

Churches opening to realities of AIDS

EDITOR'S NOTE: For people with AIDS, faith is no less important than medicine. And yet for years, religious institutions turned away from the sick and from their loved ones. In the first of a three-part series, "AIDS — A Test of Faith," AIDS advocates say the churches have come a long way.

HOUSTON (AP) — A giant cross hovers over the front lawn of the sprawling First Baptist Church complex — the bowling alley, the restaurants, the sanctuaries nestled amid hundreds of yards of red carpet.

This is an ultra-ultra-ultra conservative church, "and you can add another ultra to that," says the Rev. Bill Heston.

But when a popular choir member named Troy came down with AIDS, even the "old coots" had to think twice. Today, First Baptist and its nearly 20,000 members offer six AIDS care teams, helping people with the disease.

"When AIDS took on a face at First Baptist, then it could no longer be avoided," Heston said. "It became a person that we care about, that we loved, and AIDS is secondary."

Slowly, over the last couple of years — as worshipers find the courage to reveal their struggles with the great disease of our age — a new awareness is growing in the churches, AIDS advocates say.

In the early years of AIDS, many of these same churches had succumbed to apathy, or fear, or disgust, and had turned their backs to the disease and its sufferers. The doctrine of unconditional love did not seem to apply to the homosexuals and drug abusers who were most often infected.

But now, some 1,800 churches have AIDS relief and education programs, making the religious community the second largest provider of services to people with AIDS outside of the government, according to the National AIDS Interfaith Net-

work in Washington, D.C. And as Easter 1993 approaches, some observe remarkable parallels in the religious response to AIDS in the United States with events 2,000 years ago.

"That's exactly the story of Jesus Christ — suffering, misjudged, dying young and coming back from the dead," said the Rev. David Jaeger, coordinator of AIDS ministry for the Catholic Archdiocese of Seattle.

No one is saying the process of acceptance has been easy, or complete.

"I don't care if it's a liberal congregation or a conservative congregation. People aren't solely religious," said ethicist Earl Shelp. "If they only had on their religious hat, they would look at this one way."

The Rev. Scott Allen, the son of former Southern Baptist Convention President Jimmie Allen, was an idealistic young minister at the First Christian Church in Colorado Springs, Colo., when he learned his wife and two children had been infected via a blood

transfusion at her first pregnancy. Devastated, Allen went to his pastor for support and was asked for his resignation. Back in their hometown in Dallas, Allen says six churches turned the family away before he finally turned his back on the church.

"What I had seen is the churches reflect society more than the Gospel," he said. "I just had to walk away."

And many people with AIDS, and their families, still suffer in silence.

"My son lived and died with AIDS and I didn't feel I could tell my church," one congregant told the Rev. Howard Warren, a member of the advisory board of the Presbyterian AIDS Network, when he visited a church in Graydon, Ind. He hears the same plaint each time he visits a church in the Midwest.

Warren, who himself waited two years

before disclosing he had the virus, said the fear extends throughout the church.

"Even people in our system are afraid that if it is found out in our system or in our church, they would just be anathema," Warren said. "The silence of the church is devastating."

But slowly the barriers of fear and prejudice are breaking down as people with AIDS and their loved ones come forward.

"It's touching us where we live," said the Rev. Winton Hill, pastor of Bethel African Methodist Episcopal Church in an inner-city neighborhood in Stamford, Conn. "It's now our brothers, our sisters, our mothers, our fathers, our daughters, our sons."

And churches are beginning to respond. At the Church of the Intercession in Harlem, Canon Frederick Mitchell invited 45 close colleagues to a professional meeting on AIDS eight years ago; 11 showed up. Today, all of the heads of black denominations endorsed the National Black Church Day of Healing Prayer for People with AIDS March 17.

And the Rev. Molly McGreevy of St. Luke in the Fields Episcopal Church in New York is no longer "jokingly referred to as the funeral queen of Greenwich Village" — churches that had refused to bury people with AIDS are now relenting.

In Houston, religious communities of every denomination have become among the most active in dealing with AIDS.

Under the coordination of the Foundation for Interfaith Research and Ministry, more than 65 churches have established care teams that have helped 1,100 men, women and children with the virus.

The Rev. Ray Highfield of Christian Tabernacle Church sold his house and moved into an apartment above a garage next to a residence for homeless people with AIDS started by the Pentecostal church.

"We feel this is where Christ would be involved," the stocky Highfield says as he takes a break from sawing to finish a back room. "It's hard not to have pride (he raps one hand on wood) to look out and see two pews of HIV people."

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— Rev. Winton Hill, pastor of Bethel Church

Watchdogs scold NPR for content

NEW YORK (AP) — National Public Radio, long a target of conservative criticism, is being scolded by a liberal media watchdog group for being too white, too male and too cozy with Washington insiders.

In a report being issued Monday, Fairness and Accuracy in Reporting, said an analysis of four months of NPR programming found that:

- Only 21 percent of NPR's news sources were women.
- All but one of the 27 regular commentators were white and 23 were men.
- Twenty-eight percent of domestic stories were reported from Washington, and 59 percent from the Northeast region.

The study also criticized NPR's international coverage for being overly dominated by European news.

A spokeswoman for NPR, Mary Morgan, said the watchdog group's statistics appeared to be accurate, and she conceded some shortcomings at the public radio network. But in general, she defended the programming and said the group's interpretations of the statistics reflected its own liberal bias.

"You know, we get hit on all sides about this stuff," she said. "FAIR thinks we're too right-wing and the people on the right think we're too much to the left."

NPR, which is funded largely by corporate donations and its own member stations, serves 468 stations with news programs. The report was based on an analysis of 2,296 stories heard.

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