

A Liturgical Resource for the Worshiping Community Dealing with AIDS by Patricia D. Brown

INTRODUCTION

When AIDS is over. What a wonderful thought. Now in the middle of this epidemic, it is difficult to imagine. But the end of AIDS is the ultimate goal. Yet even when that day comes, our lives will never be the same because we all will have lived through the disease. Society, our campus, each of us, will never be restored to how things were before AIDS. Even now it touches all of our lives; we are all changed. Indeed, AIDS is currently claiming lives each year from the student, staff and faculty populations of our university and college campuses.

Who Is Affected?

The persons who are presently affected with AIDS are not somewhere 'out there,' other than us, but the person sitting in the chair beside you in class, studying in the library and shaking hands with the campus chaplain after worship. Who are these people affected by the disease, AIDS HIV? They are:

- Persons living with AIDS.
- Students, faculty and staff.
- Friends and families, including children.
- Healing and health care professionals.
- Those who minister.
- Those who are afraid and wish it would go away.
- Persons who seek God's healing and peace.
- The "they" is all of us.

Some of us wonder how much closer the impact of AIDS will come. How many more will die before the crises over? Even if AIDS never touches you personally, you need to be prepared for the impact it is going to have on your campus. No community will be immune from the disease.

Worship As A Beginning

Worship in itself is an act of love, acceptance and nurture, acknowledging that God in Jesus Christ is at work in our life and in our world. One way campus ministry can begin to address the concerns surrounding this disease is in worship. Creating a worship environment which is welcoming to all people loved by Jesus is an essential part of campus ministry. Worship can be a first step in mobilizing resources to be in mission and deal with the needs involved both on the campus and the larger community. Using this liturgy in worship is one way we as people of the church can begin to discern the ways God is calling us to engage in faithful response.

A Few Guidelines

Although there are no right or wrong, correct or incorrect, ways of speaking and writing about this relatively new disease, I've tried to create a few guidelines of my own as I sit down to write this liturgy. I share that process here with you.

As followers of a resurrected Christ, we believe in a God of life. This means we refer to "persons living with AIDS" rather than "victims of AIDS" in order to empower people to avoid passivity in the face of the illness. It means life goes on even in the face of death. It means we can face our mortality and death and continue to live as a people of hope. It means I can say, "Yes, the doctor told me I have AIDS, but I can still live in the assurance of the risen Lord!" The apostle Paul exclaimed, "We do not live to ourselves and we do not die to ourselves. If we live, we live to the Lord, and if we die, we die to the Lord; so then, whether we live or whether we die, we are the Lord's" (Romans 14:7-8 NRSV).

This does not mean we do not acknowledge that there will be illness and sadness, feelings of hopelessness, anger and discouragement. Many of us are fearful. We even want to hide and deny what is happening to us, those we love and our campus community. Fear, questions and uneasiness do exist and will pervade the campus worshipping community's life if not faced. Those who identify their misgivings may feel guilty when they admit them. All of these feelings must be acknowledged. Community members need to be reassured that all their reactions are real and normal. These feelings and realities are not to be belittled or denied. We all need to learn and understand as deeply as we can to care in ways that will be sustaining and nurturing.

The community must take care not to fall into behaviors which diminish the individual's personal sense of worth. Instead we, who are all affected by AIDS, name our feelings and concerns as valid and walk as equal companions on this uncharted road.

In the service you may wish to refer to facts and statistics, indicating the numbers of persons infected with the HIV virus, the numbers of persons diagnosed with AIDS, and the numbers who have died. Because of the ever-changing nature of these statistics, they are not included here. You may contact your state and/or local health department for the most recent national and regional statistics.

The worshipping congregation on campus can be a catalyst in building awareness, prevention, education, personal service and even lobbying on behalf of the campus and community to provide care and supportive ministry. Yet, for us as Christians, it is more than all these agendas; it is also a spiritual crisis.

Increasingly, the campus community, students, faculty and staff suffer the pain and loss of loved ones and are fearful of misunderstanding or rejection. In holding a worship service such as this, the campus worshipping community can show an openness to be present with people affected by AIDS/HIV or others with extensive illness, and talk about it before it comes home. During months of continual or terminal illness, the questioning of faith and prayer on the part of families of faith is at times overwhelming, often disheartening. There are others of your larger community who are doctors, nurses and health care providers who care for these persons. As a community we are responding to the Good News of Jesus Christ when we express the loving touch of God. We can give encouragement and acceptance to those who are affected in our communities.

In the midst of the global epidemic of AIDS, the church is urgently called to a ministry of health and wholeness. We as people of Jesus are a major force in our college or university community to be a life-giving presence in the time of this potentially fatal disease.

Take What Is Helpful And Leave The Rest

My intent in writing this worship resource is not to offer a prefabricated or generic service. It is my belief that each worship experience must arise from the response of the community both to the suffering of AIDS and the movement of the Holy Spirit. This gives the worship dignity and grace. Take, therefore, what is helpful and authentically yours and leave the rest. I offer practical guidelines, not rules.

LITURGICAL RESOURCES

Gathering

Announcement and Welcome

Welcome to this service of worship! It is part of our Christian tradition to come together, united in Jesus Christ, particularly in times of stress and trouble. Today we gather because the impact of AIDS has touched the life of our human community.

We gather because our lives have been affected in various ways. Some of us have experienced

firsthand the illness or death of a loved one. Some of us have HIV infection and are living with AIDS. All of us are imprinted with the pain and fear surrounding this international epidemic.

So we come together in worship, united in knowing that not AIDS, but God is the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end. Let us pray and sing the songs of faith, confident in a God who stands by us, affirms us, and gives us the strength to be sustained and to live today fully.

Responsive Act

Come Lord Jesus, and empower our worship:

So we can be a sign community, among other signs, of God's gracious love

Come Lord Jesus, and guide our worship:

So we can be a symbol of hope and compassion for the world.

Come Lord Jesus, and move our worship:

So we can be a vision of wholeness and partners in healing.

Great Physician, healer of body, mind and spirit:

Make us a sign, a symbol, and an embodiment of the vision. Refresh us with the healing balm of your presence.

Prayer of the Day

Gracious God, we give you thanks that our time of living can be both holy and healing. We gather here to seek your presence among us. Fill us with your healing power that we may be channels of your love. Amen.

Prayer of Confession and Act of Pardon

When a Prayer of Confession and Act of Pardon are used, the tone should be one of assurance, acceptance and hope. The emphasis should be on the confession of all the sin of all the people present. The confession or pardon should not insinuate in any way that AIDS is either the result of sin or a punishing judgment from God.

He was dying of AIDS.

He said to me, "No one touches me."

I did not touch him.

Her face was old and worn before its time.

She told me "I'm sick and tired of being sick and tired."

I had no time to stop.

His dreams for the future were dimmed.

He asked: "Where is the welcome I once enjoyed?"

I remained silent.

She was angry with feelings of resentment and the unfairness of life.

She implored: 'Where were you when I needed you?'

I turned away from her.

In these and in many ways, O God, we are caught in fear, confusion and anger. We have not loved our neighbors or heard their needs. Forgive us, we pray, as we reach out with ears to hear, hearts to respond, and hands to help.

Amen.

Hear the Good News of forgiveness! God grants new life to those who turn and seek it. In the name of Jesus Christ, you are forgiven.

Amen.

Sermon

(Luke 10: 30-37, The Good Samaritan) Try focusing on the innkeeper for a change--the one who was faced with the long-term care of the injured one. The innkeeper was entrusted with the care of the man and did so on faith that the Samaritan would return and pay what was due. Long-term caregivers need extra support.

(Mark 2:2-12) The paralytic's four friends are not discouraged by the seeming inability to reach the healer. They do anything possible for their sick companion, even removing the tiles of a roof. They show how far we must go to help friends and loved ones who are sick.

(1 Thessalonians 1: 1-10) This text lifts up disciples of Jesus who have a "work of faith and labor of love and steadfastness." With the power of the Holy Spirit, they build a community of faith, joy and welcome as they await Jesus' return.

Petition Prayer

Following each petition, there may be a period of silence in which the congregation is invited to name aloud or silently those persons or situations they wish to remember.

God of mercy, we thank you today that we are invited to be in this holy space to bear witness to the sacredness of all human life. We are all children of your creation and ask now for your blessing.

SILENCE

We pray and bring before you our pain, anger, grief and tears. We seek your guidance to comfort one another and find comfort for ourselves.

SILENCE

We pray and set before you our hope, courage, wholeness and peace. We lift these up as signs of your presence among us.

SILENCE

We name before you those who have been affected by the crisis of AIDS. We pray for any others in grief or trouble, that they may call upon you for help.

SILENCE

We pray and release all these concerns into your sustaining power. Bless us, heal us, make us whole. Through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.

The Peace

The Peace is a necessary part of the worship service. It is an opportunity to offer signs of reconciliation and love. The congregation may stand and greet one another in the peace of our Lord Jesus Christ. The leader may use these words or other words which reflect the purpose of the Peace.

God's peace is one which heals our attitudes and builds healthy relationships between God, families, persons and communities. Let us stand and offer one another signs of peace, reconciliation and love. The peace of the Lord Jesus Christ be with you all.

And also with you.

Dismissal With Blessing

Empowering God, as we go forth:

Grant us stillness in the midst of strife.

Grant us comfort in the midst of chaos.

Grant us your Spirit as we travel on refreshed and renewed!

Amen.

Closing Prayer

Eternal God, as your disciples we return to our daily lives better able to sustain one another and more intent on extending your healing presence. We leave mindful of your care and love so that we may live faithfully each day.

In sharing one another's lives, we've grown stronger. We are more filled with depth and integrity. We have been driven to love and care by a loving, caring God.

Now we go into the world with the peace of Christ, the love of God and the encouragement of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

CONCLUDING COMMENT

When AIDS is over; what a wonderful thought! In fact, our prayer is that soon this worship piece will be obsolete. Massive, growing statistics tell us it will not. But, as a community of Jesus Christ, we do not have to wait until the end of AIDS. In faith, the changes to and within us can be positive ones. Because we will have entered into the struggle fully, we will have become more caring, understanding and compassionate with each other. As a Christian community, we will be more empowered, fearless and united.

Indeed, in the middle of AIDS our greatest resource is the community of Jesus Christ. Right now, in the midst of this terrible global tragedy, we can begin to visualize our lives freed from a devouring control of AIDS -- lives that are healthy, happy and productive. Jesus is ready and already present with those who suffer.

When AIDS is over? May that day come soon! Amen.

PRAYERS FOR CARE PARTNERS

Morning Prayer:

God of new beginnings and of this day: As the sun warms the earth and brings new light, bring warmth and light to our home in the unfolding of this day.

Help me, just for today, to bring comfort and relief when needed.

Allow me laughter for my heart and joy for my soul. Give new light today so that I may not become bogged down in the sickness that overwhelms. And, Lord, when the going is tough, let me know that you are here, that you hear my cries, and that you never leave me alone.

Thank you for the opportunity of this day to be loving and loved by [Name]. In your Son's precious name. Amen.

Evening Prayer:

Lord of the sunset: As another day draws to a close, hear my prayer of thanks giving, for another day lived in the fullness of your grace, for another day of life and love, for another day of opportunity to serve and to receive. May tonight bring peace, calm and rest from the day's trials. May your spirit fill our home so that we may know and abide in you.

Bring us into tomorrow refreshed and renewed, in the name of one who promised He would never leave us alone. Amen.

Personal prayers for community

Almighty God, Lover and Creator: I bring my prayers to you this day for persons anywhere who suffer from HIV infections and from the ravages of AIDS.

I confess, Lord, that I do not understand a disease for which there seems to be no cure, for which there seems no hope for tomorrow. All I can do is come to you and ask that you bring hope for tomorrow for those who are ill, especially for [Here the name(s) can be stated.] I pray for their family(ies), their loved ones, and those who give them care.

When one in my midst is ill, Lord, I too suffer. Keep me in close accord with those whom I name before you. Bring me to action to help and advocate for them. In the name of Jesus Christ I pray. Amen.

OR

Holy One: Today the reality of AIDS looms even larger because one of our own is ill.

It is easy, God, to want to ignore the sickness of another and to pretend that life is cheery for everyone. Help me today, Lord, to focus on another, to pray for my friend and companion, to remember ways to be of service: to give time to his/her caregiver, to make a meal, to sit and share.

God, you have placed me with a community of believers. Yet, I know that in the believing is also sharing, working together, and being the Christ for one another. Help me to see the Christ in [Name]. Help me to be loving so that I might be Christ for another. Amen.

Personal Prayer for Self

Spirit of God:

In this moment I am caught in fear and confusion. I teeter on the edge of my vulnerability; some imagined, some surprising, some painful;

Spirit of Truth:

In the still small voice I am aware of your nearness which is strangely, mysteriously present to me; a smile in my friend's eyes, with bread and intimacy shared, in the silent moment alone.

Spirit of Life:

A deep longing brings me to your presence, and in the depths of my own holiness I cry that my spirit might be truly freed, to be eased in my struggles, bold in staring down my terror hopeful and free in my living graceful in my life.

Spirit of Love:

Gentle my anger. Quiet my desperation. Soften my cynicism. Soothe my fears. Put me at peace and reconcile me with myself, and then with the people around me. Amen.

OR

Come Lord Jesus, be with me in my needing; come, go with me in my searching; come, struggle with me in my wanting; come, stay with me in my longing.

Come Lord Jesus, come.

OR

O Lord, I ask not to be delivered from the turbulence of my days and nights, but I do ask for a sense of warmth from the fading embers, a sense of light in the staggering face of the deep. Shake from me the dusty webs from my eyes that as in days before, I may begin to see the surprises of life urging me to go on in faith to renew my vision, regain my perspective, restore my soul.

In the power of Jesus' name, I lift my prayer to you. Amen.

This resource was written and prepared by the Reverend Patricia D. Brown, executive secretary of Mission Evangelism of the General Board of Global Ministries, the United Methodist Church, New York City, and the Reverend Adele K. Wilcox, pastor of Falls United Methodist Church and director of the Ridge Group Ministry, Philadelphia.