Dogma & Devotion

If God had AIDS, would our religious institutions show more love? Andy Humm looks at how the epidemic has challenged and changed the faithful.

February 1, 2001 By Andy Humm

There is no God. So Daniel J. thought when first told that he has HIV. Prior to his diagnosis at 22 in 1997, Daniel's faith had been "a happy mélange of Catholicism, Santeria and Buddhism." At that moment, however, "it just evaporated. I expected that I was going to die immediately, and I became a nihilist." But after several years of "doing drugs, not wearing sunscreen and not paying bills," Daniel says, a series of events -- from the death of his 90-year-old grandmother to the bittersweet sound of a Schubert cello quartet -- led him back to a spiritual life.

Just as coming to terms with HIV attracts many to spirituality, religious groups are drawn to PWAs. From the permanent AIDS memorial at the Episcopalian St. John the Divine in New York City, the world's largest cathedral, to far-right Rev. Fred Phelps of Kansas who shows up at PWA funerals with signs proclaiming "AIDS is the Cure" and "God Hates Fags," religious groups have either given love to PWAs, or loved to hate them. Conservative Catholic Mother Teresa was the first to open hospices for PWAs in the early '80s, where patients had to live on a nun's schedule, while New Age spiritual leaders such as Ma Jaya Sati Bhagavati, founder of Florida's River Fund, have long provided far fewer "Thou Shalt Not"s for the sick. Buddhist monks blessed baskets of condoms in Thailand 10 years ago to promote HIV prevention, but many prominent religious leaders, most notably the pope, steadfastly oppose such essential measures even today. Whether it's the Catholic Church running hospitals or fundamentalist Christians opposing needle exchange, religions have been more than spiritual homes -- they have shaped the global conversation on AIDS.

By now, most organized faiths -- from Islam to Buddhism to the Lutheran Church -- offer a form of AIDS ministry. Some are comfortably run by paid administrators right out of denominational headquarters, others by independent individuals who are bucking religious hierarchy. Rev. Bill Johnson is Minister for HIV/AIDS Concerns at the United Church of Christ, a liberal Protestant denomination in Cleveland that has welcomed gay people for decades -- signaling a climate of acceptance, rather than judgment, when AIDS struck. "In some communities in the 1980s," Johnson, who is openly gay, recalls, "UCC churches were the only ones doing anything about AIDS. People with AIDS looking for a spiritual home found us." He adds that AIDS transformed the church: "The epidemic was a catalyst for organizing a task force on substance use. Prior to AIDS, we weren't doing anything." Johnson's AIDS ministry also inspired a host of health-related UCC

ministries, including a network of parish nurses. This model of service without judgment also characterizes the Quakers, who run such programs as the Friends House in New York City, housing homeless HIVers of all faiths.

But most movements mix a bit of brimstone with their blessings and beneficence. The Presbyterian Church USA condemns sex outside of marriage in general and homosexuality in particular. “We have one foot inside and one outside the church,” says Rev. Nancy Troy, director of the Church’s Health, Education and Welfare Association, which runs the Presbyterian AIDS Network. “We are a prophetic organization and often need to call the church to accountability.” Her ministry has succeeded in moving the denomination to adopt a policy supporting needle exchange. “Sometimes,” she adds, “we dissent” -- as on the issue of affirming gay people.

The Lutheran Church has faced similar struggles. Former AIDS czar Kristine Gebbie now heads up the Lutheran AIDS Network. She says that while her church has not changed its doctrines on sexuality, the tumult over confronting AIDS has led to a more inclusive attitude, with some parishes becoming “Reconciling in Christ Congregations” that even perform commitment ceremonies for same-sex couples. Rev. David Kalke, a Lutheran pastor in San Bernardino, California, hosted a youth conference last year where he says the message was: “If you’re going to be sexually active, have safe sex. We can deal with the moral issues later. But if you get AIDS, it’s too late.”

That common-sense advice has yet to crack the Roman Catholic Church, a major provider of AIDS care, except at its fringes. When activists began to promote AIDS ed for youth in the ’80s, the Brooklyn Diocese, for instance, announced that this wasn’t needed in Catholic schools, which already taught that extramarital sex, homosexuality and drug use are sins. ACT UP’s controversial 1989 Stop the Church! action at St. Patrick’s Cathedral (see “Cardinal Sin,” December 2000) was called to protest Cardinal John O’Connor’s efforts to keep safer-sex information out of public schools. ACT UPer Ann Northrop says the church became a political target when it crossed the line from educating its faithful to imposing doctrine on the city. “The Catholic Church has not only blocked lifesaving prevention efforts,” she says, “it has even cynically used AIDS to rescue itself and its hospitals from bankruptcy.” New York’s St. Clare’s Hospital, for one, was saved by becoming an AIDS center.

Catholic hospitals have merged with secular service-providers in many parts of the country, leaving PWAs in certain regions no choice but to use Catholic affiliates for care. The catch is that these institutions are prohibited from offering abortions, dispensing condoms or providing any HIV prevention information but abstinence. “The Catholic Church provides necessary, valuable services,” says Rev. Jim Mitulski, a PWA and former Catholic who recently resigned as pastor of the gay Metropolitan Community Church of San Francisco after some 15 years. “But for gay people to access them, they have to sacrifice their self-esteem. The people who do the work are sincere, but they must answer to officials who may feel differently.” While the Catholic Church sponsors many AIDS ministries -- including one at the Archdiocese of Miami, run by the openly HIV positive Rev. Dennis Rausch -- none officially breaks with church teaching on sex.

Still, there is dissent within the church, most coming out of Dignity, the gay Catholic organization. Openly gay Rev. Bernard Lynch began an AIDS ministry for Dignity/New York in 1982. While the superiors in his Irish religious order gave his work the nod, he had to support himself financially (as a psychotherapist.) “The archdiocese of New York was openly hostile and tried to have me deported,” the Ireland-born reverend says. While he was angry at the leadership for its “extraordinarily un-Christlike approach to us,” he says, “we were able to transcend the Church and find comfort in our God.”

In Judaism, as in Christianity, stark differences divide the movements. On one end is the homophobia and sexism of the ultra-Orthodox synagogues, where AIDS is so hush-hush that those who test positive are often disowned by their families. The sister of one such man launched the Tzvi Aryeh AIDS Foundation in his name in response; Norman Sandfield, cochair of the Jewish AIDS Network of Chicago, says he admires her for “butting her head up against a brick wall of denial.” On the other end is the Reform movement, which distributed explicit HIV prevention info to its affiliates a decade ago, and which includes a wealth of gay synagogues. When doing education in Orthodox congregations, Sandfield says he can’t even mention condoms; at one Reform youth group, by contrast, he recalls casually fielding questions about anal sex. New York City’s gay Congregation Beth Simchat Torah hired its first full-time rabbi in 1992 specifically because so many congregants were dying of AIDS and needed attention.

Islam, like Catholicism, takes a strictly doctrinal approach. Rasheeda Abdul Hakeem, director of the New York City-based Islamic Wellness Institute of North America, says that most of the HIVers with whom she works are incarcerated men who converted to Islam post-diagnosis and are anxious to put behind them the sex and drug use that led to their infections. The Koran forbids not only homosexuality, but drinking and substance use. Yet for Hakeem, Islam holds a strong hint of mercy. “When people go through illness,” she says, “their sins are being forgiven.” And, she says, Islam teaches hope: “Mohammed related that Allah did not create any disease without also creating a remedy. There is a cure for AIDS -- it is a matter of finding it.” Indeed, the Nation of Islam once marketed Kemron (a form of alpha interferon widely believed to be useless) as the magic bullet, and continues to sell it as an Afrocentric alternative to the “white man’s drugs.”

Many AIDS advocates see religious institutions -- whether mosques or churches -- as critical for AIDS outreach. Pernessa Seele founded Harlem’s Balm in Gilead to increase the involvement of African-American churches in AIDS. “For PWAs in my community, there is nothing greater than knowing that you have a church praying for you and that a pastor will come to your bedside,” she says. Seele admits that she “caught hell” from churches when she started blazing these trails back in 1989, but she has seen tremendous progress: much more open discussion of AIDS, including “a healthy dialogue about sexuality,” which in turn means more services and support for PWAs. Gone, she hopes, are the days when AIDS was decimating gospel choirs in silence. Many HIVers now even go to church for help in staying on their drug regimens. Seele says she finds joy in “helping the community address the barriers that keep people in bondage.”

Not every chain has been broken, by any means. Valerie, 38, tested HIV positive five years ago. She is still so unsure of how she would be treated in her Brooklyn Baptist church were she to

disclose her status that she has remained in the closet. “I don’t think they’d understand,” she says, recalling what she was told when she found herself 18 and pregnant: “After you have the baby, you can come back to the choir.” For all this lack of welcome, it is the church she was born and raised in -- her home. She still joins the congregation about six times a year, prays at home and reads the Bible.

Having HIV, however, has broadened Valerie’s spiritual outlook considerably. She discovered Reiki, a relaxation technique that she says “helps de-stress me,” and she self-treats with acupuncture daily. Valerie says that these spiritual practices keep her going: “I’m able to clear myself and communicate with the Goddess.”

While two decades of advocacy mean that HIVers are now welcome in a broader range of congregations, AIDS -- as crisis and cause -- has retreated in significance at some. New York City AIDS activist and interfaith minister Liz Potter-Sclar says, “Religious institutions became more human during the worst years of the epidemic, but now they are drawing the curtain again.” Panels of the AIDS Quilt still hang on the wall at Congregation Beth Simchat Torah, but the bereavement group is gone. Ten years ago, religious conservatives were losing the battle to halt effective HIV prevention; today, much federal money is reserved for “abstinence only,” and the Vatican is back to its “condoms are not ethically permissible” litany.

As PWAs enjoy longer lives, many feel freer to push for change in their own tradition, or borrow from others. Some are walking away from harsh doctrines that harm their survival, heeding the words of MCC pastor Mitulski that “you shouldn’t belong to a faith that hates you.” Some, like Valerie, have found their own way, combining 12-step spirituality with the rituals of Sunday church, or Buddhist meditation with Jewish prayer. As with medical treatments, their is no one path; some PWAs take the established route, and others the road less traveled.

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