

HIV in Britain 1982—1990 : the Christian Reaction

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‘ ‘I’d shoot my son if he had AIDS’’, says Vicar’, was a tabloid headline only four years ago. Thankfully, most Christians have moved on from that type of reaction. Nevertheless, the variety of Christian responses covers a wide spectrum of opinion and practice. In this respect Christians are no different from many other people in society. The Churches reflect and consolidate the values and mores of the society of which they are a part. The overall challenge for Christians facing HIV/AIDS, as well as many other contemporary issues, is how to be prophetic. This means not simply falling into a reactionary mould, but analysing what is happening in the pandemic of HIV, reflecting upon this reality and after much listening to people’s needs, discerning whether the Churches have anything valuable to say.

It is important to distinguish institutional Christian responses, reflected in official statements, and the action on the ground by Christians of all denominations. In some responses there is convergence of view, in others informed dissent from ‘official’ lines. It is also important to note the context within which the debates about pastoral responses to AIDS/HIV take place, for these touch on other lively issues such as the right to life, understanding drug use, sexuality in general and homosexuality in particular. If society at large shows discomfort in dealing with these and some of the other major issues which AIDS raises, such as death and dying or the politics of health care, then it is hardly surprising that the Churches have been faltering in their first steps to respond.

In Britain, as in so many other parts of the northern hemisphere, initial responses to the challenge of HIV were mainly developed by gay men. The Terrence Higgins Trust, named after the first known person to die of an HIV-related illness in the UK, was formed in 1982 by a small group of his friends who simply wanted to know more about this strange new illness. They wanted to be able to respond in a more effective way in future, and to learn particularly from the American experience in terms of education for prevention, and care-giving. Modelling itself to some extent on the New York Gay Men’s Health Crisis Centre, THT quickly grew as the major voluntary sector organisation dealing with HIV in the UK. Its leaflets on HIV for gay men, women, and drug users were the first really accurate information many received, pre-dating Government

campaigns by years. It developed a 'buddy' system by which people with HIV/AIDS could obtain close personal support. A structure of sub-groups within the Trust provided opportunities for volunteers to offer their skills at a number of levels, from sticking stamps to telephone counselling.

Christian reactions and responses to the HIV challenge in the UK have reflected the secular experience. Generally speaking, the first responses were from men and women involved in a variety of lesbian and gay Christian organisations. People became involved in, for example, local telephone helplines and AIDS support groups. Others were drawn into the work of the THT either as buddies or through the Trust's own Inter-Faith Group.

It was not until 1986 that specific institutional Church responses began to emerge. Church hierarchies had been forced to respond, primarily reacting to the early governmental advertising campaigns in 1986—7. The embarrassed silence which greeted the death of Greg Richards, an Anglican priest, in 1985, was in marked contrast to the appalling tabloid headlines at the time. Church leaders were as paralysed by fear as were the majority of the population. For some, the fear was not only of AIDS *per se*, but also fear of facing the issues raised by the widespread homophobia within Christian institutions. For others, regardless of denomination, it was a fear that their inclinations towards more liberal pastoral practices and attitudes in matters of sexuality might bring them into conflict with higher authorities.

The growing force of the 'New Right' and the move towards a British equivalent of the 'moral majority' led to remarkable unanimity amongst Church leaders in their statements on AIDS and HIV prevention. One by one they rejected any suggestion that AIDS was God's punishment, but ...! Here was the crucial point of their dilemma. The safer sex messages and the promotion of condoms in Government advertising were seen by many as promoting promiscuity rather than preventing further infection. It would be true to say that the reactive tone in many Church statements made it clear that little homework had been done on the subject. The subtlety of the issues and the problems of language were more than pedantic or linguistic niceties. Statements by individual Church leaders tended to increase the sense of alienation not only of people with AIDS but also of those working with them.

It soon became apparent that different denominations needed not only statements from individuals within their ranks, but also corporate expressions of attitude to this new and far-reaching health crisis. The Church of England, the Roman Catholic Church, the Methodist Church and the Baptist Church, as well as the British Council of Churches, all produced statements or working documents in varying degrees of detail. The general tendency was to shy away from controversies around homosexuality, making renewed calls for changes in behaviour and a return to sexual expression only within marriage. All emphasised the

need for compassion and the challenge to care for those affected by HIV or AIDS.

While the calls to compassion and care might have been new to the majority of church congregations in 1987–8, other Christians had been quietly working away, supporting people with AIDS at all levels. Early in 1986 the Lesbian and Gay Christian Movement (LGCM) held a workshop on Christian responses to AIDS at its annual conference. Preceding this a small group of people had formed the AIDS Faith Alliance (AFA). The group consisted of members of the Metropolitan Community Church exercising a particular ministry among lesbian and gay people, Quest, a gay Catholic organisation, as well as members of LGCM. The AFA's purpose was

to foster a truly loving religious response to the problem of AIDS. Keeping religious bodies informed about AIDS, it aims to draw from them the positive support that those suffering from AIDS have a right to demand.

The AFA published a leaflet in conjunction with the THT, 'Is AIDS God's wrath?' combatting often-expressed fundamentalist views.

In July 1986 the AFA sponsored a national conference whose aims were

to encourage churches both local and national to convene conferences and establish a network of support on the spiritual, medical, discriminatory and educational issues of AIDS; to ensure that these become the concern of every church member, and to establish the AIDS Faith Alliance as a national religious support group on AIDS.

The main outcome of the conference was the development of Christian Action on AIDS (CAA). This organisation provided an ecumenical focus for many church people but tended to be dominated by Anglican concerns. The original desire of the AFA to include people of all faiths never materialised. Thus CAA provided a particular Christian focus with some limited ecumenical cooperation. Conscious of its membership as being predominantly gay, CAA sought to broaden its constituency. A representative of the Haemophilia Society had been a member of CAA's Council since early days. It became known that a well financed group of evangelical Christians were exploring means by which they could support AIDS initiatives both in the UK and overseas. CAA was seen as a possible vehicle for this cooperative development. This hoped-for allegiance came to nought and eventually a new organisation, AIDS Care and Education Trust (ACET) was launched. This was headed by Dr. Patrick Dixon, a well known evangelical doctor who had specialised in terminal care. ACET provides a range of home care and practical support for people with AIDS.

The involvement of the Free Churches was established early on in a commitment to care for people with AIDS. Martin Hazel, a United Reformed Church minister, had been closely involved in the work of the

Terrence Higgins Trust and particularly the Inter-Faith Group. He eventually took on a national brief in this regard for the United Reformed Church.

Another group to involve itself, surprisingly to some, has been the Salvation Army. Always quick to respond to any need, the Army has extended work for people with AIDS at local and international levels. In South-West London it has established a drop-in centre for anyone affected by HIV/AIDS. In parts of Africa it has close links with other evangelically-based organisations providing community and hospital care. The Army has had to face similar dilemmas to other evangelical groups in terms of traditional attitudes to the Bible and sexuality. Salvationists have particularly strong disciplinary rules relating to homosexuality which can result in dismissal from the Salvation Army ranks. Nevertheless it seeks to serve the needs of people with AIDS regardless of the means of HIV transmission. 'Salvationists provide care without moralising about preceding habits, though they may try to produce a change in life style', says its booklet on AIDS care.

Probably the best known of evangelical initiatives in the AIDS field has been the Mildmay Hospice. Originally founded as a cholera hospital in a poor district of east London, the Mildmay Hospital lurched into crisis in the early 1980s and through this found a new lease of life, facing a new health care challenge: AIDS. As with other evangelical initiatives, the Mildmay project has not been without controversy. Due to the prominence on its Board of Trustees of well known fundamentalist Christians, the gay community greeted the Mildmay proposals with grave suspicion. There was a fear that gay men, in situations of physical and emotional vulnerability, might be subjected to underhand conversion techniques. While these fears persist in some quarters, most activists in HIV/AIDS organisations consider the Mildmay an exemplary centre, offering support at a number of levels: in residential and home care, in counselling, training and pastoral support. It is now planning a family unit specifically catering for parents and children who may be affected by HIV illness. The staff of the Mildmay have been carefully chosen for the AIDS project and have engaged in continuing dialogue with sections of the gay community and HIV/AIDS organisations throughout the planning and introduction of facilities. The staff are not solely Protestant and there is an ecumenical chaplaincy team including Anglicans and Catholics, led by a Baptist pastor. They are clear that their motivation springs from a Christian commitment to compassionate service; nevertheless, religious or spiritual support will be provided only when specifically requested. In this regard the Mildmay attempts to be sensitive not only to different Christian sensibilities, but also those of multi-faith and multi-cultural Britain in the 1990s.

The significance of evangelically-based groups offering support to people with HIV/AIDS is that they provide a focus for a large number of Christians who would feel uneasy supporting some of the secular AIDS

agencies. This is not simply to allow individuals a soft option of giving financially without questioning attitudes of prejudice. For many donors and supporters, the experience has meant taking first steps to reassessing strongly held beliefs and understanding their attitudes to homosexuality in particular.

Lest it be thought that evangelical Christians have a monopoly in this area, two Anglo-Catholic priests in the Church of England, Bill Kirkpatrick and David Randall, have been prominent in developing pastoral support for PWAs. Significantly, their ministries have taken them away from traditional parochial structures. Bill Kirkpatrick has long held a 'reaching out' ministry on the streets of London, whether to the homeless young in Soho, or the gay community in Earls Court. His own experience of visiting central London hospitals and finding his 'street parishioners' with a severely debilitating illness was the foundation of his ministry to PWAs. Based at St. Cuthbert's Church in Earls Court, he has held regular healing and memorial services and played a significant part in opening up church premises to provide a drop-in base for Body Positive, a support organisation for people with HIV. Even this secular organisation is not without its religious links, in that its Director is Brother Colin Wilfred, an Anglican Franciscan priest.

While Bill Kirkpatrick's ministry has led him from a floating ministry to an honorary curacy attached to a parish church, David Randall has travelled another road. David resigned as Vicar of a church in London's Notting Hill as he too became more and more involved in ministry with PWAs. He spent a period working in San Francisco and on his return launched CARA (Care and Resources for People Affected by AIDS) which provides spiritual and pastoral support to PWAs and their carers. CARA also runs regular training programmes for clergy and others of all denominations desiring to work in AIDS ministry. The vociferous debates in the Church of England in recent years about homosexuality have not made such ministries easy; hierarchical support has at best been 'quiet', with some very isolated exceptions in people like the Bishops of Edinburgh and Oxford and one or two assistant bishops in London.

The debates and conflicts which have affected evangelicals and Anglo-Catholics have also touched Roman Catholics in England and Wales. Good ground work for future pastoral support had been laid in 1979 with the publication of a sensible and open set of guidelines on the pastoral care of homosexual people, produced by the Bishops' Social Welfare Commission. These guidelines were welcomed as a moderate achievement by many but viewed with some concern by other Catholic hierarchies and critically challenged in the famous letter of Cardinal Ratzinger on homosexuality, published in October 1986. To their credit, the Bishops of England and Wales have not sought to withdraw or replace them, even though the matter has come up for debate within Bishops' Conference meetings. The English and Welsh Bishops have

been conscious of the difficulties their confrères in other parts of the Catholic world have had with Vatican bodies and sought to maintain a cautious party line.

Halloween 1986 marked the first time that the Roman Catholic Church in England and Wales officially recognised that AIDS was an important pastoral issue for all levels of its membership. The Dominican-sponsored conference, 'The Catholic Church and AIDS', held at Spode House, drew support from the Bishops' Conference and the Terrence Higgins Trust. Over 100 Catholics attended, many of them involved professionally or voluntarily in AIDS work for two or three years; thus a valuable body of experience was identified, including the irreplaceable experience of people with HIV/AIDS themselves. A working party provided a report to the Bishops calling for a number of steps to be taken towards coordinating and facilitating the Church's pastoral response to HIV/AIDS. In 1987 an Inter-Diocesan AIDS Consultation repeated the call for a national coordinator to be appointed, then suggesting that a national 'reference point' be established. The General Secretariat of the Bishops' Conference was to have reported to the Bishops' Standing Committee in January 1988 on the feasibility of such a project.

As in other Churches, it was not to be the hierarchy that would give the lead in responding to AIDS. It was clear that there had been divisions of opinion amongst the Bishops, and these may still exist. Some simply do not see AIDS as an issue; others' ministry is touched regularly by the lives and needs of people with AIDS and a few have been remarkable in their support at a variety of levels. Many Catholics working in the AIDS field felt distanced from the tone of official statements emanating from the Catholic Bishops's Conference. They also felt frustrated that at least two seriously considered requests for action and initiative had come to nought. A consciousness began to dawn that maybe such leadership could not nor should be expected from the hierarchy.

The frustration that nothing appeared to have happened at an official level led to the founding in November 1988 of Catholic AIDS Link. CAL describes itself as a 'Catholic group offering non-judgmental, spiritual, emotional, practical and financial support to those affected by HIV/AIDS.' The three 'founders' came together in the summer of 1988 and resolved to try and bring about a partnership in which all could support each other. They believed that it was a desperately challenging time for the Church and, through their own experience, they had come to believe that the Holy Spirit was active in a very special way in their lives as they encountered those who were affected by HIV/AIDS. By contacting those who had attended the 1986 Spode House Conference, various Diocesan Coordinators and other interested people, they brought together representatives from 16 out of the 22 Dioceses of England and Wales for a consultation in November 1988. At that meeting members of Religious communities, priests and lay people, in assessing the Church's response to the HIV/AIDS crisis,

called upon their fellow Catholics to wake up to the urgency of the situation.

The new organisation's patrons included Bishop Victor Guazzelli, the Duchess of Norfolk and Lord Tordoff, as well as medical and pastoral care experts. The first major event was a public Mass for World AIDS Day, 1st December 1988, which was celebrated by Bishop John Crowley at the French Church in Leicester Square. The following month, January 1989, CAL had a one-day meeting of a group for theological and spiritual reflection on HIV/AIDS. This was a concrete example of the networking that CAL believes to be so important. Other events followed, e.g. a day on the topic 'Care for Carers'. The first Mass of Anointing that CAL organised for those affected with HIV/AIDS was in April 1989. It was held at St. Aloysius Church, Euston, and the chief celebrant was Bishop Guazzelli.

'Compassion and Justice' was the topic of the editorial of CAL's second Newsletter. CAL's Newsletter is now circulated to over 400 addresses—individuals, hospitals, seminaries, agencies, the media and a growing overseas list. CAL continues to do everything it can to promote networking. It has produced a list of hospices and medical care centres nationwide open to people with HIV/AIDS. In April this year it launched its own network directory, listing individuals with proven skills throughout the country, to enable these more easily to network with each other. As part of its global networking, CAL sent three representatives to the November 1989 Vatican AIDS Conference. At that Conference CAL played a leading role in establishing the 'International Christian AIDS Network'.

By the summer of 1989 CAL had a central co-ordinating team of seven people, bringing together much varied expertise. One example of CAL looking outward was the Vigil and Liturgy that it organised for World AIDS Day, 1st December 1989. Hosted at Southwark Cathedral by Archbishop Bowen and visited by the Minister of Health, it was an amazing evening, with Catholic and Anglican Eucharists, visual displays by many of the different Christian groups involved in working alongside those with HIV/AIDS, the laying-on of hands, the Rosary and silent prayer—all culminating in a Liturgy of Light and Dedication.

Since it began, CAL has also been involved in helping people affected with HIV/AIDS in many practical and financial ways. CAL frequently gives emergency grants to individuals who are unable to get help elsewhere. It may be for an urgent bill, an urgent visit, a gas cooker or to help with funeral expenses. Such grants are available to anyone affected with HIV/AIDS, regardless of religious affiliation or anything else. Usually such requests come through an existing agency or field worker. Among this year's new CAL initiatives are training courses. But there is still much to be done—much listening, much hearing and much loving.

The Christian reactions and responses to AIDS in Britain clearly

range from an assistentialist, 'compassionate care' approach to positions which would draw from the insights of liberation theology particularly in the realms of sexuality. Some responses clearly express official denominational pastoral lines, others would dissent in varying degrees from official teaching statements on sexuality. Given that the majority of those affected by HIV/AIDS in the UK are still gay or bisexual men, the redefinition of attitudes to these experiences of human sexuality is bound to maintain a high profile. As HIV becomes more of an issue in the heterosexual population, Christian reactions will not be able to remain bound to a preoccupation with past statements. If HIV is predominantly a sexually transmitted infection in the northern hemisphere, then the Churches in their enunciation of pastoral responses must take this on board, with all the complex problems of permanency of relationship, fertility of sexual union, meaning of sexual relationships. It may well be that out of the seeming despair of HIV or AIDS a new vision of human sexuality might develop, not of the kind voiced by Mgr. Carlo Caffara, the Vatican theologian, whose so-called vision is 'chastity or death', but a new and prophetic vision of life-giving sexuality, one enabled to break through biological binding cloths.

Through the eye of a needle

Simon Robson OP

We go on and on learning about AIDS. I first became aware of AIDS when I started reading the early press reports some ten years ago. Eventually I knew of people who were ill because of AIDS, I knew that lovers of friends of mine were ill, and in due course they died. I remember the very first time I saw the skin cancer Kaposi Sarcoma: it was on the hand of a friend whom I was visiting in Amsterdam. I remember helping in 1987 to light over a thousand votive lights in the Dominican Priory Church at Oxford at an all-night vigil, to represent the current number of people in the United Kingdom known to be HIV Positive, and, of course, those candles also represented those who had died. My experience also included explaining how HIV infection is transmitted (and how it is not), talking about 'safer sex', and giving advice about the HIV test.