



Listening to Uplift

A new podcast explores what it means to be a “church with AIDS.”

August 11, 2025 By Ted Kerr

Decades before COVID-19 lockdowns inspired churches to move online, members of [Metropolitan Community Church](#) (MCC) of San Francisco delivered cassette recordings of Sunday services to homebound parishioners living with HIV.

Now, those recordings have been resurrected. The new podcast [When We All Get to Heaven](#) uses those tapes—focused on the pretreatment era—alongside interviews and archival audio to tell how MCC San Francisco, an LGBTQ congregation, fought not just to survive the AIDS crisis but to thrive.

Over 11 episodes, beginning October 5, 2025, listeners learn how clergy, laypeople and parishioners wrestled with mortality, faith and the labor of sustaining a queer church amid mass death and upheaval.

When We All Get to Heaven was created by Lynne Gerber, Siri Colom and Ariana Nedelman. Below, Gerber—who narrates the podcast—speaks with POZ about the project and what it means to be a “church with AIDS.”

How did you learn about the tapes?

I had been a longtime friend of MCC San Francisco. I was close to people who were becoming clergy, and they often invited me to attend. I’m not Christian. I’m not a lesbian. I’m not a joiner, so I never joined. But I went a lot, and one day, I was in the church office when a longtime member named Steve asked me if I knew about the cassettes that he had stored under the church floor. He had saved them from being thrown out during a church move.

When he first mentioned them, I thought there would be a few dozen tapes. Not so. There was a collection of 1,200 cassettes of church services from 1987 through 2003, each labeled with the date and a few additional details. I knew from the labels that this was a monumental collection that needed to be preserved.

What was it like to listen to the tapes for the first time?

I listened to the tapes for the first time in 2011 at MCC San Francisco, at 150 Eureka Street, which is where MCC had been through the years this podcast is exploring. I was working with a team of undergrads from Berkeley, some of whom had never used a cassette player.

Listening to the tapes was like tuning into sound that was already all around me, in that building, in the ether. As we listened, I got the overwhelming sense that this was a community collection, and the community needs the opportunity to listen.

An MCC parishioner wearing an Easter bonnet greets a baby during the service

Courtesy of Metropolitan Community Church of San Francisco

MCC San Francisco calls itself “a church with AIDS.” What does that mean?

The phrase comes from an article written by MCC pastor Jim Mitulski and then-student clergy Kittredge Cherry titled “We Are the Church Alive, the Church with AIDS.” It was published in The Christian Century magazine in 1988.

To understand the phrase, context is helpful. MCC was founded on the affirmation and acceptance of queerness, queer sexuality and marginalized genders. By the time AIDS was emerging as a crisis, the church already understood the power of stepping into stigma and not giving into the cultural pressure of shame. Calling itself a church with AIDS was another step in that process. The epidemic was set up in moral terms, with this idea that to get AIDS you had to do something pretty “un-Christian.” MCC did not fall for the setup. Instead, it did the work to be a church where people with AIDS were involved at every step for as long as they could or wanted to be.

Because of this foundation, MCC was able to do things that other churches couldn’t. For example, in the early days of AIDS, a lot of churches were fighting about maintaining the practice of the common cup, the shared vessel used during communion. They were afraid that communion would be the path to HIV transmission. Not MCC. They shaped their communion ritual around people with AIDS in different ways. They knew that people with AIDS didn’t get touched, so they integrated prayer where people held hands into the communion service. People at MCC services received

communion from people visibly sick with AIDS. And when MCC did alternatives to the common cup, it was more often to protect people with HIV vulnerable to transmission from others.

Being a queer church with AIDS also meant that no one was or is excluded from being a mourner. There is a place for friends, a same-sex partner, multiple partners and parents, a place where HIV status, religious affiliation and everything else that made up a person could be acknowledged together. That was pretty radical.

MCC is not a church that ministers to people with AIDS, which implies a certain distance or a kind of charity. It became a church with AIDS, with no separation between the two. 150 Eureka Street hosted the first San Francisco ACT UP meetings, buyers club activity and the distribution of medical marijuana in the church's building by the church's clergy. Editor's note: Buyers clubs were groups formed to provide access to HIV therapies that had yet to be approved by the Food and Drug Administration.

Can you give us insight into the crafting of *When We All Get to Heaven*?

The three of us spent years listening to tapes. We did not listen to all 1,200 cassettes, but we did digitize a core collection of 325 from which we made our selections. We had to make a lot of hard decisions. It was important to us that the podcast be about a church as a whole. In writing, we imagined a choir, where sometimes you hear a mélange of voices, sometimes you have a soloist and the choir responds or sometimes you have a duet or a quartet for a piece.

The challenge then became how do you make episodes? Sayre Quevedo, our story editor, helped us shape moments of tape and characters we knew we were interested in into arcs.

What has been the reaction from MCC?

It matters to MCC members that these stories are being preserved and told. The difference between memory as they remember it and history as it actually unfolded is wild for folks.

I was talking to somebody the other day about protease inhibitors, which in the Bay Area became available in 1995. In 1998, the *Bay Area Reporter*, which was the largest gay paper in San Francisco, had a headline: "NO OBITUARIES." The medications changed the tenor of the epidemic so much that there was, for at least one issue, not one AIDS-related death in the paper. Many people remember that headline coming out. But the guy I was talking to remembered the headline being the same year as the drugs were released, not three years later. I think this engagement

with one's own personal timeline of what happened has been both challenging and moving for people.

What does it mean for you to release the podcast right now?

At the beginning, we had a vision that we are living in a world that is going through crises that have no end. We were thinking mostly of climate change, racial injustice and economic inequality.

Then COVID happened. One of the first things that surprised me was the level of contempt those in power had for people. I had naively thought that the contempt we saw in early AIDS was about the kinds of people who got it and that after AIDS we would not see that again. Now the contempt is so explicit, and it extends to everyone.

Listening to the tapes and what we have done with them speaks loudly to things that happened and that are happening now. When it comes to AIDS, especially in the pretreatment years, the story seems simple: It was bad, then people with AIDS acted up and then there was treatment. In reality, though, it was week after week of death, outrage, insult, physical pain and suffering with no clear relief in sight.

MCC offers a model of how to gather, engage and be together when things are really bad and you don't know what's going to happen. When We All Get to Heaven has become a much more specific project than I thought it would be, and it feels like a good time to put it out in the world.