ribonucleic acid, and DNA is deoxyribonucleic acid.

The people who were declared cured previously had HIV antibodies and proteins detected in their blood. After the cure procedure these antibodies and proteins diminished and continued to decline gradually over time. Scientists explain that they need research on more than a handful of persons cured of HIV to really understand the duration of follow-up needed and the likelihood of an unexpected late rebound in virus replication.

The first person with HIV who was cured was Timothy Ray Brown, also known as the “Berlin patient,¹¹” because the medical intervention that cured him was performed in Berlin, Germany. This case was reported in 2009. The methodology which cured him was a stem cell transplant. Timothy was living with HIV but was also diagnosed with acute myeloid leukaemia, a type of cancer. Stem cell transplants (also called bone marrow transplants) are usually used to treat some forms of cancer.

Timothy received donated stem cells from someone with a mutated gene (called the CCR5 gene). This mutation is known to block HIV from entering the body’s cells; therefore, people who have the CCR5 gene can have resistance to HIV. These stem cells were able to suppress or clear the HI-virus from Timothy’s blood, and he was declared cured. This meant that he no longer needed to take the medications, and HIV was no longer found in his body; however, he still feared that HIV would come back. Timothy died in 2020 due to cancer.

Since this case, four people have been similarly cured (they are called the London, Dusseldorf, New York, City of Hope, and California patients). In July 2023, Swiss scientists reported that they had cured a sixth person using a bone marrow transplant from a donor who did not carry the mutated CCR5 gene.¹² This last case is a cause of hope that cure methodologies could also be developed from bone marrow donated by people who do not have the CCR5 gene; this implies the possibility of a larger pool of potential donors.

It is important to know that bone marrow or stem cell transplants are expensive and high-risk procedures and that this treatment cannot yet be done on everyone living with HIV. However, it does open more research avenues.

The first person with HIV who was cured was Timothy Ray Brown, also known as the “Berlin patient.”

10. Jennifer M Zerbato and Sharon R Lewin, A Cure for HIV: How Would We Know? *The Lancet HIV*. Published Online March 10, 2020 [https://doi.org/10.1016/S2352-3018\(20\)30075-8](https://doi.org/10.1016/S2352-3018(20)30075-8), [https://www.thelancet.com/journals/lanhiv/article/PIIS2352-3018\(20\)30075-8/fulltext#articleInformation](https://www.thelancet.com/journals/lanhiv/article/PIIS2352-3018(20)30075-8/fulltext#articleInformation).

11. James Gallagher, “Berlin patient: First Person Cured of HIV, Timothy Ray Brown, Dies,” *BBC Website*, 30 September 2020, <https://www.bbc.com/news/health-54355673>.

12. “Researchers Say ‘Geneva patient’ is the Sixth Person with HIV in Long-term Remission,” *France 24 website*, 20 July 2023, <https://www.france24.com/en/health/20230720-researchers-say-geneva-patient-is-the-sixth-person-with-hiv-in-long-term-remission>.

HIV cure methodologies continue to be studied. Based on the six cases of people cured of HIV, there are several studies, for example, on the HLP (HI-virus-like-particle), which is 100 times more effective than other candidates for HIV cure therapeutics for people living with chronic HIV on combined antiretroviral therapy (cART).¹³

When compared with other potential cure approaches, HLP is an affordable biotherapeutic and can be administered by intramuscular injection like the seasonal flu vaccine. If successful in clinical trials, HLP could be used by millions of people living with HIV who depend on HIV medications daily to control viral replication.

Several clinical trials are currently investigating whether experimental methodologies could be replicated in the general population, considering their different characteristics.¹⁴

HLPs are dead HIV particles hosting a comprehensive set of HIV proteins that increase immune responses without infecting a person.

13. University of Western Ontario, “Researchers a Step Closer to a Cure for HIV,” *ScienceDaily website*, 26 March 2024, <https://www.sciencedaily.com/releases/2024/03/240326124555.htm>.

14. Oregon Health & Science University. Research Offers Clues for Potential Widespread HIV Cures in People. *ScienceDaily website*, 25 May 2023, www.sciencedaily.com/releases/2023/05/230525141517.htm.



What Is Healing?

I will give back your health and heal your wounds, says the Lord. For you are called an outcast—'Jerusalem for whom no one cares.'

Jeremiah 31:17 NLT

During the conversations in Nigeria, participants agreed that healing is a broader term that encompasses a process of restoring balance and well-being, both physically and emotionally. Healing involves restoring one's function in society and goes beyond the body and the organs; it includes a right relation with God, with oneself, and with others. In many ways, medical science indirectly continues Jesus' healing ministry.

Healing can occur on various levels, including physical, mental, and spiritual. Healing can involve medical treatment, self-care practices, therapy, or natural processes like time and rest. It is a complex and multifaceted concept that encompasses the physiological and psychological aspects of recovery and well-being, rooted in the belief that God the Creator is compassionate and loving and desires the well-being of all creation. An essential element of healing is social healing when a person finds acceptance in their surrounding society and families. The pastoral mandate of faith communities means we must work toward becoming healing communities.

The WCC *Health Promoting Churches* series describes healing as “progress towards health and wholeness.”¹⁵ Healing is a gradual process, taking time to bring deep restoration to health at more than one level.

There are four spheres of healing: physical, mental, social, and spiritual. No disease is confined to only one of these spheres in terms of either its causes or effects, and neither should healing be. There are different practices that aid healing, which could include modern medical science and technology, traditional practices, liturgical acts, faith healing, prevention, and community building.

The WCC defines health as “a dynamic state of well-being of the individual and society, of physical, mental, spiritual, economic, political, and social well-being—of being in harmony with each other, with the material environment and with God.”¹⁶

Rev. Wushishi Yussuf explained that in the Christian faith, the concept of “cure” can also refer to spiritual healing, also called faith healing, where individuals seek restoration through prayer, faith, and belief in the power of God. The nexus between healing and cure lies in their shared goal of improving a person's health. It can involve various methods, including medical treatment, therapy, or even natural remedies. He presented the following verses as examples of different healings.

- In **James 5:14-15**, healing involves alleviating physical symptoms with oil and restoring the relationship with the faith community.
- In **Matthew 4:23**, healing involves justice, reconciliation, education of the community, and healing of every physical disease and sickness.
- In **Psalms 147:3**, healing is for the broken-hearted and the wounded, beyond physical but also spiritual, bringing comfort and restoration.
- In **Jeremiah 30:17**, healing is physical (health), spiritual (wounds) and communal (we understand this when the text says, “because you are called an outcast, Zion for whom no one cares”); this means justice will be restored because God cares for the ones that no one else does.

15. Mwai Makoka, *Health Promoting Churches, Volume I*. (Geneva: WCC, 2020), <https://www.oikoumene.org/resources/publications/health-promoting-churches-vol-1>.

16. Christian Medical Commission, *Healing and Wholeness: The Churches' Role in Health*, (Geneva: WCC, 1990).

Imam Yusuf Saidu Mohammed explained the work of Islamic scholars who studied the teachings of Imam Al Ghazali.¹⁷ They describe that healing is achieved by practices that lead to balance, such as the development of noble character, good morality, built-in social relations, and the achievement of happiness in the world and the hereafter.

Examples of practices promoting balance are *Mujahadah* (struggle with the carnal self), *Riyadhah* (model of the character education based on worship, fasting, etc.) and *Tazkiyat al-Nafs* (purification of self), among others.

He also mentioned some practices, such as Ruqyah (spiritual healing through recitation and supplications). The combination of physical remedies and spiritual supplications is emphasized for overall well-being. Islamic faith places a great emphasis on health

and healing. It encourages seeking treatment when ill and maintaining good health to fulfil one's religious duties effectively.

In addition, it was important to re-visit and re-analyze the concepts of faith healing and exclusive claims of faith healing.

Amber Itohan Erinmwinhe from NINERELA+ (Nigerian Network of Religious Leaders Living with or Personally Affected by HIV) explained the concept of faith healing as follows:

The ability of faith to help restore balance to human beings by addressing psychological, biological, social, economic, and spiritual issues that bring about the lack of such balance. Faith healing is holistic and complements treatments prescribed by medical and psychiatric professionals.

Prof. Mohamed Karama says faith healing should be recognized as a component of treatment and care, touching the spiritual dimension of healing. Faith healing should be acknowledged as an integral part of healthcare, considering the importance of addressing the spiritual aspect of healing. It should be integrated into treatment protocols, particularly in faith-based medical centres, and introduced into public health facilities to uphold standards of care that are often overlooked. At the same time, it's important for faith leaders to support scientific progress, including in the area of HIV treatment.

Contrary to the idea of complementarity between faith healing and conventional treatment, exclusive claims of faith healing promote the spiritual pursuit of care without medical and health interventions. Exclusive claims of faith healing were defined as:

The ability of faith to eliminate the physical, biological, and mental health issues caused in a person who is sick. Faith healing presents itself as an alternative to psychiatric and medical responses to sickness, as competing with other medical service provisions. While we encourage faith healing as a component of care, we should discourage the claim or demand for exclusive faith healing.

Amber Itohan Erinmwinhe. Training of Trainers 27-30/11/2023, Abuja, Nigeria.

During the discussions, it was evident that healing is essential for faith communities and that faith communities have a comparative advantage in providing healing; however, the persistence of HIV stigma and discrimination is evidence of a lack of healing. The existence of claims of exclusive faith healing—which attributes HIV to sin—in opposition to HIV treatment makes evident the lack of education on HIV and stigma.

Prof. Mohamed Karama noted that, for both Muslim and Christian communities, HIV was considered a punishment from God in the early days of the pandemic, particularly for some modes of transmission. He says it is essential to overcome this perception because it fuels stigma. He explains that Muslims believe that Allah can test their resilience and reliance on Him through afflictions, which negates the punishment theory.¹⁸

17. Aliah B. Purwakanania Hasan and Abas Mansur Tamam, "The Implementation of Mental Health Concept by Imam Al-Ghazali in Islamic Counseling Guidance," *Journal of Strategic and Global Studies*: Vol. 1: No. 1, Article 1, January 2018. DOI: 10.7454/jsgs.v1i1.1000 Available at: <https://scholarhub.ui.ac.id/jsgs/vol1/iss1/1>.

18. Qur'an 2:155 Surah Al-Baqarah 155, <https://quran.com/al-baqarah/155>. "We will certainly test you with a touch of fear and famine and loss of property, life and crops. Give good news to those who patiently endure."

In addition, Quran 49:11 rules out stigmatization based on any reason:

O believers do not let some men ridicule others who may be better than them nor let some women ridicule other women who may be better than them. Do not defame one another, nor call each other by offensive nicknames. How evil it is to act rebelliously after having faith. If they do not repent, they are the true wrongdoers.¹⁹

Prof Karama affirms that religious leaders must not be judgmental in addressing the youth and people living with HIV. Faith leaders should understand the vulnerability of young people to HIV; this would be a manifestation of healing.

19. Qur'an, Surat Al-Hujurat [49:11], The Noble Qur'an, محمد ركنال نارقالا, <https://legacy.quran.com/49/11>.



What Is the News about HIV Healing?

The following is good news about HIV healing:

HIV stigma and discrimination have been reduced. Since HIV discrimination and stigma could be one of the strongest manifestations of lack of healing in HIV, it is important to note that, during more than forty years of the HIV epidemic, HIV stigma and discrimination were significantly reduced. The People Living with HIV Stigma Index country reports document this change.²⁰ However, HIV stigma and discrimination have not ended, and across the world, they continue to be the main barriers to universal access to HIV prevention, testing, treatment, and adherence.

More people with HIV are reconciled with their communities. In comparison to the initial years of the HIV epidemic, more people with HIV are reconciled with their communities now, and HIV is no longer a factor of separation. This contributed to the visibility of people living with HIV, and even religious leaders speak openly about their experiences living with HIV. The International Network of Religious Leaders Living with or Personally Affected by HIV and AIDS (INERELA+) has provided opportunities for some of these leaders for many years. As Canon Prof. Gideon Byamugisha says, “I take my HIV medications, religiously.”

Gracia Violeta Ross, who has been living with HIV for twenty-three years and taking antiretroviral medications from 2015 until the present, often prayed, asking God to cure her of HIV. Now she says, “I am not cured of HIV; however, I am healed.” When she disclosed her HIV status to her congregation in 2003, the group of women she feared would gossip about her status became her main prayer support group; Gracia says that is a manifestation of her healing.

Faith communities have experience in responding to HIV stigma and discrimination. During the trainings, some participants shared their own work and experience in response to justice and reconciliation. Some examples include the work of NINERELA+, an interfaith network that addresses stigma among Muslim and Christian leaders across Nigeria.

The WCC recently published a collection of six case studies of congregations around the world that had success responding to HIV stigma,²¹ to add to the extensive training material on HIV published over the last twenty years.²²

AIDS deaths are less. The 2023 UNAIDS fact sheet reports that 630,000 people died from AIDS-related illnesses in 2022.²³ Since the start of the epidemic, 40.4 million people have died from AIDS. This means there was some level of justice and restoration; some governments have paid attention to HIV and AIDS as a public health concern and allocated funds to respond to the HIV pandemic. Medications have been provided, and access has increased; some faith communities championed the cause of people living with HIV, communities have mobilized their efforts, and United Nations agencies have prioritized the HIV response. The change in the number of people who died of AIDS-related diseases since the start of the epidemic (40.4 million) to the number of people who are now **LIVING with HIV** (39 million people living with HIV in 2022) is an important demonstration of holistic healing.

However, participants agreed that, despite progress in the HIV response, the socio-economic factors fuelling HIV remain a challenge and a barrier. Some of these are broken social and family networks, unjust systems, gender inequalities, scarcity of education and economic opportunities, violence against women and girls, and discrimination. Wherever these conditions exist, they become a fertile terrain for HIV.

Therefore, other questions discussed as the dialogue continued were:

20. Country Reports, *People Living with HIV Stigma Index website*, <https://www.stigmaindex.org/country-reports/>.

21. David Barstow, Gracia Violeta Ross, and Manoj Kurian, *Recommended Practices to Combat HIV-Related Stigma: A Guidebook for Local Faith Communities*, (World Council of Churches: Geneva, 2023), <https://www.oikoumene.org/resources/publications/recommended-practices-to-combat-hiv-related-stigma>.

22. HIV & AIDS, Reproductive Health, and Pandemics, WCC Website. See resources (<https://www.oikoumene.org/what-we-do/hiv-aids-reproductive-health-and-pandemics#resources>) and publications (<https://bit.ly/4d2ty8X>).

23. UNAIDS, “Global HIV & AIDS Statistics—Fact Sheet,” (Geneva: UNAIDS, 2023), <https://www.unaids.org/en/resources/fact-sheet>.

Are we healed?

Is our faith community a place of healing?

Why does HIV transmission continue in our countries, including in our faith communities?

Anonymous participants. Training of Trainers 15/08/2023, Abuja, Nigeria

Participants of the trainings agreed that, as a community, we are healing, but we are not yet healed completely. We have some evidence that healing in HIV has a long way to go.

Rev. Achisan Agoh, St. Francis of Assisi College of Theology Wusasa, Zaria, Nigeria, said some of the reasons for the continuous transmission of HIV are the neglected responsibilities of governments to respond to the HIV epidemic, the individual failure of people to adopt prevention measures, the ongoing inequalities, the lack of persisting actions of religious leaders to curb HIV spread, scarcity of care for people living HIV, and lack of programmes and messages to stop discrimination and stigmatization. Rev. Agoh said, “We must individually and collectively contribute our quota to stop the spread of HIV.”

Canon S. R. Ehinola, The African Church, noted, “Few positive and deliberate efforts and affection from all can make healing possibly faster than imagined; the world is free by our commitments.”

Another religious leader who preferred to remain anonymous said: “A lot of what we do that creates vulnerability for women has a relation with faith. It is time for us to have the difficult discussions and to undo some mistakes.”

Rev. Danjuma Micah Akalenyi, Lutheran Church of Christ in Nigeria, reminded participants that Galatians 6:2 says we should carry each other’s burdens and, in this way, fulfil the law of Christ. The Bible instructs Christians to show love to those living with challenges, for example, people living with HIV. Pastors should educate their members and immediate community that HIV is not the end of life and promote the demonstration of compassionate love and care for people living with HIV.

Conversations also analyzed what faith leaders could do to respond to increased claims of exclusive faith healing, which, in some cases, negatively affects HIV testing, treatment, and adherence. The following are some ideas of Muslim and Christian leaders present in the trainings:

- Inform and educate congregants about early voluntary HIV counselling and testing, treatment, and adherence.
- Inform people of and refer them to HIV treatment and care centres.
- Clarify misconceptions and myths and develop theological reflections and Bible studies, sermons, talking points, lessons, and articles related to faith healing and exclusive claims of faith healing.
- Encourage large faith-based organizations to create policies and guidelines related to HIV mainstreaming in their teaching and preaching, which include HIV testing, treatment adherence, and explanation of exclusive claims of faith healing.
- Give hope to people in congregations; consider how many Christians and Muslims will not disclose their HIV status because of fear of stigma and discrimination.
- Provide pastoral care for people living with HIV.

The following question was asked as an invitation to imagine the transformation we want to see in faith communities toward holistic healing:

If we move towards the healing of HIV/AIDS as individuals and communities, what would this look like?

Anonymous participant. Training of Trainers 27-30/11/2023, Abuja, Nigeria

Training participants expressed that a healed community in the context of HIV would have the following characteristics:

- Our faith communities would be safe spaces for people living with HIV and the most affected communities; we would create and maintain spaces to practice the grace of God.²⁴
- As faith communities, we would have compassionate love and care for the most vulnerable.
- HIV would be part of the preaching and teaching with correct information and life-giving theologies.
- We would challenge gender-based violence, stigma, and discrimination.
- We would promote equality and justice.
- We would expand access to information to prevent HIV, regarding medications, and to live healthy lives.

A safe space in WCC HIV activities is a space for equal and horizontal encounters, conversation, and engagement that enables equality, empowerment, and the practice of compassion, grace, and solidarity without the possibility of retaliation, harm or adverse consequences if any discussion on complex topics adopts different positions.

Safer Spaces for Young People in Faith Communities: How, Why, and with Whom (Working document expected for November 2024). WCC HIV, Reproductive Health, & Pandemics programme.

Just as clinical researchers are moving towards the cure for HIV, faith communities should move towards the holistic healing of the brokenness caused by AIDS.

Faith communities must pursue healing, early access to HIV prevention, testing and treatment, and the cure when it becomes available. We must fight for justice, reconciliation, equity, and universal access. We should use all available tools to encourage the government and individuals to act positively towards achieving an equal, fair, and healthier community.

Every faith community has the potential to become an agent of positive transformation, hope, and love.

24. Manoj Kurian, *Passion and Compassion: The Ecumenical Journey with HIV*, (Geneva: WCC, 2016), <https://www.oikoumene.org/resources/publications/passion-and-compassion-the-ecumenical-journey-with-hiv>. See Chapter 4 “Safe Spaces of Grace”.



References

- “Researchers Say ‘Geneva patient’ is the Sixth Person with HIV in Long-term Remission,” *France 24* website, 20 July 2023, <https://www.france24.com/en/health/20230720-researchers-say-geneva-patient-is-the-sixth-person-with-hiv-in-long-term-remission>.
- Al Bukhari, S., Hadith 5678 of *The Book of Medicine*, Chapter 77, IslamicFinder, <https://www.islamicfinder.org/hadith/bukhari/medicine/5678/>.
- Barstow, D., Ross, G.V., and Kurian, M, *Recommended Practices to Combat HIV-Related Stigma: A Guidebook for Local Faith Communities*, Geneva: WCC, 2023. <https://www.oikoumene.org/resources/publications/recommended-practices-to-combat-hiv-related-stigma>.
- Christian Medical Commission, *Healing and Wholeness: The Churches’ Role in Health*, Geneva: WCC, 1990.
- Gallagher, J., “Berlin patient: First Person Cured of HIV, Timothy Ray Brown, Dies,” *BBC* Website, 30 September 2020, <https://www.bbc.com/news/health-54355673>.
- Hasan, Aliah B. Purwakania and Tamam, Abas Mansur, “The Implementation of Mental Health Concept by Imam Al-Ghazali in Islamic Counseling Guidance,” *Journal of Strategic and Global Studies*: Vol. 1, No. 1, Article 1. January 2018, DOI: 10.7454/jsgs.v1i1.1000, <https://scholarhub.ui.ac.id/jsgs/vol1/iss1/1>.
- International AIDS Society, *HIV Unmuted: The Breaking Science*, July 2023, https://open.spotify.com/episode/4TOtQ4xq2A3Zi3cvMtA3c3?si=838CmhbESE2YaypZVm_tHg&nd=1&dlsi=30254247f26d4bea.
- Kurian, M, *Passion and Compassion: The Ecumenical Journey with HIV*, Geneva: WCC, 2016), <https://www.oikoumene.org/resources/publications/passion-and-compassion-the-ecumenical-journey-with-hiv>.
- Makoka, M., *Health Promoting Churches, Volume I*. (Geneva: WCC, 2020), <https://www.oikoumene.org/resources/publications/health-promoting-churches-vol-1>.
- Oregon Health & Science University, “Research Offers Clues for Potential Widespread HIV Cures in People.” *ScienceDaily* website, 25 May 2023, www.sciencedaily.com/releases/2023/05/230525141517.htm.
- Qur’an 26:80* (Surah ash-Shu’ara), Quranic Quotes, <https://quranicquotes.com/2021/01/29/364-quran-surah-shuara-80/>.
- Qur’an*, Surat Al-Hujurat [49:11], The Noble Qur’an, <https://legacy.quran.com/49/11>.
- Qur’an* 2:155 Surah Al-Baqarah 155, <https://quran.com/al-baqarah/155>.
- UNAIDS, Global HIV & AIDS Statistics—Fact Sheet, <https://www.unaids.org/en/resources/fact-sheet>.
- UNAIDS, *The Path that Ends AIDS: UNAIDS Global AIDS Update 2023*. (Geneva: UNAIDS, 2023), Licence: CC BY-NC-SA 3.0 IGO, <https://thepath.unaids.org>.
- UNAIDS, “Undetectable = Untransmittable: Public Health And HIV Viral Load Suppression,” *UNAIDS Explainer* (Geneva: UNAIDS, 2018), https://www.unaids.org/sites/default/files/media_asset/undetectable-untransmittable_en.pdf.
- University of Western Ontario. “Researchers a step closer to a cure for HIV.” *ScienceDaily*. www.sciencedaily.com/releases/2024/03/240326124555.htm.
- Zerbato, J. & Lewin, S., A Cure for HIV: How Would We Know? *The Lancet HIV*. Published 10 March 2020 [https://doi.org/10.1016/S2352-3018\(20\)30075-8](https://doi.org/10.1016/S2352-3018(20)30075-8), [https://www.thelancet.com/journals/lanhiv/article/PIIS2352-3018\(20\)30075-8/fulltext#articleInformation](https://www.thelancet.com/journals/lanhiv/article/PIIS2352-3018(20)30075-8/fulltext#articleInformation).



HIV treatment is very effective and tolerable nowadays. However, some faith leaders, out of misinformation, continue spreading messages of exclusive healing by faith, asking people living with HIV to abandon their medications as proof of their faith in God.

In *Good News about HIV Treatment, Cure, and Healing*, the initiators of the conversations and the discussants analyzed the concepts of treatment, cure, and healing in HIV, using principles of Christian and Muslim theologies, and concluded that faith communities have the mandate to heal. They discussed the six recent six cases of people with HIV who have been declared cured, which sparks hope for a definitive cure for all. Meanwhile, faith communities must support people living with HIV in adhering to their treatment. Medications and treatments are part of the healing touch of God, who is the ultimate source of healing.

