Post-Gay Poster Guy

Michael Johnston assumes the missionary position

October 1, 1998 By Paul Festa

Q: Is HIV a punishment or a gift from God? A: Yes.

That's what Michael Johnston says, anyway. As the catalyst for abandoning his homosexual lifestyle in favor of fundamentalist Christianity, the virus was both.

"Having HIV is evidence of God's grace in my life," Johnston says after delivering an impassioned sermon at the Celebration Christian Church in Livermore, California. "I don't believe that God relishes the fact that I have this disease, but He can use bad things for good purposes."

The first good thing to come out of it, says the 38-year-old Johnston, is that it led him to renounce his sexual identity after 11 years of living as an openly gay man. But the transformation took some time. "I continued to live as a homosexual for two years after I knew I was HIV positive," Johnston told the Livermore congregation, and confessed: "And I am ashamed to say that in those two years not once did I ever tell any of my partners that I was carrying this deadly disease. I want you to understand that Michael Johnston is not the good guy in this story. God is."

As a preacher, Johnston woos his listeners with humor and raw emotion, exhorting them to face their sins and accept Christ's love. Churchgoers flock around Johnston after his sermon, eager to shake his hand or share a prayer. In Northern California's version of the Bible Belt, this ex-homosexual with AIDS is a sensation.

"Next to my original salvation experience when I was ten, finding out I was HIV positive was the most important moment in my life," Johnston says. "It was the point of conflict and resolution and even relief. God was bringing me to endgame."

Idle hands are the devil's playthings, so Johnston has kept busy in his post-gay decade. He founded Kerusso Ministries, dedicated to encouraging people to "let homosexuality go and let God in." He hosts and produces the antigay weekly radio show *Truth Under Fire,* heads October's annual National Coming Out of Homosexuality Day project and is a board member of the antigay groups the National Legal Foundation and Americans for Truth. And if that's not enough, Johnston is ever on call to campaign against gay rights legislation as a guest speaker for congregations and youth groups.

“I was so sick that my parents had to cart me in a van from press conference to interview,” Johnston says with a laugh. “People who saw my speech on C-SPAN said, ’You did such a great job,’ and I didn’t even remember it. God was doing it.”

Johnston does take partial credit for the full-page ads that ran this summer in *The New York Times* and *USA Today* urging people to leave their gay lives behind. “The ads were a coalition project of Christian groups,” he says of the media blitz. “Obviously, it’s a political season and maybe some groups involved did it for that reason. But our desire was to reach out into the public forum to let folks struggling with homosexuality know that there is another option.” Things were heating up the week the ads ran. He had a hundred messages on his machine. “Some are hateful and you just disregard them,” he says. "One caller just sang *The Flintstones’* theme. Maybe he thinks we’re in the Stone Age or something."

Even with his high profile, Johnston is undetectable on a three-drug cocktail, but don’t ask him what he’s taking. He doesn’t pay attention to his regimen, and admits to missing doses.

Love is something else he misses. “I do regret that I cannot have a godly wife to share my ministry with,” he says. “There are times when I long for that.” Still, Johnston does manage to keep the faith. “Sometimes, proper-looking ladies will come up to me in church and whisper, ’Are you ever going to get married?’ And I say, ’As soon as I find an ex-lesbian with AIDS, we’ll hook right up.’”

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