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# Christians face difficult AIDS questions

**EDITOR'S NOTE:** William Thackeray wrote that dying for a faith isn't so hard — it is living up to it that's difficult. This last of a three-part series, "AIDS — A Test of Faith," looks at the special dilemmas of the faithful in the Age of AIDS.

(AP) — The rule is love the sinner, hate the sin. But if the sinner has AIDS — and the sin is homosexuality or sex outside of marriage — can compassion be reconciled with religious doctrine?

If you believe God condemns homosexual behavior, how do you spread that moral teaching without casting aspersions on people who contracted AIDS through gay sex? Are more lives saved by providing information about condom use, or by promoting abstinence?

For some, the answers are clear. AIDS activists disrupt Masses and destroy sacred hosts as they demand religious groups give unqualified acceptance of homosexuality. Fundamentalist preachers fill the airwaves with the message that AIDS is God's punishment to homosexuals and drug users.

Amid these extremes, the faithful seek solutions that are both compassionate and true to their beliefs.

"This is a response of God's people to people being sick. That, to me, has always been the bottom line," says Ronald H. Sunderland of the Foundation for Interfaith Research and Ministry in Houston. "If you force (other) issues together, you're going to confront over and over again problems we don't need to face, and the people who are going to suffer are people with AIDS."

Sometimes, the gap between principle and practice can seem almost humorous.

Praise came from all over Houston when the Christian Tabernacle Church established a residence for homeless people with AIDS — with one exception.

Other United Pentecostal ministers wanted to know if it was true church members were looking the other way on the church's holiness code by taking people with AIDS to the movies.

"It didn't matter that we ministered to them, that we held their hands when they died. It was, 'You take them to the movies.' God have mercy," laughs the Rev. Ray Highfield.

But when the issue is condoms, there is no laughter. Judy Hunter, who was a consultant for the Catholic AIDS education curriculum, discusses condoms and homosexuality when she gives AIDS education seminars in dioceses around the country because "these are the facts about HIV-AIDS."

But she teaches that "there is no such thing as safe sex" and draws on her experience leading a support group where one spouse infected another despite the precaution of careful condom use.

Debra Fraser-Howze of the Black Leadership Commission on AIDS approaches black churches with what she calls her "however theory."

"Abstinence is the only sure way not to get AIDS. We need to start every sentence with that because that's honest," Fraser-Howze says.

But it is also true that condoms provide some protection, she says. So she offers pastors an alternative.

"Maybe you can't get up and

**'Loving people is much more important than judging them; much more important.'**

— Rev. Molly McGreevy

say it, but there's no law you can't let me in the basement and have me say it," she says.

Compromises that are possible on condom use seem more elusive when the issue is homosexuality.

Presbyterian ACT-UP is planning acts of civil disobedience to challenge the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)'s stand on homosexuality at its annual meeting in Orlando in June, says the Rev. Howard Warren, the group's co-moderator.

"We must not de-gay the disease," he says.

The Rev. Ken South, executive director of the AIDS National Interfaith Network in Washington, agrees homosexuality and AIDS cannot be separated.

"AIDS is about healing. How in the world can you help someone heal when you don't even start by acknowledging the core of who they are?" he asks.

But others say it is wrong to ask that Christian and Jewish groups give up biblically based beliefs that homosexuality is a sin just because homosexuals are afflicted.

"Are homosexuals to be excluded from the community of faith? Certainly not. But anyone who joins such a community should know that it is a place of

transformation ... and not merely a place to be comforted or indulged," wrote Gary, a homosexual Christian who died of AIDS, in his final letter to Duke Divinity School Professor Richard Hays.

Earl Shelp helps run a successful interfaith AIDS program in Houston, in which Southern Baptist, Catholic and Pentecostal churches have been among the religious groups caring for more than 1,000 people with AIDS.

"It's exploitive for gay people to use AIDS to advance their own agenda," Shelp says. "It doesn't have to be swept under the ecclesiastical door on the backs of people with AIDS."

The Rev. Rodney DeMartini, executive director of the San Francisco-based National Catholic AIDS Network, says he can understand the frustration of AIDS activists, but he says they also need to recognize there is hardly a Catholic Charities agency in the country that does not have an AIDS ministry. And many of the larger dioceses have full-time AIDS programs.

When St. Luke in the Fields Episcopal Church in New York first began offering a weekly dinner for people with AIDS in 1988, "we began with all these nice, middle-class, gay white men. We are now 75 percent black or Hispanic. I'm sure some of them are gay, but many of them are drug users," says the Rev. Molly McGreevy.

"The first thing, and ultimately in the end the most important thing, is always that one-on-one relationship with another human being," she says. "Loving people, in the end, is much more important than judging them; much more important."

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