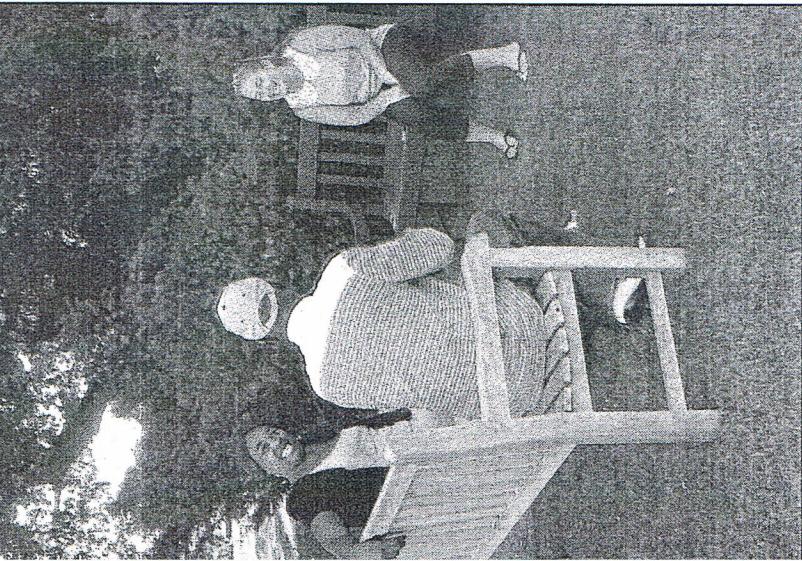


Space to enable people to be healed from the stigma of HIV

CHARITY BEGINS AT HOME



TEN years ago, Catholics for AIDS Prevention and Support (CAPS) sponsored a conference in the Diocese of Westminster, to review the situation in regards to HIV in the life of the Church in the UK. The conference included a workshop specifically for Christians diagnosed with HIV. Approximately 18 people living with HIV (PLWH) participated in this workshop. A few were Irish and British gay men, most were heterosexual African women and men, all living in London. Some were Roman Catholic, but to our surprise, many were from other traditions. They shared their experience of living with HIV as Christians, together.

Given the 'suspicion' of the Catholic Church among some Christians, it was notable that around ten of the participants were from Pentecostal or Evangelical churches. When asked why they had come to a Catholic sponsored event, one woman said: "I saw HIV and Christian and I just had to come." It became clear, that these Christians from various denominations felt that their pastoral needs were not adequately understood or addressed, within Christian Churches generally. They came out of some desperation.

They described how they felt that HIV was a taboo subject, not to be spoken of, in their

churches. Many explained that within the congregation several people were, like them, living with HIV – they would see each other at the HIV clinic. However, this was never acknowledged between them, nor spoken of within the congregation, nor by their priests or pastors. Still today, silence around issues of HIV is the norm in most churches. Why might this be?

Ignorance and a lack of awareness is one explanation. Many people consider HIV to be a 'manageable' long-term condition today, rather than the fatal illness that it once was. That is true in many ways, but not quite the whole picture. The reality of living with HIV is much more complex. Scientists are still learning what it means to live with HIV for a long time. Not everyone responds well to the medication that subdues the virus in the body, and the effects over 15 or 25 years are still being studied. Within the CAPS HIV peer support groups, we have had three members die in the last two years, others are ill with cancers, or a form of dementia, caused when the virus crosses into the brain. HIV remains a life threatening condition.

The lack of public visibility of PLWH may also cause us to think that no-one living with HIV works in our Church. Not so long ago, HIV was visible in the thin bodies of those living with and

dying from AIDS. It was impossible not to notice. Today, PLWH may remain hidden from view, appearing on the outside to be just like anyone else. But there can be no doubt that within our churches there are people coming to terms with HIV. It may be their own diagnosis, or that of a family member or friend. Often they will do so secretly, quietly and alone, because to speak of such things in the Church remains taboo.

Some years ago, a Christian man who heard me describe this secrecy challenged me. With some irritation, he suggested that it was unreasonable to expect Christians to take account of every particular life situation, and further, that PLWH should know that they will be accepted in our Churches: "Everyone knows that the Church is welcoming of everyone," he protested. "What do they expect us to do, put up a sign saying if you are living with HIV you are welcome?" He continued: "And a sign for women who have had an abortion, and another for people with drug problems?"

I had not intended to upset him. Who among us wants to hear that our churches are not welcoming places? After all, it is one of the principle signs of Christianity that after the example of Jesus, we welcome all women and men, especially

those who are poor and in need. Perhaps he thought I exaggerated the situation. Yet, his question also betrayed a lack of understanding. I had failed to help him appreciate just how powerful the stigma attached to HIV still is, and how stigma operates within individuals and communities. HIV stigma has long roots in our shared Christian tradition of linking sex, disease and sin. Anxieties about sexuality and intimacy run deep and are not easy to uncover or admit to. Yet we are all subject to these fears. There is something fearful in the threat of death that comes through intimacy. The stigma is reinforced by our unwillingness to talk about or discuss issues related to sex, and our inability to tackle the reality that our behaviours do not always conform to Church teaching. We are inclined to see only what we want to see. For the person who is diagnosed with HIV this stigma is triggered internally and these anxieties and the companions of stigma which are judgement, blame and shame, are felt inwardly, whether or not that is appropriate, and usually, it is not.

Jesus instructed us not to judge. Yet we are all inclined to do so. When the judgments we hold about ourselves or others are uncovered, we all need supporters and understanding from others who accept us as we are. At best that is what we experi-

Vincent Manning

ence within Christian community. This is also why CAPS provides weekend retreats for Christians living with HIV, so that these issues can be addressed and worked through. We do not provide an alternative to church, but we try to provide space so that people can be healed from the stigma which they experience following an HIV diagnosis, and grow in faith, strengthened in the knowledge that nothing can separate us from the love of God (Romans 8:38-39).

Ten years on, CAPS will hold another Conference to pray and reflect upon these issues. All are welcome to join us on Saturday 25th October for *Love Tenderly Act Justly: Stories of HIV and Christianity Today*. We will listen to the stories and experience of Christians living with HIV in the UK. For tickets please go to <http://www.brownpapertickets.com/e-mail:LoveTenderlyActJustly2014@gmail.com>.

In the meantime, may I encourage you to ensure that a 'Positive Catholics' poster or leaflet is displayed in your church, so that those living with HIV will see a visible sign of welcome and know that support and pastoral care is available for them in our Church. Leaflets can be downloaded from our website at: <http://www.caps-uk.org/resources.htm>

ndlerly, act justly – CAPS provides weekend retreats for Christians living with HIV, so that issues can be addressed and worked through, and for them to grow in faith, strengthened in the knowledge that nothing can separate us from the love of God