

Affirming, Affirming  
December 3, 2006  
World AIDS Day – Advent 1 – Hope

By Rev. Linda Yates

When I graduated in 1982 I was lucky enough to begin work right away in the Medical Immunology Research Laboratory at Memorial University of Newfoundland. I remember the first time I heard about HIV. I was at a medical continuing education seminar and someone was presenting a paper on this strange phenomenon affecting gay men in California. Many assumed the deadly disease was a side effect of drug use. However, some prophetic immunologists were identifying the new illness as a total crashing of an individual's immune system, likely caused by a new emerging virus.

In the aftermath, it was astonishing how quickly people all over North America used the AIDS epidemic to justify an already existing hatred of gays and lesbians. Never mind that the epidemic was virtually unknown in the lesbian community. Never mind, that in the ensuing explosion of the virus, some of the groups most affected were women (who were unwillingly infected by heterosexual partners), recipients of blood transfusions and children infected in-utero. Never mind that globally homosexuals make up a tiny fraction of those infected with HIV. But then, logic rarely holds sway with folks bent on hating. AIDS, like all epidemics before it including tuberculosis, cholera and typhoid, disproportionately affects the poorest and most vulnerable in the world. Of course, the poorest and most vulnerable are usually those our world would rather not be bothered with. Neglect is a more passive form of hatred.

Theologically, the idea that God gives deadly viruses to people as a form of discipline is abhorrent to any person who bothers to read the gospels. You will never find Jesus infecting or giving anyone a disease to teach them a lesson. Jesus, God's most direct indication yet of who God is, *always healed in relation to disease*, never infected. People often assign theological meaning to tragic events based on their own slanted perception of justice. For example, if a very good man is accidentally hit by a car while crossing the road, folks will shake their head and say "What a tragic accident. I guess you never can tell." However, if a very mean man is accidentally hit by a car, people often observe that such a man deserved it and that God was obviously punishing him. If they are not terribly religious, observers might designate such a man as having bad karma or something like that. At its worst, these inclinations function to justify tragic events because the justifiers want it to happen in some bizarre and warped way. Thus, saying that AIDS is God's wrath visited upon homosexuals is more about the speaker's wish that homosexuals would be harmed or even dead.

Hatred against homosexuals is still one of the few forms of discrimination that can be openly sanctioned by governments and institutions. This week the Harpur government wants to repeal the marriage rights of homosexual couples. Most observers note that this can not stand up in law because our Charter of Rights trumps everything and fortunately enshrines equality of everyone, including homosexuals. The Conservative government has gone on record as saying that they do not want to use the

Notwithstanding clause but might have to if our Charter of Rights and Freedoms gets in the way of denying homosexuals their right to marry.

We know that racism is still a huge problem in our culture. We also know that to be a person who lives with disability means living with significant challenges and barriers in our culture. Having said that, I doubt that the Harper government would ever try to prevent such folk from marrying each other or any other adult. There is no other group that is specifically and systematically being singled out by right wing faith communities and by the state of Canada for the type of persecution, discrimination, harassment and abuse that homosexuals are. No one in any church would dare say to a person of different race or ability, "You can not come into our church" or "You can not be baptized in our church" or "You can not have your children baptized in our church" or "You can not be married in our church." Many churches have absolutely no qualms about saying such things to homosexuals. Not only that, they are now saying via our Conservative government, "We are also going to do our best to make sure that *no where* in this land of Canada can you have these basic human rights."

When I did my first lesbian wedding, truthfully, I wondered how I would feel about it. I need not have worried. The same rich, holy moments happen during same gender marriages. The only difference I have noticed is that lesbian weddings tend to be more organized than usual, a blessing for sure! At St. John's we have already married three lesbian couples. The roof has not fallen in. The only difference to our church community is that three more couples were joined together in a life long covenant of married fidelity instead of just living together. Are we really going to say to them, if this law is passed, "I'm sorry but what St. John's United Church and God have joined together is now dissolved?" Is it possible to take back the activity and blessing of the Holy Spirit?

In terms of the law, there is already plenty of wiggle room for those denominations who do not want to hire homosexual workers or do same sex marriages. If you are a youth who wishes to work at Mount Trabor Bible camp close to Middle Musquodoboit you would need to fill out a form that not only asks questions designed to weed you out if you are homosexual but also asks you to formally in writing condemn homosexuality as a sin against God and a sure path to the fires of Hell. I know. A disgruntled parent who was actually quite conservative in her views, showed it to me. She considered it a step too far. There is plenty of room to discriminate under the existing laws. Why does the Harper government need more?

Here are the reasons why I hope St. John's can become an Affirming Church. First of all, we have worked through a big part of the process already. You began this process three years ago. It was difficult, laborious work. However, you did it and you are a stronger, wiser community for it. To finish the process means assisting our community in examining its barriers to all peoples – to truly become the welcoming church we claim in our mission statement. It will help us determine if there are those who would be within our doors except for real and perceived barriers. Walking the talk - becoming an Affirming Church puts the "walk" in our Mission Statement "talk."

St. John's is known as a justice seeking church. The actions of this Conservative government make it clear that in some ways to choose to become an Affirming congregation is an act of rebellion against big government repression. In our current global political climate, putting that rainbow outside says to the world, "You can't tell us

who to marry. You can't tell *us* that our brothers and sisters in our congregation are second class members of society!" Putting that rainbow outside becomes an act of standing with our brothers and sisters as they fight for basic, simple equality. It is akin to indicating to the public in the southern United States of the 1960s that our establishment is *not* segregated. It takes courage to do that.

The second reason I am for becoming Affirming is a little more crass and may not even be approved by the Affirming Committee for public discourse. More young families are moving into this area. When the Gladstone development opens in the spring and fall, many people will be looking for a new church home. If we become Affirming and earn the right to put the rainbow on our sign, it says volumes to the public about who we are: volumes of good things. It says to families seeking an open minded, justice seeking, welcoming worshipping environment that St. John's is what they have been looking for. No other church on the Peninsula has that rainbow on their church sign. It says to families that this is a courageous, forward looking, progressive church. It says that we are NOT fundamentalist and conservative. That rainbow says that we follow the teachings of Jesus that are radically and courageously welcoming, not welcoming in the lukewarm, kind of clubby tradition. That rainbow speaks in a way that nothing else does saying, "St. John's United Church is a safe place for your children where questions about faith and God are okay." It means that at St. John's human rights and a radical equality as demonstrated by Jesus the Christ are not just talked about here but are practiced. In other words, the rainbow means we walk the talk.

Like all faith communities there are many barriers in our church, both obvious and unconscious. These barriers prevent full participation by people of all races, abilities and sexual orientation. Our gay, lesbian and transgendered people have been very patient with us. They have waited and they have waited. While they have waited they have been subject to many uncomfortable and even hurtful commentary. Perhaps they will still have to wait some more. You are a courageous church, a church that is Christ centred and radically caring enough to work through this difficult task. Let us pray that as we work through this period that the waiting is productive, transformational and that, for our brothers and sisters still relegated to the edges by the world, the waiting is not too long.

**World AIDS Sunday Sermon  
Debra Wilson & Sean Foreman  
December 3<sup>rd</sup>, 2006**

The United Church's tradition of social action is part of what captured my interest when we were discussing whether we would try to find a church to attend with our children. My partner, though raised in an Anglican Church, had had a very positive experience in a United Church in Sioux Lookout, Ontario. I recall her relaying how exciting she found her involvement in that church because they devoted time to having conversations about real world issues and then discussed ways in which they could have an impact, either at a local or an international level. Though there are many reasons I have come to call St.

John's my church, one of the most exciting things I feel here is that these conversations about real world issues and the need for action continue to be important to this congregation.

Today, Sean and I will be talking about issues that centre around social justice and we ask you to consider the ways in which St John's can move forward on some of these issues over the next year.

This past Friday was World AIDS Day. The World Health Organization organized the first World AIDS Day in 1988 and yearly commemoration ceremonies are now held on each continent. This year's theme is "STOP AIDS: Keep The Promise" and encourages citizens around the world to hold their governments accountable to "keep their promises" under the United Nations Millennium Development Goals to fight the disease.

Although it is difficult to truly imagine the scope of this pandemic, it is easy to get lost in the avalanche of details that help describe the reality of the world's AIDS crisis. An elementary teacher once told me a story of a school project in which the teachers planned a simple project to convey how incredibly large one million is. They had all the students bring in those plastic tags that close milk and bread bags. The teachers quickly began to realize how naïve they were themselves when the storage area they had opened for the project quickly became overrun by plastic tags, long before they had even reached one hundred thousand tags. I'm not sure if they ever did reach a million but one thing really stuck with me: it is virtually impossible to imagine how big a million actually is. I try to keep this in mind as I consider a few basic statistics:

- Every 5 seconds another person becomes infected with HIV
- Over 4000 Canadians are infected with HIV each year.
- 5500 Africans die each day
- 3 million people died in 2005 from AIDS
- 15 million children have become orphans as a result of AIDS
- 25 million have died so far
- 40 million people are infected with HIV
- By 2030, it is estimated that 117 million people will die from the disease!

So, what is the United Church doing about this crisis?

The Beads of Hope Campaign, with which many of you are familiar, had a goal to raise 1 million dollars to help fight HIV/AIDS and it more than doubled that amount by the time it wrapped up in 2004. These funds have continued to provide stable long term funding to 39 global partners right up until now, December 2006. From now on, the Mission and Service fund will continue to fund these initiatives so if you are looking for one way to help ease this crisis, donations to the Mission and Service fund will certainly help.

In May, the United Church was a co-signatory on a letter encouraging Stephen Harper to exercise leadership on behalf of the Canadian people in the global fight against HIV/AIDS. In this letter the church leaders state:

*Compassion and care alone are not enough. This threat to life is, at its core, an issue of faith. We believe in the fullness of life for all human beings for they are the bearers of the image of God. Our mandate to proclaim the good news of God in Christ compels us to action to address the issues at the root of this pandemic—the source of so much suffering and death. Until we transform the structures that contribute to the spread of AIDS, the crisis will continue. For us the call of Isaiah 58 "to break the bonds of injustice and to set free the oppressed" rings out clearly in this moment. The world can wait no longer for action to end HIV and AIDS.*

The letter goes on to specifically name six Canadian Initiatives that Prime Minister Harper could put forward on the international stage. One of the suggested venues was the 16<sup>th</sup> Annual World AIDS conference held this past August in Toronto. If you are a national news follower you may recall that Prime Minister Harper declined the opportunity to appear at the conference. This brings up yet another avenue of action open to all of us here at St. John's: write your MP and write the Prime Minister and encourage them to take a leadership role in the fight against HIV/AIDS.

The letter to Mr. Harper ends with a passage from Isaiah, Chapter 58, Verses 6-7:

*I'll tell you what it really means to worship the Lord. Remove the chains of prisoners who are chained unjustly. Free those who are abused! Share your food with everyone who is hungry; share your home with the poor and homeless. Give clothes to those in need; don't turn away your relatives.*

[Sean]

Good morning everyone. As Debra has outlined, the statistics can be frightening, both from around the world and here at home. So how do we conquer our fear, and move beyond the numbers? As Christians, how do we “Think Globally, and Act Locally” to help those who are suffering?

The Halifax World AIDS Day Vigil was held Friday at the Bloomfield Centre. It is always an incredibly spiritual and moving event; a time to gather, remember and honor those who we have lost to HIV/AIDS – loved ones, family members and friends. At this event each year, the names of those we have lost through the years are read out loud, as many sit with remembrance candles; some openly grieving, others in silent reflection.

This year, there were 6 panels from the Canadian AIDS Memorial Quilt on display at the Halifax Vigil. You should know that our Social Action Committee and St. John's UCW joined other donors to bring so many panels of the Quilt to Halifax for this event; one small way we can “act locally” to show love and support.

While medical treatment and of course finding a “cure” for HIV/AIDS remains a top priority, focusing solely on treatment or politically uncontroversial prevention methods is not enough. As one expert pointed out at the recent international conference in Toronto, “You can't put all your eggs in the abstinence basket. We need a menu of strategies for real people”.

In 2003, our provincial government released the N.S. Strategy on HIV/AIDS, a comprehensive plan to combat AIDS here at home, with an expanded focus on primary health care and enhancing access to health and social support services to aid prevention.

Recommendation 4.8 of this local strategy suggested that the NS Commission on AIDS fund research to examine the spiritual care of people living with HIV/AIDS in N.S. As you can imagine (if you don't know anyone from this marginalized community) those living with HIV/AIDS, and their friends and families, can face enormous fear and prejudice - and judgment - in their daily lives. Physical health is only part of the equation in living a full and productive life. Spiritual health and nourishment, that we here at St. John's seek together each Sunday and hopefully throughout the week, is also essential, but for some difficult to find.

In May 2005 the N.S. Rainbow Action Project (NSRAP) received funding to implement Recommendation 4.8 by creating the "Spiritual Care & AIDS Project". The primary goal of this Project is to define and develop a spiritual care component within the existing care, treatment and support framework for PHA's their families and support networks. One aspect is to examine the specific spiritual needs of this group, and also assess the barriers to access for spiritual services and support.

As past-chair of NSRAP, I can tell you that one barrier to spiritual care that we have already clearly identified from this work, is actual and perceived prejudice and unsupportive attitudes within the Christian church, particularly against PHA's in the gay community.

As proud as we should be with the great work that the United Church, as a Christian faith community, has done and continues to do in proactively reaching out to marginalized communities, how do we "Keep Our Promise" and continue to fulfill our collective responsibility to dispel the perception that God's Love is not for all? How do we reach out to those who are hurting, those who are living with HIV/AIDS or who have lost loved ones and need comfort and a safe place to experience that God does indeed Love us all?

We are already involved in one solution. In 2004 this congregation overwhelmingly supported the creation of our Affirming Church Committee, to which both Debra and I now belong. It is our hope and experience that through this on-going process, our collective sense and experience of being a welcoming church reaching out to diverse and marginalized groups will continue to evolve, and that we will discern the value in proactively communicating our sense and commitment to such diversity.

Closing [Debra]

As is true each week, you have been presented with several issues to contemplate, several challenges to face. We ask you to keep considering the ways in which St. John's can continue moving forward as a congregation that grapples with and moves forward on

issues of social justice. Let's help "Keep the Promise" and continue finding ways to reach out to the broader community that enriches each of our lives.