

Religion offers comfort and warmth to AIDS victims

EDITOR'S NOTE: People with AIDS are making their way to the nation's houses of worship, changing the churches and feeding their own faith. In this, the second of a three-part series "AIDS-A Test of Faith," they tell their stories.

Jane could hold her secret no longer. She told the people in her Bible study class in a Southern Baptist Church in Missouri that she had AIDS. One by one they approached, hugging and comforting her.

The next week, a woman was getting into the pew next to Jane when her husband stopped her. When the woman persisted, her husband said in a voice loud enough to be heard around the church: "That woman has AIDS."

The family marched to the other side of the sanctuary. Her confidence and faith shaken, Jane turned to her pastor. He advised her to find another church.

As soon as she was able, Jane told the pastor at her new church that she has AIDS: "His reaction was to put his arms around me and hug me and cry with me. And I knew then I had found my church home."

That Jane encountered discrimination at her first church is no surprise - most people with AIDS have become accustomed to slights and snubs and outright rejection from those who fear their disease.

What is worth noting is that Jane and others with AIDS are persisting in finding spiritual homes.

They are drawn by the same powerful human need to find meaning in human tragedy that has historically brought the terminally ill to the doors of churches, mosques and synagogues. That need is overpowering the fears and prejudices

they might encounter there.

Like the lepers of biblical times, with whom they are often compared, AIDS victims seeking solace in faith have created small moments of truth in congregations, defining the religious response to AIDS for the next generation.

"Some day, in some cosmic context, we will be judged by how we have handled or not handled this," said Rabbi Joseph Edelheit of Minneapolis.

Cynthia is a young mother with two small children (both she and Jane spoke on the condition that their real names not be used). She remembers how hard it was to confide in her Southern Baptist pastor that she had AIDS, but she could no longer handle the illness alone.

"I was about to explode. I fully expected to get kicked out," she said.

Instead her pastor prayed with her, and vowed to do something in the church. Within three months, the small Southern Baptist Church held an AIDS education seminar: 50 people were expected, 150 showed up.

"There is nothing heroic about this. This is human. This is real. I need someone who will be there with me," she said.

Yet not all reactions have been positive for Cynthia; one person at the AIDS seminar said he thought everyone with the HIV virus should wear armbands. She has to go to a larger church 30 miles away to meet members of her AIDS care team.

But Cynthia, 26, no longer feels she has to face the disease alone.

"I've seen the response of my Christian friends at church, and it's been love," she said.

Byron Remie, a slight, physically demonstrative 29-year-old black man with AIDS, and Dora Gough, a gray-haired 66-year-old white woman who is a portrait of Southern Baptist propriety, hug each other fiercely within walls of the First Baptist Church of Houston.

Each bears the scars of societal attitudes toward AIDS, but the two have found comfort in each other's arms in this flagship church of Southern Baptist conservatism.

Remie told his mother of his illness, but she has not even told his sister or stepfather, much less confided in the church in their own small town that "my baby" has AIDS.

Here at First Baptist, where Remie is not a member, an AIDS care team does everything from cleaning the dead reaches out of his apartment to being available to talk at any time of the day or night. With tears in his eyes, Remie looks at Gough, who is "like my second mom."

Gough's first experience with AIDS came when her son called her up to tell her a friend had died of the disease.

"Mama, Kenny died alone. Mama, if I get HIV, will I have to die alone?" her son asked her. "I said, 'No way.'"

When she let the church know that her son had AIDS, she received no response. "When Tom came home October 4 until Tom died January 30, not one of my friends would come over to my house."

Before he died four years ago, her son made one more request that she has not forgotten.

"He told me before he passed away, 'Mother, don't forget my friends,'" said Gough, who struggles with tears at every mention of her son. "For about two-and-a-half years, I took care of 15 of his friends."

Many of the people she cared for were disowned by their families. She tells of one young man who told her the day his good friend died, "I'm so glad you're here. It's like having my mama with me."

Now that she is able to speak about her involvement within her church, the tall, thin woman cries freely and she says: "I feel I am where God wants me."

"Mom, I have AIDS and I want to die," was the simple, harsh way Katherine McCracken's son told her of his illness.

Her oldest sister doesn't want McCracken's son in her home, and the Baptist churches that used to be her spiritual home offered no programs to help her. But the Christian Tabernacle Church in Houston provided both mother and son with friends and support groups.

"It's hard enough to lose a child, but to watch him deteriorate every day. ... If I didn't have the church and the people, I don't think I could take it," she said in a break from working in the kitchen of Benji's House, a church-operated residence for homeless people with AIDS. "I know that if Jesus was here today, he would not turn his back on these people. I know that."

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— Rabbi Joseph Edelheit

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