

## Pope's comments on condoms are wrong and irresponsible

The Treatment Action Campaign (TAC) acknowledges the excellent work done by churches worldwide to address the HIV epidemic. The groundswell of support from churches in caring for people with HIV has often meant that people have access to essential services who would otherwise have suffered and died needlessly. The church is one of the greatest allies of the HIV treatment access movement across the globe, and especially in Africa. In South Africa, where over 50% of the population attends a house of worship at least once a week, Archbishop Njongonkulu Ndungane and other religious figures have championed the struggle for access to ARVs and other life-saving services, side by side with activists.<sup>1</sup> It is for this reason that TAC was so dismayed to hear the recent harmful and ill-informed comments by Pope Benedict XVI on his visit to Cameroon on Tuesday.

On Tuesday 17 March, Pope Benedict XVI visited Cameroon and told reporters, "You can't resolve [AIDS] with condoms ... On the contrary, it increases the problem." (Source: CNN on <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lhxqvVmgEbg&feature=related>)

The Pope's comments are irresponsible. The evidence that consistent condom use is effective at reducing the risk of HIV transmission is incontrovertible. Below we reprint the abstract of a scientific meeting that analysed 138 peer-reviewed articles to determine the effectiveness of condoms at reducing the risk of contracting sexually transmitted infections (STIs) including HIV. A key finding of the meeting was that the results of "longitudinal studies of the sexual partners of HIV-infected persons indicate that consistent condom use reduces the risk of HIV/AIDS transmission by approximately 85%."

The evidence is considerable that abstinence-only programmes, apparently favoured by the Pope, are ineffective. The AIDS Research Institute of the University of California, San Francisco published a monograph in March 2002 that states:

*An assessment of the peer-reviewed, published research reveals no evidence that abstinence-only programs delay sexual initiation or reduce STIs or pregnancy. By contrast, credible research clearly demonstrates that some comprehensive sex education, or 'abstinence-plus,' programs can achieve positive behavioral changes among young people and reduce STIs, and that these programs do not encourage young people to initiate sexual activity earlier or have more sexual partners.*

The evidence shows that it is important to distribute condoms and that it is also important to provide sex education to adolescents that includes accurate information on how to use condoms.

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