

DIOCESE OF WASHINGTON



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THE RIGHT REVEREND
JOHN T. WALKER
BISHOP OF WASHINGTON

October 9, 1986

Beloved in Christ:

Saint Paul tells us, "the spirit you received is not the spirit of slaves bringing fear into your lives again;..." Yet there is a spirit of fear which has permeated our community and our nation, and we who by the Holy Spirit have been made children of God must now firmly address this fear in our own lives and in the life of the diocese.

The proximate cause of our fear is Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome - AIDS. There is no doubt that AIDS is a terrible affliction bringing suffering and death to those who have it. It strikes men, women, children, and newborn babies; black, white, and Hispanic persons; homosexuals and heterosexuals; those who use drugs and those who do not. The fear of being exposed to the AIDS virus is a real one, but research tells us that it is not casually transmitted, and that one is not in danger of catching AIDS by touching someone who has it, or eating with them, or sitting next to them in church, nor even in sharing the Sacrament of Christ's Body and Blood with them. I, personally, have had no hesitancy in sharing the Cup with those who have AIDS or who have been exposed to it.

The prophet Isaiah spoke eloquently about the man of sorrows who was despised and rejected. Our Lord, nailed to the cross, was the most pointed example of one who was despised and rejected. Our fear of exposure has produced a large new group of men and women of sorrows, who are, in unspeakable ways, despised and rejected even by some who identify themselves as followers of the crucified Lord. Persons with AIDS have been fired from their jobs, evicted from apartments, abandoned by parents and friends, and frequently left unfed in hospital beds. This is not just happening somewhere else; it is happening within the boundaries of this diocese.

The cruel fear goes beyond our being afraid of exposure. It is also a manifestation of our inability as Christians to deal openly and honestly with issues of death and dying and with the mystery of human sexuality. Persons dying from AIDS are often young, previously healthy and vigorous; they are often babies who have had no chance at living a full life. We feel we have no weapons to deal with such terrors. Some have said that God's punishment is being visited upon persons with AIDS. I reject this notion completely as a narrow, skewed vision of how the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ deals with his people. Ours is a God of forgiveness and reconciliation who continually calls his people to repentance and new life in him. If he visited all of those who sin with fatal diseases or natural disasters, the human race would have been wiped out long ago.

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Others wish to distinguish between the "guilty" and the "innocent", between the promiscuous person or the drug user, and the person who received tainted blood from their mother or from a transfusion. It was not Our Lord's practice to make these kinds of distinctions, and on the occasions he did, he invariably went to those whom society judged guilty. Our calling is not that of judging, but of serving, and there are human beings in our community who have a particular need for our care and compassion.

The time has come for action on the part of the Christian Church. There is no point in wasting time lamenting the fact that it has taken us too long to respond. We must now begin to respond as Christ would have us.

Education is vital. The education of Christian people as well as the community at large to the realities of AIDS, how it is and is not transmitted, must happen so that our fears can be overcome, and so that those who are at risk may avoid exposure. Exposure to the AIDS virus for so many of those who are now dying happened long before the terror of the disease came to our awareness. The truth is that many men and women have changed their behavior as they have become educated about how this disease is transmitted, yet our fear and our prejudice have caused us, both in our churches and in the wider community, to hold back on the specifics of ways of preventing AIDS because we do not want to offend peoples' sensibilities.

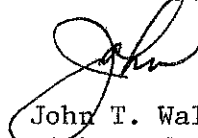
As responsible Christians we must provide education in our own homes and churches, and support for education in the schools where young people are exposed everyday to the lure of drugs and are coming to grips with their own sexual psychologies. If we are afraid to talk about these things in Church School and adult education programs, then we must take some of the blame for the continued presence of this epidemic. Let us not wait until there is a baby or a young man or woman with AIDS in each of our parishes to begin to provide educational materials.

Our Lord commanded us to visit the sick and comfort the dying. It is time for us to demonstrate in concrete ways his, and our, love for those who are ill. We in the Church have long recognized this action as being at the center of our pastoral ministry; to be reluctant to exercise this ministry to persons with AIDS, as well as to their loved ones, is not worthy of us. The Episcopal Caring Response Committee has taken the lead in raising funds for a house for persons with AIDS who have no place to live. The Community of Hagar has developed a ministry to the families of persons with AIDS, particularly those coming to Washington from other areas of the country. Hospices in Washington and the surrounding counties have begun to provide services to persons with AIDS. Community groups are providing support in terms of counseling and companionship as well as medical services. But as the number of persons diagnosed as having AIDS continues to rise, more is needed both in terms of funding and in hands-on ministry.

AIDS Pastoral Letter
October 9, 1986
Page Three

We have been given the spirit which enables us to face directly and without fear all that confronts us. Let us now go forward in faith, empowered by the Spirit, to root out the fears which enslave us and then give ourselves in a service of love and compassion to those persons with AIDS, and persons afraid of AIDS. If we are to be Christ's Body in the world, we can do no other.

Faithfully,

A handwritten signature in dark ink, appearing to read "John T. Walker", written over the printed name.

John T. Walker
Bishop of Washington