



R.I.P. Stephen Pieters, a Gay Minister With AIDS Interviewed by Tammy Faye Bakker

His groundbreaking 1985 appearance on the evangelical TV show put a face to AIDS. The event was re-created in a 2021 Oscar-winning film.

July 18, 2023 By [Trent Straube](#)

The Reverend Stephen Pieters, the openly gay minister with [AIDS](#) who made national headlines in 1985 when he appeared on Tammy Faye Bakker's evangelical TV show, died July 8, 2023, in Los Angeles. He was 70. He had been hospitalized with an infection two weeks earlier, [according to The Hollywood Reporter](#).

Bakker interviewed Pieters via satellite during her popular Tammy's House Party, which reached more than 13 million viewers at its peak, [reports The Washington Post](#). (He never personally met the evangelical icon, who died in 2007.) The segment marked a groundbreaking moment in the early years of the [HIV](#) epidemic, putting a face to a disease—and to homosexuality—that most Americans, especially conservative Christians, feared and misunderstood.

"It really rocked the conservative Christian community and kind of rocked the gay and lesbian community as well," Pieters said.

The interview was re-created in the 2021 film "The Eyes of Tammy Faye."The Eyes of Tammy Faye

The 25-minute interview, which you can [view on YouTube](#), was re-created in the 2021 film The Eyes of Tammy Faye. Jessica Chastain won the Academy Award for Best Actress for portraying the televangelist in the movie.

On the red carpet at the film's premiere, Pieters met Chastain, who, he said, seemed starstruck in his presence. "She spotted me and looked so surprised and delighted," he recalled to POZ blogger Mark S. King. "She came over and pulled me into a tight hug that must have lasted for 20 seconds. All the time she was telling me, 'You're amazing. You're extraordinary.' I was stunned, and she told me a couple of times, 'You and Tammy saved so many lives.'"

Actress Jessica Chastain and Stephen Pieters in 2021

“I was a pastor [in 1985 with the LGBTQ-affirming] Metropolitan Community Church [MCC],” [Pieters told POZ in a separate interview](#) that coincided with the film. “I had been speaking about living with AIDS for two years or more. I made sure the interview went out live so they couldn’t edit it. It was a kick.”

Initially, Pieters recounted, he didn’t notice much of a response to the interview. “It wasn’t until 1987, when the Reverend Troy Perry played the interview at a general conference for MCC and 1,000 people stood up and cheered, that I got much of a response,” he said. “I was so shocked. After that, I traveled for 12 years all over the world, and they always wanted me to show that interview at church events. Everyone wanted to see it.”

In 1984, Pieters had developed Kaposi sarcoma skin lesions, which at the time were commonly associated with AIDS. There were no effective treatments at the time, and Pieters was expected to die within a year. In 1985, he was “patient No. 1” in a medical study for the antiviral suramin, which turned out to be too toxic, reports the Washington Post. But his condition stabilized, and he was able to join the Gay Men’s Chorus of Los Angeles and continue his ministerial work. In 1993, he attended the first AIDS Prayer Breakfast at the White House, hosted by President Bill Clinton.

Last year, the musical Tammy Faye opened in London, with music by Elton John. The production highlights the interview between Bakker and Pieters.

Steve Pieters

Courtesy of Steve Pieters

When asked during the POZ interview whether he had any misgivings about the 2021 film revisiting his moment in history, Pieters responded: “There is a little bit of fear in me that this is what’s going to be the lead in my obituary. This interview and now this film is what I’m going to be remembered for, not that I survived AIDS or was a director of AIDS ministries but that I was that gay pastor with AIDS who did that interview. Which is OK, I could be remembered for a lot worse.”

