# Keeping the Faith

December 1, 1999 By Jeff Hoover

In the dim, hushed infinity that is the interior of New York City's Cathedral of St. John the Divine, a quiet bridging of the divide between religion and people with HIV has been underway for 14 years. At 1 p.m. on the fourth Saturday of each month, men and women gather for a "Eucharist of Remembrance" for loved ones no longer here. The ceremony takes place at the National AIDS Memorial, a permanent chapel along the cathedral's towering south wall.

On this late-summer day, 13 people sit facing an altar recessed into the "Medical Bay" dedicated to St. Luke. The celebrants include Deacon Brooke Bushong, a 58-year-old lesbian who founded the memorial in 1985, as well as Rev. Henry Buzzard, a priest from St. Ann's Church for the Deaf. Two sign--language specialists interpret Buzzard's remarks, which follow a standard, albeit abbreviated, Episcopal service. Our service's climax differs from the norm, however, as shortly before communion, Rev. Carl Reimers, a Presbyterian minister who is the memorial's president, reads a list of 30 names of people who died of AIDS. This simple reading is as sobering to me as the first time I saw the AIDS Quilt.

But while that memorial can be impersonal in its massiveness, we at the chapel are an intimate band, united in our commitment to carry memory forward. Each name echoes softly, overlapping the previous one in a gentle wave of sadness. After Reimers finishes, he asks congregants to add names of their own, and several do. All will be enscribed in the Book of Remembrance, a mammoth tome that occupies a permanent perch by the altar—and holds some 5,000 names.

The ceremony doesn't so much end as dwindle comfortably to a close. Buzzard stands and, with the aid of the interpreters, eloquently lays out the case for solidarity among all people under God and compassion for those with HIV. After he finishes, one woman steps forward and signs her thanks, giving a little bow. It's all I can do not to stand and bow back; Buzzard beats me to it, though.

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