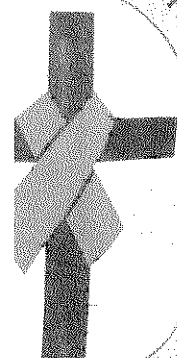




## AND SUPPORT TO THOSE LIVING WITH THE CONDITION

POSITIVE CATHOLICS FOR ATTENTION & SUPPORT



ive Catholics

**Stand up and be counted: At Hyde Park**



church in London to share, reflect on scripture and pray together. From humble beginnings, Positive Catholics has grown and the developing network is composed of women and men, young and old, married and single, 'gay' and 'straight', recently diagnosed and those who have lived with HIV for more than 20 years.

The Positive Catholics network is made up of people from Africa, Latin America and Europe, who now live in the UK. It includes people active in Church life and people who have been 'away' from the Church for many years.

In London, Positive Catholics meets every six to eight weeks to share food, prayer, community and conversation, in homes. Little groups are starting to form in Birmingham and Manchester, too.

There are three retreats each year, providing an opportunity for HIV-positive men and women to take time out from their ordinary lives, to pray together, share stories and experiences, fellowship and love; and to discover the presence God in the midst of HIV.

The Passionist Community and The Benedictines offer hospitality. Individuals, and a few Catholic agencies, offer financial support and encouragement.

What is remarkable about Positive Catholics is that it is peer-led. HIV-positive people share their hospitality, fellowship, gifts and talents for the benefit of their HIV-positive sisters and brothers.

In sharing talents and resources, friendships begin; and in beginning friendships, Christian love is brought into being.

There are too many stories to tell in an article such as this, yet we would like to share with you some of the joy which comes from this fragile community.

The following quotes are from

four members of Positive Catholics.

Members of Positive Catholics tell of the relief they feel when they are able to meet others who understand their situation: "I have gained confidence and found it rewarding when you open up to others. Sharing stories and experiences have lessened my burdens and anxieties."

This is one way by which people gain the support and encouragement to share this difficult news with friends and family and others who are close to them. This courageous step towards Christian community counters isolation.

Many are burdened, like Sam, with a sense that God is punishing them in some way. An HIV diagnosis can make you feel like Job and that God has abandoned you.

### Healing

However, through the Positive Catholics community, and especially at the weekend retreats, God's presence is made real and some of these fears can be confronted.

"I was hoping to be healed spiritually and this was achieved. I have realised that God loves me unconditionally," said one member.

Through prayer, fellowship and the sacraments, the weekend retreats are often experienced as an opportunity for God's love and healing to break through: "I have understood the difference between cure and healing"; "The highlight for me was the healing liturgy. This gives me the courage, strength, and faith to go on."

The Positive Catholics peer ministry is one way in which the Catholic family reaches out to others in need. Christians from other traditions also attend the meetings and retreats, always expressing gratitude for the particular encour-

agement which comes from within our Church.

Beyond the growing network, Positive Catholics also offers an invitation to the wider Church to become aware of and to share in the vulnerability of those HIV-positive people living among us, those who have so much to be afraid of in terms of sickness, rejection and exclusion.

The wider Church is asked to express its friendship with the excluded, the powerless, the rejected and the poor, and in doing so, to build the bonds of Christian love.

In the words of Jean Vanier, founder of the L'Arche Community, the Church is invited to become a "place of welcome" for vulnerable people "where people are transformed by an intense experience of community and relationship".

This is true for people who are living with HIV also. Over the years, Positive Catholics has been blessed with the pastoral support of priests and religious who have extended a hand of friendship to HIV-positive men and women, and the many little acts of generosity of friends, family members and people of goodwill.

In the Gospel of Luke, we can hear Jesus speaking to the Church: don't just invite your family and friends to a fantastic party "invite the poor, the disabled, the lame, the blind" (Lk 14:12-14) because in doing this we extend the bonds of Christian love.

In holding out a hand of welcome to people living with HIV and Aids, the Church can also share something of the joys of the Positive Catholics story. What might you do in your parish?

■ To find out more about Positive Catholics, please visit: <http://sites.google.com/site/positivecatholics>



Sign of solidarity: World Aids Day will be observed on December 1 to call attention to the 33 million people worldwide living with HIV/Aids