

CCATHOLICS *for*
AAIDS
PREVENTION *and*
SSUPPORT



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NEWSLETTER NOVEMBER 2011

Chairperson's Message: *Mind The Gap - or 'Be Not Afraid'*

It seems only a week ago I was writing a message for our last newsletter, but actually a year has passed. So much has happened. I hope you will take the time to read the reports of activities from both CAPS and PC included in this newsletter. We also include some personal sharing that we hope you will find informative and thought provoking.

CAPS has the mission to be a Catholic presence within secular Hiv agencies, and to be a voice for those living with Hiv within the Church. CAFOD continues to raise awareness and support work in regard to Hiv throughout the world, but CAPS is the only specifically Catholic charity addressing issues of Hiv as they relate to our situation in Great Britain. It has occurred to me recently that what we are trying to do can be thought of as 'minding the gaps' in provision. The famous instruction that we hear on the London Underground to 'mind the gap' warns passengers not to fall between the train and the platform at certain stations, as they go on their way. Similarly, we try to mind the gaps in the secular agencies, so that the needs of people with faith are not neglected as they go on their way. We also try to make sure that issues around, and people living with, Hiv, are not neglected because of the gaps in provision in our own Church. These gaps in provision mirror each other in a curious way in my mind. An essay could be written on the subject, but here are just some thoughts, in 'broad brush strokes'. For many reasons there is suspicion of the Catholic Church in some quarters. At the most painful level, there are people who have had damaging encounters with religion that make them understandably cautious, sometimes hostile. On a policy level, whilst data is collected by agencies in regard to age, ethnicity, sexual orientation, place of residence and the nationality of people living with Hiv - religion or faith is often not even thought of as relevant. Hiv prevention and care is sometimes viewed narrowly as a medical issue only. At worst, Catholic faith is viewed as damaging - an enemy in the struggle to combat Hiv and Aids. More often, faith is just considered irrelevant.

Within our Church there are those who equate Hiv narrowly with controversies around the use of condoms, homosexuality, or the question of sexual health education in our schools. Others imagine that Hiv is not an issue that needs to be addressed any longer in the UK, because medical advances have 'solved' the problems. The needs of people can get lost in the gaps, as we argue internally about Catholic 'orthodoxy', or as general ignorance results in good people doing little or nothing.

If we consider the most polarised positions described here, we can see that fear is the driving force. Some fear religion as a destructive, restricting, irrational and de-humanising force. Others see Hiv as totemic of issues that dilute standards of morality and authority, which threaten to erode the body of Christ, the Church.

The result can often mean that people are marginalised because of the threat they represent. Fearful, we can ignore those activists who are concerned to raise issues of faith and Hiv, in the support group and in the Church. Fearful, we can exclude people of faith living with Hiv because they might disturb us by their presence. They may confront our prejudices and challenge our view of the world, just by being there. Sometimes, it seems to me that some secular health agencies wish to protect themselves from becoming infected by the 'nonsense' of religion, and our churches wish to remain uninfected by the problematic facts of Hiv.

We should not be despondent however, because as you will read in this newsletter, with the help and support of our friends, benefactors, other agencies, and Christian communities, we do seem to be making progress in filling the gaps in provision. We do so imperfectly, and sometimes clumsily. Yet, with continued support, and the movement of the Holy Spirit, we hope that our work in the world and in our Church will continue to bear fruit. For there is nothing to fear where the love of God is concerned.

Vincent Manning
Chairperson

CAPS Annual Report 2011

CAPS work in 2011 has continued to develop, supporting particularly Positive Catholics (PCs) peer ministry.

Trustee changes

CAPS Trustees accepted with deep regret the resignation of Fr. Bernard Lynch SMA in October 2012. Bernard has been a trustee since CAPS was formed. He has a distinguished record of service for people infected by Hiv and Aids since the earliest days of the pandemic. After 30 years of ministry, as priest and campaigner in Africa, USA and the UK, we cannot do justice to the contribution he has made and the lives that he has touched. It is perhaps enough to say that he has been in a place of vulnerable solidarity with countless individuals and different groups of people over this time. We thank him for his contributions, and his dedication in a service of love for others. We will miss the wealth of experience and the passion that he brought to our group. We welcome as a new trustee Ms Joyce Lyamuya, who lives in Manchester. Joyce has a range of experience in the voluntary sector and also worked for the Commonwealth Development Corporation (CDC) in Tanzania.

CAPS – A voice for Hiv in the Church

CAPS became a member of the Caritas Social Action Network (CSAN) this year. Trustees and members of Positive Catholics attended a major conference in June 2011 which considered the role of social action in the Church in England and Wales. We were able to represent CAPS and PCs, and had a stall and display in the market place area of the conference. We networked, of course, and were a visible sign of the presence of people living with Hiv in the Church. This well-organised conference enabled us to learn a great deal about the valuable work of others, especially amongst the most vulnerable people in our society.



We were also present at a CSAN meeting and lunch with parliamentarians in the House of Lords in February 2011, and the Student 'Stop AIDS Tour' meeting, hosted by Pamela Nash, MP, and the All Party Parliamentary Group on HIV and AIDS, in Parliament last October.

Engaging Catholic Bishops of England & Wales



The Chairperson and members of PCs met with Archbishop Peter Smith in November 2011. This was an important meeting as Archbishop Smith chairs the Department for Christian Responsibility and Citizenship as well as being Vice-President of the Bishops Conference of England and Wales. Members of the Positive Catholics community were able to share their personal experience with the Archbishop, who listened with great care as they told of the practical, emotional, and spiritual challenges that living with Hiv often brings. Meeting over tea at Archbishops House, Archbishop Peter offered advice, and practical ways by which the pastoral ministry could be made more

available to people living with Hiv. The Archbishop's welcoming of people living with Hiv into his home, was an act of solidarity with those who feel marginalised and rejected because of their Hiv status. His kindness will be of great encouragement to many others. Ending with the Archbishop's blessing, this meeting was an important outward sign, to Christians and those of other faiths and none, that people living with Hiv can find acceptance and understanding within the Church. The Archdiocese of Southwark, over which Archbishop Peter presides, includes the London Borough of Lambeth which has the highest number of people receiving treatment for Hiv.

CAPS and schools

Many parents will know that navigating admission for your child to a secondary school can be a nightmare. Catholic Schools are often over subscribed, and admissions policies can be lengthy and numerous. For families where Hiv is present, there is an additional pastoral imperative that children growing into young adults, are supported pastorally, within the community that a good school provides. We have been supporting families living with Hiv again this year, as they try to gain admission to Catholic schools. Sharing the situation and complexities of Hiv as a reality in the family, requires sensitivity – especially when a parent finds themselves applying to many schools for the first time.

CAPS and immigration

Earlier this year we met with members of the Jesuit Refugee Service (JRS) at their new base in East London. We had a full conversation about the ways in which Hiv, and especially issues of late diagnosis, may impact many of the people who visit the JRS for support. We have also supported the applications for asylum of members of PC by writing to the Home Secretary. We are privileged to hear and share the often harrowing stories of many of our members who are seeking safety in this country, and who have suffered persecution, torture and sexual abuse.

New websites

As the work of CAPS grows, we have found it necessary to upgrade our systems of communication. Funding has allowed us to develop two new websites, one for CAPS and the second for PC. We hope that these will be up and running shortly. There is quite a lot of work and time involved, We hope that a more suitable web presence will enable us to make our work more widely known and more easily available to the many people who access our current webpage from around the world. It will also be possible to donate to CAPS/Positive Catholics by **PayPal** as soon as the websites are ready.

CAPS – A Catholic voice within the Hiv sector

We continue as members of the South London Hiv Partnership (SLHP), and have worked closely with other agencies in this group such as The Terrence Higgins Trust and The Metro Centre. We have also maintained links with the George House Trust in Manchester. Funding issues and significant disruption within the NHS have made the on-going work of the SLHP uncertain, but we hope that this important collaboration will continue into 2012. We have also attended meetings with the African Health Policy Network, and the African Health Forum. Our resources are stretched, and as a totally voluntary organisation, we cannot attend all of the important meetings that take place. However, where we can, we ensure that a Catholic presence and concern is made real, especially within those agencies working within African communities, where rates of Hiv infection, and numbers of people who are committed Christians, are high.

Trustees have also begun initial conversations with Positive Parents and Children (PPC), an agency that supports families where Hiv is present. One of the members of PC represented CAPS at a public meeting at the Ritzy Cinema in Brixton, London, organised by PPC, where young people spoke about their experience of life with Hiv in the family. It was noteworthy that faith had featured positively in many of their stories. We have been exploring with PPC how we might help in supporting the faith development of young people, in families living with Hiv.

Positive Catholics peer-group ministry

With hospitality from our Benedictine friends and the generosity of sponsors, we were able this year to hold three retreat weekends at the Abbeys of **Downside** and **Douai**. Our spring and autumn retreats are held at a self-catering house in the grounds of Downside Abbey, and this year we have enabled about 18 adults to enjoy these times of friendship reflection and prayer. Our main summer retreat is at Douai Abbey in far more luxurious accommodation where we are also provided with fine food from the team behind the scenes, who do so much to make visitors welcome (especially Positive Catholics we like to think - or at least that is how they

make us feel). This year at Douai we were 27 adults and 8 children in total. You can see an article on hope, written after our Douai Retreat in this newsletter. For the first time Positive Catholics will be holding a weekend retreat at Douai Abbey from Jan 6 – 8th 2012



The Benedictine charism of hospitality as extended to us by Dom Christopher OSB, Dom Benet OSB, and their communities, affords an atmosphere of acceptance and normality which is in marked contrast to the experience of so many of our members, who still tell of encounters marked by secrecy, misunderstanding, judgement, ignorance and outright rejection. Can you believe that some of our members still have tea and sandwiches served to them by relatives, in cups and plates kept separately from other household crockery, for fear of contamination? Others struggle to share with family the anxieties and concerns they live with for fear that they will be misunderstood or rejected. Some live in communities where their Hiv status is known, and where they are taunted by ignorant people. Many endure multiple daily rejections because of their sexual orientation; or because they are asylum seekers; because they are without work, or on benefits. At this time in our society when we are so keen to find scapegoats to blame, Hiv for many of our members is just another aspect of life that must be hidden.

We are grateful to Fr. John Sherrington, CP, and to Dom Dominic Mansi OSB for their ministry with us this year. The sacraments of healing and our celebration of the Eucharist together during our retreat weekends have been grace filled encounters with the Jesus who heals and gives of himself so that we may become like him for others. We thank them also for simply being with us on our journeys, and also Dom Christopher OSB and Dom Sebastian OSB, for conversation, moments of magic, friendship and kindness.



As we come together in Christian community to counter isolation and make real the body of Christ living with Hiv, we are healed in the love that we share amongst each other, and the love that we receive strengthens us as we return to our everyday situations and relationships, and we can move forward in faith.

Team leadership and group facilitation

One of the wonderful developments this year is the way in which members of PC have taken on roles of leadership for the community. 10 people participated in an additional weekend of training in 'group-work skills and facilitation' held also at Downside in June this year. As a lay lead peer community of people living with Hiv, we try to acknowledge the gifts and talents that each one of us has. This weekend of training has meant that many of our members are better equipped now for the task of leading our group sessions together as we share our stories, and as we pray with each other. Each group during our Douai retreat was facilitated by the members of PC, and the group meetings in Manchester, Birmingham and London have each been lead by PC members.



Group meetings – challenges and opportunities

We continue to hold monthly gatherings for on-going support in London. In Manchester, the PC community is growing in numbers and in confidence. We have also benefited from the on-going support of Sr. Margaret, CP, and her community who offer us hospitality, and the attendance of Fr. Peter Kinsela who has also been journeying with the Manchester group. There are a small number members who have met a couple of times in the Midlands also, but there are challenges when trying to start any good thing, and we have yet to see how their journey will unfold. Many of our members have busy lives, in challenging jobs, or challenging personal situations. In each of our small regional groups, we need always to proceed with great care. Sometimes we do experience the pain and hurt, as well as the joys of being in Henri Nouwen's words, a "fellowship of the weak". We are also acutely aware that whilst we have a large number of women in the community, it is often difficult for them to attend group meetings each month, especially in London where there is little room to accommodate children. Trying to make sure that everyone can access support and community is an on-going challenge for us. Those with childcare responsibilities are often also quite isolated, without other support networks. How we can address this issue in the future, we have yet to see.

Nourishment through liturgy and prayer

We were welcomed again by the Jesuit community at Farm Street for our special Advent and Lent liturgies. The 2011 Advent Liturgy takes place at Farm Street on Saturday 10th December. These gatherings are our particular opportunity to gather together in anticipation and preparation. We appreciate the willingness of the community to host us, and thank Fr. William SJ for his support. Around World AIDS Day 2010, liturgies were held in Birmingham, London, and Wrexham. The Westminster Diocese's Soho Masses' community, at the Church of Our Lady of the Assumption & St. Gregory, Warwick Street, Soho, generously offers the proceeds of a regular retiring collection to support our work. On the 1st Sunday of each month, the names of those recorded in the Catholic AIDS Memorial Book are read out during the Bidding Prayers. In July 2011 we were privileged to have sections of the UK Names AIDS Quilt hanging in the Church over a weekend. Through the courtesy of the Parish Priest, the church remained open throughout the Saturday, to enable people to drop in for quiet reflection to view the Quilt panels. Those shown hanging below include the name of Philip Langbridge, whose Catholic parents created this panel in his memory. Philip's name is also inscribed in the Catholic AIDS Memorial Book, along with other names which appear on Names Quilt panels not shown here.



Supporting Families and individuals

The early Christians were known for the love that they showed each other, and this love can be demonstrated when we take care of each. This year Sr. Gill, MMS, has begun to make relationships with two of our families. Together they have embarked on a journey of fellowship. We thank Sr. Gill for her offer of support and

willingness. These are early days, and Sr. Gill has also had many other concerns to attend to. We have been praying for her, and her sisters, regularly this year as they also face illness. How wonderful though that Sr. Gill and our families have begun a friendship. Others have faced many challenges in the year. In particular, Stephen was ill in hospital for many days. He received many visitors and well wishers, including members of PC when they knew that he was unwell. Rosie attended several times, and Eamonn came bearing DVDs of saints and Hollywood starlets, to relieve the boredom of the hospital wait. Another of our members faced the threat of eviction in court. Another of the members accompanied him on the day. Thankfully the eviction order was not granted.

CAPS was also able to support one PC woman to return to visit her family in Uganda, after many years away, with the help of a substantial gift from a supportive Catholic charity. You can read her account of her trip in this newsletter. We thank those who made this possible.

Book Review, John Thornhill

Catholic Voices, ed. Austen Invereigh & Kathleen Griffin, Darton Longman & Todd, 2011, £14.99

Catholic Voices is a collection of essays which attempt to explain the Church's teaching on the key social and moral challenges of the age. Chapter 8 looks at *Catholics and Aids*. This book attempts to take a reasoned and balanced look at the Church's response to the pandemic. It recognises the magnitude of the Aids crisis. It acknowledges the catastrophic death rates among young adults of both sexes and from all walks of life.

It recognises that Hiv and Aids is intimately associated with social and economic inequality and exclusion. *Catholics & Aids* focuses on the 22.5 million sub-Saharan African men, women and children living with the virus: 70 percent of the total number of people globally living with the virus. It recognises the cultural complexities of Hiv prevention campaigns: citing the work of the controversial and rigorously contested Harvard anthropologist, Edward Green, who attributes the rapid spread of the virus in Africa, to the export of a Western model of prevention based primarily on condom use rather than behaviour change.¹ It stresses the teaching of the Church in terms of abstinence and fidelity; and it highlights the contribution of Catholic agencies and communities globally in prevention and care.

Perhaps because of the magnitude of the Aids crisis and perhaps because of the multi-faceted nature of the pandemic: this book has two major weaknesses:

1. **Hiv: the guest at our table:** *Catholic Voices* is written for Catholics in the UK, yet it says very little, if anything at all, about people diagnosed with Hiv in the UK and the many who do not know they are living with the illness. In 2010, the latest year for which UK statistics are available, **69,424** HIV-diagnosed persons (all ages) were seen for **Hiv care** in the UK, representing an increase of **6%** on the number seen in 2009 (**65,292**) and a **166%** increase on the number seen in 2001 (**26,088**). For the past five years the numerical year-on-year increase has been stable, at about 4,000 additional individuals seen for Hiv-related care each year. The total population aged 15-59 years, including those testing Hiv positive anonymously and undiagnosed, living by the end of 2009 with HIV/AIDS in the United Kingdom is estimated at 80,800 (76,510-85,820), of whom 53,720 are males (50,610-58,000, or 67%) and the remaining 27,020 females (25,280-28,890), or 33%.²

Catholic Voices rightly and necessarily recognises the terrible impact of Hiv on sub-Saharan Africa, but it implies a way of thinking that Hiv and Aids is a problem affecting other countries: something that is "over *there*", "not on our door-step", something "other" and "unseen" in our own daily lives. This follows a pattern in the way in which different thinkers have tackled the Aids pandemic over the past 30 years. Early commentators like Randy Shilts remarked in his comprehensive survey of Aids in America in the 1980s, how people thought and talked about Aids almost exclusively in terms of an American, gay, male experience. Even the scientific community talked about "gay cancer and gay pneumonia...(and were) quite happy to keep the problem just that: gay." (*And the Band Played On*: P 104). This reflected the epidemiology of the pandemic in those early days. Now however, the focus of attention has shifted to new centres of crisis in the developing world. This is right and

¹ *Catholic Voices* is described as 'the essential handbook for the apologist in the era of 24-hours news...to put the case for their faith.' A much fuller presentation of the complexity of issues involved will be found in *Catholic Ethicists on HIV/AIDS Prevention*, ed. Keenan, Fuller, Cahill & Kelly, Continuum 2000; or *Ethics & AIDS*, Kenneth R. Overberg SJ, Sheed & Ward Books 2006.

² UK Health Protection Agency, September 2011

proper; but this does not mean that Hiv and Aids has gone from out midst. It is still here living with us in the UK today.

2. Prevention versus "care": *Catholic Voices* rightly rehearses the controversial debate about the use of condoms and campaigns of fidelity and abstinence in preventing the spread of the virus. But it focuses too much attention on this at the expense of how our Church can become a place of welcome for people already touched by Hiv and Aids: a place where people can be transformed by an embracing experience of acceptance, warmth, community and relationship. In the encyclical *Salvifici Doloris (1984)* Pope John Paul II identifies the parable of the Good Samaritan as a model for Christian action: the Good Samaritan is the social outcast who provides warmth and care for a wounded man without questions, without conditions, touching what is deemed "un-clean" because he knows this is what God desires.

The Aids pandemic highlights profound social and religious dilemmas in our understanding of what it means to be a human being. Hiv and Aids is not simple and it both hurts and challenges our world in different ways. It asks us what it means to be made in the image and likeness of God, and to live in relationship with God and our fellow human beings. It highlights the complexity and fragility of our understanding of sex and gender; our ethical frameworks for the mediation of sexual behaviour; and it challenges us, again and again, to actively consider the way in which we care for the poor, the outcast, the oppressed, and the marginalised. Above all it invites the Church to be a place of warmth and welcome, acceptance and care, for the poor, the outcast, the oppressed and the marginalised; and to place itself squarely alongside the excluded, like the Good Samaritan.

The Gown of God's Love, Bernard J. Lynch SMA
a tribute to Elizabeth Taylor, 1932-2011



www.elizabethtayloraidsfoundation.org

In New York City, the nineteen eighties were clouded with spiralling AIDS deaths in the gay community. As theological consultant to Dignity New York – an organization of LGBT Catholics and their friends – in 1981, I founded an AIDS ministry to help the sick and dying. Soon I was drafted onto the Mayor of New York's new task force on AIDS. Everyone who was gay in the city thought they had it. No one knew how this 'gay cancer' was transmitted. People's lives ran wild with fear and paranoia. Hospital orderlies, priests and people avoided those 'afflicted by the plague,' in case they would themselves become victims. In ten years Dignity had lost six hundred of its membership to GRID (Gay Related Immune Deficiency). More and more of my time was taken up with ministry to those who were ill, their partners, friends and families. I still had to work as Campus Minister at Mount Saint Michael's Academy, a Catholic High School to earn my living. After school and on weekends, I would rush around the city to visit someone at home or in hospital, or to make funeral arrangements for another 'soldier' who had fallen foul of the plague.

One such person whom I ministered to was Anthony Sofio. Anthony lived in the East Bronx, not far from the school where I worked. Every other day I would drop in on him and his mother to see how he was doing and bring him Holy Communion. On one such visit I noticed framed notes in the hallway. Having glanced at them, I saw that they were signed 'Elizabeth and Richard.' On inquiry, I was told by Anthony, later to be confirmed by his mother, that they were from Elizabeth Taylor and Richard Burton. Anthony, although in the dying stages of AIDS, delighted in informing me that he had "indeed been dress maker to Elizabeth Taylor." I asked him did she know that he was ill. He answered, "No Father, I am afraid not." On arriving back to my apartment, I immediately telephoned the editorial desk of New York Daily News. I explained who I was and my connection with Anthony Sofio. I told the person that I spoke to that as a matter of urgency, "I must get in touch with Elizabeth Taylor." I said, "You, can check out my credentials and Mr. Sofios's work for Ms. Taylor, but do please get the message to her." Forty eight hours later, I had a call from the editor's desk to say that Ms. Taylor's secretary was on the line.

The following afternoon, after completing my work at Mount Saint Michael's, I dropped in on the Sofio household. Mrs Sofio greeted me with a big welcoming smile and Anthony was beside himself with joy when I

entered his bedroom. "You are a naughty boy Father Lynch" he said. "You have no idea Anthony," I responded. "Look," as he pointed to the largest and most beautiful bouquet of orchids I had ever seen. He handed me the accompanying note. It read: "To my darling Anthony, I place my hand on your forehead and my head on your heart with Love, Elizabeth." A few moments later the telephone rang. Mrs. Sofio answered. "It is for you Father." It was Elizabeth Taylor wishing to speak to me first about Anthony. She asked serious questions about his illness, and about how he was coping. She was extraordinarily concerned and compassionate and asked me if I thought "God would hear her prayer?" I thanked her, for all she had done and was doing through AMFAR, for those with HIV/ AIDS. "Your work for people like Anthony, Ms. Taylor, is one of the loudest prayers God has ever heard." With that, I passed the telephone to her former dressmaker.

Anthony died three days later. I am sure that since that day in 1985, Anthony has been helping to weave the most beautiful 'gown of God's eternal Love,' to welcome Elizabeth home to a joy "which no eye has seen or ear ever heard."

To paraphrase Yeats: *Rich memories, nothing but memories,
But in the grave all, all, shall be renewed
The certainty that I shall see Anthony and Elizabeth
Leaning or standing or walking
In the first loveliness of their youth
And with the burning fervour of their youthful eyes
Has set me muttering like a fool.*

FIRST STEPS, Mark

I didn't expect it, but maybe I should have done. After 20 or more years living close to the world of HIV and AIDS, loving, comforting, supporting, teaching ... doing my bit. Somehow the virus had missed me and I expected to retire into a graceful old age. I knew all the key players in the early days of the virus in the UK. By "players" I mean, Defenders, Attackers, Referees, and those on the side-lines, watching doing little. I tried to educate and change attitudes, understand the politics, and how to get money for organisations. Inevitably after 10 years, like many before me, I had to stand back and I chose to change direction.

This year I decided to retire and travel, maybe for a year or so. I was excited and set off for the Philippines, a paradise to share with friends and relax: idyllic Beaches, hot, hot sunshine, tropical storms, and such welcoming friendly people. Six weeks later I was brought home on a flight from Manila, 29 hours total in travel. I don't remember much of it. I had a high fever, disgusting things were happening to my body, and I was admitted to Hospital immediately I arrived home. This is not the place to dwell on the nightmare of that experience. I was too ill and humiliated to "fight for my rights" or "retain my dignity" I was certainly not helped to do this by anyone charged with my care. On my last day in the Hospital I was given my diagnosis: a nasty parasitic virus, Cryptosporidiosis, and oh yes, almost by the way, the Human Immunodeficiency Virus had caught up with me at last.

Somehow it seemed right! An absurd thing to say maybe, but my time had come and I had to learn to cope. I say learn because despite all my acquired knowledge, for the first few months I knew nothing. My friends were wonderful, in practical and emotionally supportive ways. I had such a lot of fear, and stopped going to Mass. My faith did not leave me, God did not abandon me, but I did not feel worthy somehow. To go into Gods House would be to contaminate. Intellectually I did not believe this. I could not read comforting words. I felt alienated from my own faith community. I needed to talk about this. The clinical services (in a different hospital) were first class. Where to go, who to talk to? About my own loss of identity, my professional façade, my self-respect. All of these things related to the importance of faith in my life.

Taking a deep breath I contacted Positive Catholics, after all I was now qualified to join. And then God kicked in. The understated but real affection and support given to me was genuine from the start. Not about going to meetings " My name is Mark and I am HIV positive" but " take time, say what you need, speak and we will listen, cry and we will understand, laugh and we will join in. " Yes God was here, and I gained confidence enough to approach the Parish priest and ask for a blessing which came without hesitation.

Since then I have been in touch with the local group, just a few of us, and we have shared stories. All different, all powerful in a variety of ways. I have met incredible African women who have suffered in ways I could never imagine and enliven every gathering with music and laughter, as well as tears. Men of all ages, backgrounds and orientation, some worn down with the effort of keeping it all together: their own health, encouragement

and support for others. I have been on a weekend retreat at a Monastery, where the healing was done preparing the meals and eating together as much as in the group conversations. The Sacrament of Healing offered by a Monk from the Community was simple, powerful and beautiful. The environment God offered us was better than any medicine...it was the medicine.

The binding of it all together is our faith, our God, and yes, our Church. Sometimes we may struggle with doctrine, we may encounter ignorance, but as Catholic human beings we have something special. Positive Catholics for me is a bridge across a river which is sometimes angry and turbulent and sometimes gently flowing. Sometimes others throw stones into it and make a splash. Support comes from those who understand with a deep sense of knowing which does not always have to be put into words. Conversation can be about Theology and Mission, but equally about Music and Food and Dance and Celebration. Not only talking, but doing.

I cannot be certain yet what God has in store for me, but believe it will not be greater than I can manage. I am no longer afraid to put out into the deep. Most of all I am no longer alone. But then of course, I never really was. Albert Schweitzer, one of my personal saints wrote: "I have given up the ambition to become a great Scholar; I want to be more, simply *a human*". I am grateful to those at Positive Catholics who share their humanity to a degree which helps us to survive and go forward without fear, but with realism, and acceptance. Thank you and may God bless you.

The Colour of Light - 30 May
daily meditations for all of us living with AIDS, Hazelden Books 1988

The First Big Step is saying "I can do something" - *Tom O'Connor living with AIDS*.

"I can do something", what a glorious revolutionary statement. I am not a helpless victim. I am not at the mercy of survival statistics or a doctor's life expectancy predictions. The Life force runs through me now. Nothing is more powerful. And I CAN do something. I can call someone. I can go to a support group. I can go to a meeting. I can read a book about my immune system. I can eat a good meal. I can take a walk. I can meditate. I can pray. I can focus on my breathing. I can cry or laugh or scream or smash a plate. I can ask for help. I can be willing to let miracles happen in my life. I can focus my mind and heart in the right direction - every move I make towards healing empowers me and makes me stronger. I am an actor in my life. I take responsibility for my actions. I turn outcomes over to a Higher Power.

Dancing in the Rain

Life is not about waiting for the storm to pass. It is about learning to dance in the rain.

Anon.

Hope, JT

"Do not be afraid, for I have redeemed you. I have called you by your name, you are mine"

One of the themes which emerged out of the Douai weekend, 2011, is the place of "hope" in our relationship with Jesus. Sometimes we can feel so weary of pain and hurtful memories in our own lives and so overwhelmed by the scope and scale of brokenness in the lives of people whom we love, in society and among nations; that we can feel somewhat hope-*less*. Like Jonah, we can feel called by God to live an impossibly difficult life, battered by life's storms, even swallowed by whales; until finally we say "*Yahweh, please take my life, for I might as well be dead as go on living*" (Jonah 4: 3). After Jesus was crucified, the disciples found themselves in a very similar situation: their friend and master had been executed as a criminal and they were so afraid, they locked themselves away in a room for fear of the authorities (John 20:19). They probably thought they would be rounded up and executed next. Despite Jesus' promises to them, they had no idea that he would rise again. In many ways, we too are like the disciples living in the gap between the cross and the resurrection: we are the people of Easter Saturday. We live in a crucified world where there seems very little to hope for. But in the gap between the cross and resurrection, Jesus asks that we hope in his promises to us. He has redeemed us. He has called us by our names and we are his.

Blessed John Paul II is the Pope who put "hope" back on the Christian agenda. In his own life he experienced many things which might have challenged hope: as a child he lost his mother and brother to sickness, he endured the terrible destruction of the Nazi occupation of his homeland and World War II, he lived through decades of ruthless atheistic oppression, he survived a murder attempt as Pope; and in the latter years of his pontificate he battled a cruel and degenerative disease. Yet, his constant message was "do not be afraid."

Blessed John Paul II says: *May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, so that by the power of the Holy Spirit you may abound in hope.* (Letter to the Romans 15:13). Jesus I trust in you! Spes contra spem - *hope against hope! With God nothing is impossible!* (The Pope Speaks, 39/3, 1994,183).

And again he says: *"Jesus said to us, 'My grace is sufficient for you, for My power is made perfect in weakness.' I will all the more gladly boast of my weaknesses, that the power of Christ may rest upon me. (2 Corinthians 12:9-10) The sick, the elderly, the disabled, and the dying teach us that weakness is a creative part of human living, and that suffering can be embraced with no loss of dignity. Without the presence of these people in our midst we might be tempted to think of health, strength, and power as the only important values to be pursued in life. But the wisdom of Christ and the power of Christ are to be seen in the weakness of those who share His sufferings. Let us keep the sick and disabled at the centre of our lives. Let us treasure them and recognise with gratitude the debt we owe them. We begin by imagining that we are giving to them; we end by realising that they have enriched us. May God bless and comfort all who suffer. And may Jesus Christ, the Saviour of the world and healer of the sick, make His light shine through human weakness as a beacon for us and for all mankind. Amen.* (L'Osservatore Romano, 5-31-82, 3).

In our own lives we should remember the great 'hope' which we have celebrated in our Mass together: Jesus is with us and **He Intends Victory Positively.**

My journey to home from home, M.M.

Many people In Britain get confused when I am talking about going 'home'. I was born in Rwanda, grew up and got married in Uganda to a Rwandan Tutsi, of Tanzania by residency, who went to school in Uganda and we finally went back to Rwanda after the genocide of 1994. My husband had joined the Rwandan patriotic army in Uganda which overthrew Habyalimana's government in Rwanda. I came to the UK in 2002 to look for sanctuary after the death of my husband by unknown people. After nine years of struggle in Britain I got indefinite leave to remain and a year after I got British citizenship. I believe that is why my friends and I get confused when I tell them that I had gone home. They wonder which home I am talking about because now I am British and my home is here in Britain.

Even though we lived in Uganda as refugees, I did not know the process in which my families went through to live in Uganda or other neighbouring countries like Tanzania or Burundi because I was young and anyway I was always with my parents so I did not know the impact of being in exile without your family and especially your children. I applied for asylum in the UK in 2002 and got indefinite to remain in 2009. All these years I was in the UK, I did not have either a close or distant relative but I got a family made up of the church members, HIV positive people and support groups. They have been all a person would want in a friend or family.

I was diagnosed with HIV in 2003, a situation I called uninvited 'double tragedy guest'; not only that I had lost my husband, left my children behind but I was also diagnosed with HIV. I had lost the hope to live because all I knew from Africa was that HIV equals death. There is a saying in my language that God brings hunger and provides the way of looking for food from those who have it. Indeed God provided me with the groups of networks, organisations and people that would hold my arm through the longest, hardest journey to freedom, and access to HIV combination therapy that I would not have received if I was returned to Rwanda despite having a combination of problems.

After 9 years in Britain I was able to return to Uganda and Rwanda to see my children that I left when they were toddlers. During the nine years as an asylum seeker, I was not allowed to work or to go to join higher education. When I was given permission to live in the UK it was a good relief but at one point I did not know what to do with my status. It was another new but long journey where I needed to be independent, pay rent, utilities and even buy essential furniture for my house without any savings. Thinking of having freedom of movement was a dream come true but how it was going to happen was another challenge without money to buy a ticket to Africa.

I shared my challenges with my friends and HIV support networks who contributed some money towards my ticket and upkeep in Africa. Since I had not been living with my children for over eight years, I had to seek for counselling because I was not sure of how my children will receive me and where I was supposed to start as a mother. I had the issue of disclosing my HIV status to my children and how it would impact on them. I remember having sleepless nights towards the last week before I left and even practicing how I will start the

topic. I realised how we take things for granted in this world. Yes, these are my children but I could not take them for granted that they will just accept me.

At the end of June 2011 I was met at the airport by my youngest child who is 19 years with his friends.. We just cried for some time before we greeted each other. He looked tall mature and handsome. I could not believe how tall he has grown; as much as I was mesmerised by his height, he was fascinated by mine as well. He thought that I had grown short. I reminded him that when I left he was only nine years and he was shorter than me. He confessed that he was worried because he was not sure whether he would have recognised me after such a long journey.

My eldest daughter who is 21 had lectures that day but she joined us in the evening. We had a lovely night full of tears of joy. The most important thing was to be together. Unfortunately we were one person less - my late husband, their father. After two weeks, I told them about my HIV status which sparked off questions such as how did you get it, if they are also infected etc. I tried my level best to explain to them the roots of HIV transmission and to re assure them that I am fine. The good thing, they were both supportive and it gave me an opportunity to educate them. My daughter has matured and really cares about her brother and me. I was happy to be called mum after such a long time however I would always miss the time which I stayed away from my children without seeing them grow to learn, know, understand their different characters and look after them as teenagers. To me it is a great opportunity lost and only God knows how the gap will ever be filled.

The time I spent in Uganda, I was able to help some women living with HIV in Mayuge district to start a support group. I used my experience of living with HIV, the support I have received from friends and HIV support networks in Britain to share information, knowledge with them. The aim of the group is to empower those women, have a collective voice so that they can be involved in influencing policies which affect them and understand the importance of peer support.

I would like to thank my friends who supported me and other networks such as Positive Catholics, George House Trust for the different support I was given before I left. Your help was very useful you made my dream come true and that is why I call you family.

I prefer not to mention my name because I have to put into consideration my children who still need protection from stigma and discrimination especially now that they are in relationships with people who might not want to be associated with anything to do with HIV.

How you can help ?

Please commit to pray for us, regularly.

Please consider supporting us financially. We continue to operate on a very small budget. The enclosed CAPS leaflet includes a GIFT AID declaration. If you are a British tax-payer completing this enables us to claim back 28p in every pound you donate to CAPS - cheques payable to "CAPS".

We are keen to recruit active and committed new trustees to reflect the diversity of people we serve. We especially **welcome** people with skills/expertise in IT, finance and budgets; fundraising; marketing; asylum and immigration issues; benefits advice. Women and members from ethnic minority groups are also under-represented presently in the trustee group. If you think that this may be **something constructive for you to offer**, please contact the Chair to discuss further.

Sincere thanks to all our friends, prayer supporters, religious communities, trustees and members of Positive Catholics, who encourage and inspire us in our work for God's reign.



CELEBRATING WORLD AIDS DAY 2011 - Many of the following websites have information and/or worship material, as well as other resources which can be downloaded:

UNAIDS - www.unaids.org

World AIDS Day - www.worldaidsday.org

National AIDS Trust - www.nat.org.uk / <http://www.hivaware.org.uk/be-aware/useful-resources.php> -

this latter address includes posters and leaflets to download/print

Catholic Agency for Overseas Development (CAFOD) - www.cafod.org.uk

National Catholic AIDS Network (NCAN) - www.ncan.org - *this network is no longer active, but the website is maintained.*

Ecumenical Advocacy Alliance - www.e-alliance.ch/en/s/hiv-and-aids/
 The Balm in Gilead - www.balmingilead.org
 United Methodist Church - <http://new.gbmg-umc.org/resources/worship/aids/devotional/>
 Christian Aid - http://www.christianaid.org.uk/stoppoverty/hiv/resources/fleshofourflesh_ideas.aspx
 USPG - http://www.uspg.org.uk/pray/pray_other_prayers_hiv.php
 Christian Reformed World Relief Committee: Service outline produced by the Ecumenical Prayer Circle in Liberia & Sierra Leone - <http://www.crwrc.org/pdfs/AdventLiturgy.doc>
 World AIDS Day Service, Anglican Church of Canada, Presbyterian Church in Canada, & United Church of Canada - http://www.pwrdf.org/fileadmin/fe/files/AIDS_Worship_Resource_Aug_24_04.pdf
 Primate's World Relief & Development Fund, World AIDS Day Vigil - http://www.pwrdf.org/fileadmin/fe/files/2004-VOr_AIDS_Vigil-service-read.pdf

You might want to gather with people of other faiths or from other Christian traditions to mark **World AIDS Day** or ensure that your parish or community acknowledges the challenge of HIV in its liturgies. If so, **POSITIVE RITES** is a 90-page booklet you should have. Published originally by *Catholic AIDS Link*, it brings together all sorts of liturgical resources for formal and informal celebrations, Masses on various themes around World AIDS Campaigns. Copies are available, **£3.50 incl. p/p**, cheques payable to "CAPS". Order from: **CAPS, PO Box 24632, London E9 6XF** or e-mail us: positivecatholics@btinternet.com

Dates for your diary

Here are details of various World AIDS Day religious events around the country - maybe there's one near you!

- 27 November 2011, 18.00 - *Remembrance & Awareness*, URC Halls, Grove Street, Bath BA2 6PJ
- 30 November 2011, 19.30 - Lichfield Cathedral World AIDS Day Service, The Close, Lichfield, Staffs WS13 7LD
- 1 December 2011, 19.00 - **World AIDS Day Vigil**, St. Mary's RC Cathedral, Regent St., Wrexham, LL11 1RB
- 1 December 2011, 12.00 - City of Edinburgh Methodist Church, 25 Nicolson Square, Edinburgh, EH8 9BX
- 1 December 2011, 19.00 - St. Mary's Church, North Church Street Cardiff CF10 5HB
- 1 December 2011, 19.15 - St. Matthew's Church, Tay Street, Perth PH1 5TF
- 1 December 2011, 19.30 - John Pounds Memorial Church, High Street, Old Portsmouth, Hants, PO1 2HW
- 3 December 2011, 14.00 - **World AIDS Mass, Manchester**, Celebrant: Fr. Peter Kinsella, Parish Priest - Pendleton - *venue details etc via* positivecatholics@gmail.com
- 4 December 2011, 10.30 - Westgate Unitarian Chapel, Westgate, Wakefield, West Yorkshire, WF1 1XR.
- 4 December 2011, 15.30 - World AIDS Day Service, Holy Trinity, Hamil Road, Burslem, Stoke-on-Trent, Staffs ST6 1AP
- 4 December 2011, 17.00 - **World AIDS Mass**, The Church of Our Lady of the Assumption & St. Gregory, Warwick Street, Soho, London W1B 5NB. Celebrant: Fr. John Sherrington CP, Passionist Provincial UK
- 4 December 2011, 18.30 - St Hilda's Church, Abbey Road, Smethwick, B67 5NQ



CATHOLICS FOR AIDS PREVENTION & SUPPORT

welcomes you to a

WORLD AIDS MASS

followed by refreshments & home-made, red-ribbon cup-cake sale in aid of CAPS: £1.50 each, 4 for £5.00, 9 for £10.00 - place your orders now: sophieanddeborah@yahoo.co.uk

Sunday, 4 December 2011, 17.00

The Church of Our Lady of the Assumption & St. Gregory, Warwick Street, Soho, London W1B 5NB

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