

Statement on Meeting the Challenges of Sexually Transmitted Diseases

The contemporary world is confronted by grave ethical, medical, and social problems resulting from increasing sexual permissiveness and associated promiscuity. Because Christians are a part of the larger social community, these attitudes and behaviours have infiltrated the Seventh-day Adventist Church as well, demanding that we address them.

So serious are the challenges presented by sexually transmitted diseases (STDs) that the United Nations, in conjunction with most of the world's governments, the health-care community, religious, political, and economic leaders, has instituted a series of major research and health-education programs that focus on prevention and treatment. The goal is to prevent, cure, and minimize the effects—or at least slow the spread—of these diseases.

At particular risk are youth entering puberty at increasingly younger ages, when they are especially vulnerable to peer pressure and a barrage of media and peer messages that treat casual sex outside marriage as acceptable and normal. Many youth are sexually active early in their teen years and soon become well established in patterns of sexual activity.

Correlated with increased sexual activity is a dramatic increase in STDs associated with serious physical and emotional problems.

Advances have been made along several lines:

- research has provided more accurate data;
- benefits of using condoms to reduce unwanted pregnancy and the spread of STDs have been documented;
- dangers of promiscuity have been recognized;
- more effective treatment has reduced the spread and progression of many STDs;
- risk of long-term emotional damage resulting from casual sex has been recognized; and support has grown for the position that abstinence from extramarital sex preserves sexual and emotional health.

These advances, despite their limitations, have proved beneficial and should be encouraged for their positive effects. Seventh-day Adventist caregivers should be encouraged to participate in promoting such efforts and deserve the support of church members as they do so. A pragmatic approach to dealing with these serious problems and the use of appropriate interventions should by no means be interpreted as endorsement or encouragement of sexual activity outside marriage or of unfaithfulness within marriage. Instead, these efforts must be seen as

compassionate attempts to prevent or reduce the negative consequences of detrimental sexual behaviours.

At times, family members, and pastors, teachers, counsellors, physicians, and others in helping professions may find themselves working with individuals who, despite strong counsel, refuse to turn from sexual decadence and live by God's high standard of morality. In such cases, those entrusted with ministry may, as a last resort, counsel specific individuals to use contraceptive and prophylactic methods such as condoms in an attempt to prevent pregnancy and reduce the risk of spreading life-decimating STDs.

Utmost care should be taken when making such an intervention to make it clear to the individual(s) and members of the community involved that this extreme measure should in no way be misconstrued as a scriptural sanction for sexual intimacy outside marriage. Such action on the part of professionals should be considered interim and utilized only in individual cases. Though such interventions may provide a little time for grace to do its work in human hearts, they do not provide a viable long-term solution. The Church must remain committed to making the most of every opportunity to reinforce the wisdom of God's design for human sexuality and to calling men and women to the highest standard of moral conduct.

Biblical Principles

Although the efforts described above are in many ways beneficial, they are only a response to existing situations created by the impact of sin. In the Scriptures, God has set out a superior plan to guide our use of His gift of sexuality. Built upon a series of guiding principles, it presents in practical terms God's ideal for His people who must live in a sin-stricken world.

1. Sexual intimacy is reserved for marriage. Sexuality is a loving gift of the Creator to humanity (Gen 1:26, 27). The gospel calls believers to an appreciation for and stewardship of their sexuality in harmony with the divine purposes (1 Cor 3:16, 17; 6:13-20; Eph 5:1-8; Phil 1:27; 1 Thess 4:3-7). In God's plan, sexual intimacy is reserved for a man and a woman within the bounds of the marriage covenant (Gen 2:24, 26; Exod 20:14; Proverbs 5; Song of Sol 4:12; 8:8-10; 2:6, 7; 3:5; 8:3, 4; Hos 3:3; Heb 13:4). Sexual fidelity within marriage is crucial to convey a full understanding of God's metaphor comparing marriage to His relationship with His people (Isa 54:5; Hos 2:14-23; 2 Cor 11:2; Rev 19:6-9; 21:9).

2. Sexual intimacy outside of marriage is immoral and harmful. Such intimacy has detrimental effects on individuals (Lev 18:6-3; Rom 1:24-27; 1 Cor 6:18), as well as on the marriage relationship (Prov 5:1-23). It is identified by Scripture as part of the sinful life (Gal 5:19; Col 3:5).

3. God recognizes human frailty. His divine will for human beings and His intent for creation are unchangeable (Mal 3:6; Matt 5:17-20; Acts 20:27). His absolute love for human beings and His redemptive intent are equally unchangeable (John 3:16; Rom 5:8; 8:35-39; Eph 1:1-14; 3:14-19; 1 John 4:7-10). The gospel message, centred in Jesus Christ, binds these truths together (Ps 85:10; 1 John 2:1,2).

God's grace is the only hope for fallen humanity (Rom 3:23, 24; 5:1, 2, 20; Eph 2:1-5). He is patient and long-suffering with human frailty (Num 14:18, 19; Ps 86:15; 103:13, 14; Hos 11:8, 9; Jonah 3:1; 4:10, 11; Matt 23:37; 1 Tim 1: 15, 16). Though God's grace does not give license to sin (Rom 6:1, 2), it is through such grace that God accomplishes His redemptive intent in the circumstances resulting from sin (Rom 5:12-21). God's practical dealings in cases of divorce (Deut 24:1-5; Ezra 10:10, 11; Matt 19:7, 8), polygamy (Exod 21:10; Deut 17:17; 21:15-17; Matt 19:4, 5), the introduction of flesh foods (Gen 1:11, 12, 29, 30; 9:3; Lev 3:17; 11:47), and provision for an earthly monarch (1 Sam 8:7; 10:19; Hos 13:11) offer examples of interventions short of God's ideal. Through such cases, we see His grace and mercy at work in a world deformed by sin.

4. The Church conducts its mission in a fallen world. Existing conditions contrast sharply with God's ideal. Both believers and unbelievers are vulnerable to sexual immorality as one of the tragic results of sin (John 17:15; 1 John 2:15). The Church is called to minister to believers and unbelievers alike, reaching and reclaiming sinners (Matt 28:19; Mark 2:17; 2 Cor 5:20, 21), nurturing the growth of believers (Eph 2:19-22; 4:11-13, 15; 1 Thess 5:11; 2 Peter 3:18), uplifting the infinite worth of each individual (Isa 43:3, 4, 7; Matt 12:12; Luke 12:7; 15:1-32; 1 Peter 1:18, 19), protecting the weak and vulnerable (Rom 15:1; 1 Thess 5:14; Heb 13:3), promoting and preserving life and health (John 10:10; 1 Cor 6:19; 3 John 2), and calling men and women to take up their lofty position as God's chosen and holy people (Eph 4:1; 5:8; 1 Peter 1:15, 16; 2:5, 9). The ministry of the Church is both to meet individuals where they are (1 Cor 3:1, 2; 7:1-28), and to call them to a higher standard (Luke 19:5-10; John 8:3-11; Acts 17:18-34).

5. A spiritual development process is anticipated in the Christian life. Change for the Christian involves both conversion (John 3:3, 7; Acts 3:19; Rom 12:2; 2 Cor 5:17) and growth (Prov 4:18; Luke 2:52; Eph 3:17-19; 4:11-15; 2 Peter 3:18). At conversion, believers accept Christ's perfect life as their own by faith and experience a Spirit-led transformation of values (John 3:5; Gal 2:20). Both external and internal forces may provoke relapses in thought or conduct (Gal 5:16-18; 1 John 3:20), but commitment to grace-induced progress in the Christian life (1 Cor 15:10; Phil 3:12-14; Col 1:28, 29) and reliance upon God-provided resources (Rom 8:5-7; Gal 5:24, 25) will produce growth toward Christlikeness (Gal 5:22-25; Eph 5:1).

The Scriptures call for human beings to progress morally and spiritually throughout their lives (Luke 2:52; 1 Cor 13:11; 14:20). Planning for and facilitating such growth is integral to fulfilling the gospel commission (Matt 28:20; Eph 3:14-24). It is the task of religious education to attend to individual development and to present truth in ways that hearers can understand (Matt 11:15), causing them to stretch but not to stumble (Rom 14:1-21; 1 Cor 8:9-13). Though some allowance may be made for the unlearned or immature (Matt 13:34; John 16:12; Acts 17:30; 1 Cor 3:1, 2), over time individuals should progress toward a more complete understanding of God's will (John 16:13) and a fuller expression of love for God and one another (Matt 22:37-39; John 13:35; 8:9; 13:11; 1 John 3:14; 4:11, 12). Under God's blessing, the clear presentation of the gospel and careful attention to the disciple-making process will bear spiritual fruit, even among those who have been involved in sexual sin (1 Cor 6:9-11).

Implications

1. The Church affirms the biblical view of sexuality as a wholesome attribute of human nature created by God to be enjoyed and used responsibly in marriage as part of Christian discipleship.
2. The Church is committed to sharing a biblical view of human sexuality in an intentional and culturally sensitive manner. Emphasis is placed on appreciating and understanding the human body and its functions, upholding sexual chastity outside and fidelity within marital relationships, and developing skills for decision-making and communication about sexual behaviour. The Church is committed to conveying the truth that the misuse of one's own sexuality and the abuse of power in relationships are contrary to God's ideal.
3. The Church calls people to dedicate themselves before God to sexual abstinence outside the marriage covenant and sexual faithfulness to one's spouse. Apart from the wholesome expression of sexual intimacy in marriage, abstinence is the only safe and moral path for the Christian. In any other context, sexual activity is both harmful and immoral. This high standard represents God's intention for the use of His gift, and believers are called upon to uphold this ideal, regardless of the prevailing standards in the culture around them.
4. The Church recognizes the sinfulness of humanity. Human beings make mistakes, use poor judgment, and may deliberately choose to engage in sexual practices that are contrary to God's ideal. Others may not know where to turn for help to live sexually pure lives. Nothing, however, can spare such individuals from the consequences of departing from the divine plan. Emotional and spiritual wounds left by sexual activity that violates God's plan inevitably leave scars. But the Church extends Christ's ministry of mercy and grace by offering God's forgiveness, healing, and restorative power. It must seek to provide the personal, spiritual, and emotional support that will enable the wounded to lay hold of the gospel's resources. The Church must also help persons and families identify and access the full network of professional resources available.
5. The Church recognizes as morally acceptable the use of contraceptive measures, including condoms, by married couples who seek to control conception. Condoms in particular may be indicated in some marital circumstances—for example, when one partner has been exposed to or has contracted a sexually transmitted disease, thus putting the spouse at high risk for infection.

On the other hand, the premarital or extramarital use of condoms—either in an attempt to lower the risk of unwanted pregnancy or to prevent the transmission of a sexually transmitted disease raises moral concerns. These concerns must be considered in the context of the divine plan for human sexuality, the relationship between God's creative intent and His regard for human frailty, the process of spiritual growth and moral development within individuals, and the nature of the Church's mission.

Though condoms have proved to be somewhat effective in preventing pregnancy and the spread of disease*, this does not make sex outside of marriage morally acceptable. Neither does this fact prevent the emotional damage that results from such behaviour. The Church's appeal to youth and adults alike, believers and nonbelievers, is to live lives worthy of the grace extended to us in Christ, drawing as fully as possible upon divine and human resources to live according to God's ideal for sexuality.

6. The Church acknowledges that in cases where a married person may be at risk for transmitting or contracting a sexually transmitted disease such as Human Immunodeficiency Virus (HIV) from his or her marriage partner, the use of a condom is not only morally acceptable but also strongly recommended if the husband and wife decide to continue having sexual intercourse. Users of condoms must be alerted to the importance of using them properly and to the limits of their effectiveness in preventing the transmission of HIV infection.

Appeal

We are facing a crisis that threatens the lives and well-being of many people, including church members. Both youth and adults are in peril. The Church must develop, without delay, a comprehensive strategy of education and prevention. The resources of health, social services, educational, ministerial, and other professionals, both within and without the Church, must be mobilized. This crisis demands priority attention—using every legitimate resource and method at the Church's disposal to target the home, school, church, and community. The destiny of an entire generation of human beings is at stake, and we are in a race against time.

*Research indicates that condoms, when correctly used, have about a 97 percent success rate in prevention of pregnancy and about an 85 to 90 percent success rate in prevention of virus transmission, as used by the general population. In those groups who use them consistently and correctly, the effectiveness is about 97 percent.

This statement was voted during the Annual Council of the General Conference Executive Committee on Sunday, September 27, 1998, in Iguacu Falls, Brazil.