

CHRISTIAN, PHILADELPHIAN, AND GAY-AFFIRMING
RESPONSES TO AIDS, 1982-1992

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Whitney Cox
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Examining Committee Members:

Dr. Sydney White, Advisory Chair, Department of Religion
Dr. Rebecca Alpert, Department of Religion
Dr. Laura Levitt, Department of Religion
Dr. David Harrington Watt, Department of History

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ABSTRACT

"Christian, Philadelphian, and Gay-Affirming Responses to AIDS, 1982-1992" is an analysis of primary source material from Christian congregations and extra-denominational religious groups, particularly with regards to the way these groups used scripture and theological language to construct a counter-narrative to the prevailing discourse that painted AIDS as God's punishment on sinners. These materials show the way these groups represented themselves both within their own communities and outward, providing a textual record of the way leaders and laypersons alike discussed AIDS and its meaning. This work begins by considering the complicated factors at play: the particular history of Philadelphia and its relationship to its gay communities, historical and contemporary attitudes of Christianity toward sin and disease, and the particular biomedical and political realities of AIDS. It then follows the epidemic through several Philadelphian Christian communities from 1982 to 1992, demonstrating changing Christian attitudes toward sickness and sexuality as reflected in the rhetoric from these organizations, as understandings of AIDS went from the apocalyptic to the wearily optimistic. This dissertation demonstrates that while AIDS was never the whole of gay life in the United States, not even during the years it was most frightening and least understood, the crisis it introduced necessitated gay-affirming articulations of Christian theology – ones that persisted even as they became less necessary, as infection demographics shifted. This work's examination of these texts shows how marginalized Christian communities and their allies can use liberative Christian rhetoric to push back against language of oppression supported by the dominant Christian paradigm.

This dissertation is dedicated to
Philadelphians with AIDS, named and unnamed here,
who fought the good fight, finished the race,
and kept the faith.

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both classroom settings and commentary that have shaped the way I think about the American religious landscape, particularly in Philadelphia itself, and I am grateful that he was able to bring his historian's perspective to my committee.

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INTRODUCTION

In much of the popular discourse in the United States, especially over the last half century, the concepts of 'gay' and 'Christian' are presented as binary opposites. Part of the divide is the result of some of the loudest conservative Christian voices and how they have constructed their own positions rhetorically off others as alien, irreconcilable, and fundamentally opposed to their own identity. Fundamentalist pastor Jerry Falwell, Charismatic televangelist Pat Robertson, and Focus on the Family founder James Dobson were perhaps the most prominent of these in the late twentieth century, using their own distribution networks as well as more mainstream channels to espouse a form of Christianity openly and actively advocating for the marginalization and even criminalization of non-heteronormative sexual and gender identities. During this same period, gay activists and organizers became accustomed to conservative Christianities as significant opponents to their struggles for greater social and legal acceptance; by 1981, they found these mid-century struggles for their civil rights further complicated by the emergence of AIDS. Because of their shared newness, each group found it necessary to establish itself in the public eye, and each did so by characterizing itself as the underdog hero, fighting against a marauding enemy that wanted to destroy life as they knew it. The Moral Majority did this by taking its established anti-homosexual crusade and incorporating AIDS and its secular activists to create an even more dangerous, contaminative menace in the minds of its members and donors. ACT UP, in response, characterized sources of religious authority as being the root of all their evils, identifying faith-based organizations (primarily, but not limited to, Catholic and Protestant Christianity)

as sources of bigotry and hatred that quite literally wished to see LGBT individuals dead.¹

The result of this is a common perception, especially through the last decades of the twentieth century, of LGBT identity and Christian identity as being not only without overlap, but fundamentally irreconcilable with one another. Even more so, often any understanding of the two demands they be situated *actively* in opposition to one another, with Christians taking proactive steps against gay rights and inclusivity, and LGBT activists setting their sights on Christian organizations as targets of ridicule and rejection.

However, this binary assumption also extends over into a great deal of scholarship done about gay history, not so much in action but in silence. The larger body of LGBT history in general tends to ignore religion altogether, or to address it predominantly as an antagonizing outside force working against the community. Mentions of gay-friendly Christianity often start and stop with Troy Perry and his Metropolitan Community Church, as though this small, gay-focused denomination represents the entirety of the gay Christian experience. It would be laughably incorrect to paint a picture of US Christian and gay communities as genial neighbors with occasional misunderstandings; too much of history stands as evidence to the contrary. But at the same time, it is a mistake to think of them as necessarily hostile to one another, or even necessarily separate from one another.

¹ Much of this dissertation is informed by scholar Ashley Lierman's work on the Moral Majority and ACT UP, which analyzes these two groups as they rose to prominence and came into being, respectively, in the 1980s. (*The Plague Wars: Encounters between Gay and Lesbian Activism and the Christian Right in the Age of AIDS*. PhD diss., Drew University, 2009.) In a way, her work and mine are something of a matched set; she examines the ways in which the prevailing discourses about sexuality and Christianity were constructed around AIDS, while I look at the same period, but focus instead on the missed middle of those discourses, filling in the rhetorical gap. Other antagonism-focused approaches similar to Lierman's can be found in Tina Fetner's *How the Religious Right Shaped Lesbian and Gay Activism*, Deborah Gould's *Moving Politics: Emotion and Act Up's Fight against AIDS*, and Heather White's *Reforming Sodom: Protestants and the Rise of Gay Rights*.

In this work, I examine the supportive, symbiotic, and often unifying relationships between LGBT communities and Christian communities, in order to present a picture of the relationship between sexuality and religion that is more complicated and interrelated than the prevailing narrative would have it be. To do this, I focus on materials produced by gay and gay-friendly Christian congregations and organizations operating in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania between 1982 and 1992. Though there are many notable pieces of these texts about general LGBT activism and concerns, my primary focus is the way these discussions center around HIV/AIDS. AIDS is not just a disease: It has medical, epidemiological, political, and theological concerns that communities must address. Evidence of these discussions has been preserved in textual materials produced by these individuals and communities during this eleven-year span.

To look at textual ephemera not only sidesteps the problem of faulty human memory, it allows me to look at the way these Christian groups presented themselves at the time to their congregations and other interested parties. With few exceptions, all the material discussed within was made to be available to the public, whether in person (in the case of things such as church bulletins and sermons delivered to open worship) or textually (as it would be with fliers, handouts, meeting minutes, etc.). Even materials such as monthly newsletters, which would have been delivered to specific mailing lists, carry disclaimers that indicate awareness of the possibility that they might be viewed by someone outside of the intended community. While the material made available to me does contain a number of pieces of personal correspondence, when dealing with these, I have used them as evidence of more general and public activism, and not of personal, individual cases. No personal information is made public in this dissertation that would not at the time have

been considered reasonably public; often, authors, contributors, and subjects have already been rendered anonymous or pseudonymous by the time of the source's publication, more mindful of their contexts and concealment than I could ever be.

Instead, I have chosen to focus on the way that these issues were presented in a context for general viewing, in part to argue that the binary Christian-vs.-Gay assumption exists not because of a lack of evidence to the contrary of its easy narrative, but in spite of it. Gay Christians were not only present in the Philadelphia area at the time, they were visible and active well outside their own communities. Many explicitly Christian communities were hubs of gay social life, and thus became centers of organization for disseminating information, rallying social action, and providing comfort and meaning in terrifying times. Even in churches where members were predominantly heterosexual and often in families with children, one finds many open instances of inclusion of and outreach to gay HIV-positive individuals both within and beyond the borders of their own congregations.

In short, the omission of these intersections in the discourse at best leaves an incomplete picture of the early years of the AIDS epidemic, and more critically reinforces an exclusionary dualism. I will argue here that the full story of the first decade of AIDS, especially in Philadelphia, is one of cooperation as much as conflict – yet also that, at the same time, significant differences existed in the approaches taken and rhetoric used by Christian groups whose membership was predominantly gay and lesbian, and Christian groups who had positive, inclusive attitudes toward non-heterosexual sexualities while still having majority-heterosexual membership.

The Trouble with Terminology

For the purposes of this work, I will often be using the word 'gay' to encompass a number of non-heterosexual sexualities (and, less often, gender identities). While I realize this is a bit dated and even more problematic in terms of representational language, there are three particular reasons behind my decision:

The first is that though 'gay' is indeed dated, it is dated to a time covered by the inquiry of this work. It is employed as a catch-all term in much of the material in my research; sometimes 'and lesbian' is tagged on behind to indicate a broader focus, while sometimes such inclusivity is implied without being stated. Importantly, it is not the more clinical and pathologizing 'homosexual', which, though coined in 1869 as a non-pejorative term², even at the time of the emergence of the AIDS epidemic had begun to lose favor within communities most described by it, as the term had taken on negative connotations both in the mouths of luminaries of the New Christian Right and *The Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*, the latter of which listed *homosexuality* as a condition until 1973.³ By 1991, in fact, the American Psychological Association was instructing psychologists to avoid heterosexual bias in their language by rejecting the term 'homosexual' in favor of 'gay male' and 'lesbian', noting that "the term *homosexuality* has been associated in the past with deviance, mental illness, and criminal behavior, and these

² Westphal, C. 1869. *Die conträre Sexualempfindung: Symptom eines neuropathischen (psychopathischen) Zustandes*. *Archiv für Psychiatrie und Nervenkrankheiten* 2:73-108.

³ APA Task Force on Appropriate Therapeutic Responses to Sexual Orientation. (2009). Report of the Task Force on Appropriate Therapeutic Responses to Sexual Orientation. Washington, DC: American Psychological Association.

negative stereotypes may be perpetuated by biased language."⁴ As such, during the period discussed in this work, 'gay' was the general value-neutral term of choice both inside and outside queer communities. Where 'homosexual' (and, to a lesser degree, 'homosexuality') appears in this analysis, it is intended to resonate with a very specifically historical context.

The second reason is that the primary focus of this material *is* on gay culture that is specifically male. Historically, gay men and lesbian women have not approached the culture and politics of sexual liberation from collective or at times even compatible positions, and the general lack of desire for other-gendered romantic partners has frequently led to strongly homosocial homosexuals. The gender divide between gay and lesbian activists in particular has led to schisms in activism and organization that reach back far into the twentieth century, leading to what historian and scholar Marc Stein characterizes as a mid-1960s "national homophile movement that elsewhere tended to feature overwhelmingly male or exclusively female groups"⁵. Though this was not so much the case in Philadelphia – the place to which the rest of the United States forms Stein's 'elsewhere' – groups which managed any kind of sustained, significant cross-gender participation still were often more focused on immediate action and practical goals than on affiliation in more personal aspects of participants' lives. By contrast, the city's gay and lesbian cultures managed different social organizations and artistic outlets; for instance, two major Philadelphian-led homophile publications with nationwide distribution, *Drum* and *The Ladder*, contained material of interest and appeal specifically to gay men and

⁴ Committee on Lesbian and Gay Concerns, American Psychological Association. "Avoiding Heterosexual Bias in Language." *American Psychologist* 46, no. 9 (September 1991): 973-74.

⁵ Stein, Marc. 2000. *City of sisterly and brotherly loves: lesbian and gay Philadelphia, 1945-1972*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press. 226.

lesbians, respectively. While the crises surrounding AIDS gave rise to strong (if still often somewhat uneasy⁶) unifying forces across gender lines during the 1980s, these first infections emerged into social settings often with a great deal of single-gender focus.⁷

The initial medical and cultural responses to AIDS largely attempt to address demographics most affected by infection, and the language used overwhelmingly expects the target audience to be gay men. Likewise, gay men were some of the first to produce those responses; activist Larry Kramer and several of his gay male friends organized action into what would become the Gay Men's Health Crisis (GMHC) in late 1981, before AIDS was even 'AIDS'.⁸ Even when, as the epidemic progressed, it became clear many heterosexuals (of color, especially) fit into these 'high-risk' groups, lesbians were never considered a particularly vulnerable population. That, combined with the general cultural connection with the disease that saw it initially termed Gay-Related Infectious Disease (GRID), means that 'gay' in a general context associated with AIDS before 1992 will almost invariably refer to men.

Similarly, contemporary conservative opposition to LGBT culture rarely makes any attempt to nuance categories of sexual and gender difference, letting 'gay' be one of the kindest catch-all terms used to describe many of the individuals and cultures that are the subject of this dissertation. While the purpose of this work is not to focus on negative

⁶ For a more in-depth examination of gay/lesbian politics and interactions, particularly as part of ACT UP, see Cvetkovich's *An Archive of Feeling*.

⁷ See Primiano, 'I Would Rather Be Fixated on the Lord', for an example of how one of these organizations, Dignity Philadelphia, was male-dominated in terms of leadership, membership, and focus.

⁸ Andriote, John-Manuel. 1999. *Victory deferred: how AIDS changed gay life in America*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press. 87-89.

religious responses to AIDS and sexual orientation⁹, because of the way those responses once dominated and continue to feature prominently in the discourse, they are impossible to ignore.

The third and final reason that 'gay' remains the descriptive word of choice for the period I am addressing in this dissertation is that any attempt to update the language to contemporary standards would not only be anachronistic, but would likely sound dated even a decade from now. The past fifty years have brought unprecedented changes in awareness of and openness to non-heteronormative sexualities and gender identities, and these changes have led to rapid shifts in language – shifts that have not even begun to concretize. While 'queer' and the (delightfully pronounceable) acronym QUILTBAG¹⁰ have become part of the landscape even outside of academic and activist discourses, they come with very modern uses that cannot be written back cleanly onto the past. When I have used the word 'queer' referring to historical material, it is as a nonspecific umbrella term for anything falling outside the purview of heteronormativity.

Even 'gay' is a difficult term to approach, because not all men who have sex with men (MSMs) would be considered or consider themselves gay, to say nothing of those who are or are involved with gender-nonbinary individuals. Similarly, some self-identified gay men and lesbians can have sex with women and men (respectively) without feeling a disconnect from that original label or a desire to redefine themselves as 'bisexual';

⁹ Partly because doing so has been the subject of several excellent works from many different disciplines and perspectives, among them Michael Cobb's *God Hates Fags: The Rhetorics of Religious Violence* (2007), Janet Jakobsen and Ann Pellegrini's *Love the Sin: Sexual Regulation and the Limits of Religious Tolerance* (2004), and Horace L. Griffin's *Their Own Receive Them Not: African American Lesbians and Gays in Black Churches* (2006).

¹⁰ That would be: Queer, Undecided, Intersex, Lesbian, Trans*, Bisexual, Asexual, Gay.

especially during the first decade of the AIDS epidemic, many found the label more important as a unifying identity marker than as an accurate description of sexual behavior.¹¹ Therefore, 'gay' should be understood here less as a concrete definitive category and more as a temporally significant term of self-identity and solidarity. Further, the word's connection, especially during the late twentieth century, to the concepts of 'gay liberation', 'gay power', and 'gay pride' broaden its connotations out far beyond the borders of individual sexual appetites. In fact, one of the earliest clear articulations of 'gay' as a term of collective positive identity and action comes specifically from engagement with mainline Protestantism; taking his cue from "Black is Beautiful" language, in 1969 Mattachine Society of Washington (D.C.) President Frank Kameny responded to debates inside the United Church of Christ with his then-provocatively titled essay "Gay is Good".¹² Placing 'gay' opposite the concept of sickness, Kameny unknowingly set the stage for activism barely more than a decade later, in which the collective identity of gayness served not just as a rejection of mental illness, but a point of solidarity against AIDS.

In a similar sense, when they occur, I use the terms 'male/man' and 'female/woman', as well as their associated pronouns, very broadly, implying gender presentation over and often absent any biological details. These two categories are often complicated by the presence of trans*¹³ individuals, which is why taking a person's self-identification at its

¹¹ Cvetkovich, Ann. 2003. *An archive of feelings: trauma, sexuality, and lesbian public cultures*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press. This kind of solidarity in identity over implied behavior is not at all unheard-of in queer history; the "political lesbians" and "woman-identified women" of the 1960s and 1970s created categories of organizing identity that considered manifested sexuality a secondary concern.

¹² Kameny, Franklin. "Gay Is Good (1969)." In *We Are Everywhere: A Historical Sourcebook of Gay and Lesbian Politics*, edited by Mark Blasius and Shane Phelan, 366-76. New York: Routledge, 1997.

¹³ The asterisk after trans* is a truncation symbol, which when searching in certain databases returns all variants of the ending of a word: e.g. psycholog* for psychology, psychologist, psychological, etc. In this context, it serves to create room to incorporate a variety of non-cisgendered (that is, where one's

word is important, even if the labels seem to contradict other notions of how gender and sexuality 'should' be. The intervening decades have changed much about how the LGBT community thinks of the T part of its identity, as well as how trans* individuals think about themselves; however, prior to the fairly recent past, there has not been much acceptance – even inside of queer circles – of much grey area between the two-sex poles, even if one-time permanent migration from one to the other might be possible. The either/or gender binary often represented in the language used here, then, should be understood not as prescriptive or reductive, but as a reflection of then-prevailing notions of binary gender essentialism.

At all times in this work, I attempt to describe individuals with the names and gendered pronouns the materials have chosen to use to represent them. Sometimes these are not static and may seem to provide contradictory information; sometimes this leads to referring to persons by fanciful pseudonyms. My concern is not with who these people 'really' were, but how they and those who knew them chose to present them.

Because the majority of this material was published with the awareness that it could and likely would be seen outside gay-friendly communities, I have chosen not to take extra steps to anonymize names, dates, or any other identifying details. When reasonable, I have sometimes simply chosen to truncate or omit these identifying details, especially as they pertain to individuals who were not official leaders or spokespersons for their various organizations. However, in most cases, individuals who wished themselves to distance their

gender identity/presentation is understood as not matching one's sex assigned at birth) identities and acknowledge that there are many ways to cross categories of gender, sex, and presentation. This is not an uncontroversial asterisk, but in the absence of a clearer umbrella term, I have opted for its use as applicable throughout this work.

more public identities from their participation in gay communities took steps to do so long before the original publication dates. These pages are peppered with pseudonyms, nicknames, initials, and solitary first names that have already so effectively disguised identities from me that I could not reveal further information even if I wanted to.

I also truly believe that culture has changed so significantly in the intervening years that the material here is no longer as sensitive as it was three decades ago. While non-heterosexual, non-cisgendered, and seropositive (as it pertains to this material, HIV+) identities still carry certain degrees of stigma throughout US culture, particularly within certain communities, they are not the uniform social or sometimes literal death sentences that they have been in the past. Part of what made this change was the willingness of people like the individuals in churches, organizations, and movements such as the ones described in these materials to stand up and make themselves visible. Many people who started the 1980s in the closet finished it proudly far on the other side, helping to pave the way to openness for those of us who would come after them.

Outline and Contents

This dissertation is arranged chronologically, starting with the pre-AIDS history of Philadelphia's gay population. While it is always difficult to shuffle history into neat compartments, the first decade of the AIDS epidemic can be thought of in three stages: the initial panic, growing awareness and organization, and the shift to greater public acceptability. Through these stages, AIDS goes from being a concern almost entirely relegated to the gay community, to an issue largely affecting gay groups but threatening

(and thus requiring action from) all walks of life, to a social and public health condition that cannot be ignored as a valid threat to the population at large.

Chapter 1 sets the stage with Philadelphia. Though it is not heralded as one of the great gay metropolises of the world, Philadelphia's connection to gay history and gay rights is strong. I chart a brief history of the urban area as it relates to gay rights, then give brief descriptions of the major congregations, communities, and organizations featured in subsequent chapters. Not all gay- and gay-friendly Christian organizations in Philadelphia produced texts during this eleven-year span, nor were the texts they *did* produce always preserved. However, many individuals from these organizations and the organizations themselves show up in other publications, usually as a result of collaborative action of some sort. Since the scope of this dissertation is limited to groups whose ephemera have been preserved, in this chapter I give a somewhat more comprehensive picture of the efforts of gay- and gay-friendly Christians in the Philadelphia area toward dealing with issues arising from AIDS.

In this first chapter, I also chart a trajectory of the first decade of the AIDS epidemic in the United States at large, contextualizing the material discussed in later chapters. Philadelphia is hardly an island; though it is often overshadowed by New York in terms of prominence in queer history, it was and remains a diverse, thriving metropolitan area with a diverse population, many cultures, and cosmopolitan urban awareness. Christian congregations and organizations in Philadelphia at the time were often called on to respond to decisions and actions from the rest of the country. Many also had guidance from religious structures larger than individual parishes; some were part of districts, dioceses, and communions that covered geographic areas beyond the borders of Philadelphia itself. No

decisions made by the groups focused on in this dissertation were made absent the knowledge of churchwide, national, and eventually global responses to AIDS.

Chapter 2, "'This is going to kill me and everyone I love": 1982 to 1985' covers the first four years in the scope of this dissertation. Though the condition that would later become known as AIDS was first clearly identified in the literature a year earlier, the transition from medical reality to widespread concern was not immediate. Indeed, the earliest references in these texts are not to the potential for epidemics and transmission, but to individual illnesses and deaths. Other concerns at the time take precedence, from calls to action about anti-gay state and national legislation, to social gatherings and chartered bus trips to Broadway shows, to theological reassurances of the divine goodness of *all* sexualities.

As the decade goes on, however, two things make AIDS an unavoidable reality and bring it to the forefront of discussion in these newsletters, bulletins, and other publications. The first is of course AIDS itself; though affected not as soon nor as sharply as cities such as New York and San Francisco during this time period, Philadelphia still saw a swift rise in AIDS cases, such that the presence of the plague could not be long discounted as a small trouble, soon to pass. The second, however, is the rise of harsh rhetoric from conservative Christians in the national media, calling AIDS a divine scourge and demanding harsh social and legislative treatment for those populations most affected by it. This latter factor makes dealing with AIDS not only a medical and practical reality, but a theological one as well. Gay communities found themselves staring down a coming disaster for which society at large was more than willing to blame them. Texts during this time discuss not only ways in which congregants should take care of themselves, but reassure readers frequently of

God's love and acceptance, no matter how bleak the future might appear to be.

Chapter 3, "'If we bring forth what is within us, it will save us. If we do not bring forth what is within us, it will destroy us.': 1986-1989', covers the latter half of that first decade, where AIDS was no longer a terrifying unknown malady, yet greater knowledge of its scientific nature had not removed the fear of it. The death of Rock Hudson had made AIDS a household word, leading to awareness campaigns intended to educate the public about the particulars how one might contract HIV. Indeed, the knowledge of AIDS as a sexually transmitted disease had only added to the stigma surrounding it, thus reinforcing the Christian Right's claims of AIDS as a plague sent upon the unrighteous, complete with innocent collateral damage. Many of the same concerns from the previous chapter are reflected, especially with regards to legislation and social consequences. Some apocalyptic imagery begins to permeate the language from gay communities, and more mentions of grief counseling and prayer groups show exactly how widespread the impact of AIDS had become.

This chapter also sees the introduction of a new group of participants to the discussion: gay-friendly churches, whose members were predominantly straight, yet who engaged in theological and social outreach to gay men and lesbians. Though much of the language and metaphors employed by these groups regard gay and HIV-positive individuals as an 'other', beyond the scope of the congregation, appeals to Christian compassion demand that otherness not be a barrier to understanding and help. Often these contributions provide a hopeful, if not outright cheerful counterpoint to the grimmer tone taken by majority-gay communities. These congregations are also seen represented in interfaith prayer services, though these services often downplay the connection of AIDS to

gay communities.

Chapter 4, "'AIDS is not the flail of God, nor is the world His threshing-floor": 1990-1992', ends the first decade of the epidemic in a very different light, in large part because of the cultural changes taking place in the rest of the United States. Prominent (and ostensibly heterosexual) figures such as Ryan White had begun to take more visible stances about AIDS, gathering celebrities to them and showing the world what little they had to fear from PWAs (Persons With AIDS). On the medical front, zidovudine (AZT) had been approved, and it and other drugs were providing the first hope that AIDS could be something other than a quick death sentence. And though the epidemic was at that moment raging far beyond the borders of the United States, the globalization of AIDS did much to recharacterize it in the public mind as something other than a 'gay disease', bringing in many new sacred and secular groups to help in the fight.

This optimism is reflected in the language found in the materials from this period. The eschatological tenor in the texts from gay communities shifts; the focus goes from the potential for destruction to the hope for restoration when all the suffering is through. Interfaith events begin to show evidence of more diverse participation, including from more conservative organizations that are less likely to approve of non-heteronormative sexual behavior, but at the same time are willing to pray and fundraise for those affected by the disease. Perhaps most importantly of all, while AIDS does not disappear from the discourse of these gay Christian communities, its prominence shifts during this period until it is again one concern among many – serious, but not apocalyptic.

Chapter 5, "'Burning in the Bones and Kindling Fire": The Uses of Scripture', takes

a larger look through material used in the time periods discussed in all three previous chapters, drawing conclusions and identifying commonalities in the ways in which the Bible was deployed by these groups, especially in public worship. The Bible creates the common language of Christianity, containing the stories and verses which are not only familiar, but are considered authoritative, across denominations. Considered by most Christians to be divinely inspired – and by some to be downright inerrant – it provides a textual baseline for moral considerations. Prominent conservative Christian voices at the time had already made use of much scripture to support continued anti-gay discrimination, leaving gay and gay-friendly Christian groups the choice to either cede the text to their opponents or to engage with those views on their own terms.

However, not all groups deploy the Bible equally, even those that have similar views on the inclusion of gays and lesbians into the church, or are in agreement that AIDS is not God's divine punishment on particular sinners. That two equally well-meaning individuals can read the scripture to two radically different ends creates a dilemma that in many ways limits the usefulness of scripture. In fact, the texts show gay and lesbian groups engaging less with the particulars of scripture, and more with more general ideas of grace, compassion, and mercy that stem from biblical sources, but are not necessarily wed to them. However, other groups continue to use specific passages and images to pray for healing and plead for compassion for sufferers of AIDS, particularly when that group is not limited to gay men.

The conclusion looks at all of these texts and communities for commonalities and more general approaches not specifically wed to AIDS or sexuality. The issue at the core of this work is not only one about queer Christians and the AIDS epidemic, but how *any*

marginalized Christian community might deploy its faith traditions against its marginalization – especially during a crisis that makes this work literally a matter of life and death. What particular approaches and reassurances did Christianity offer the marginalized? How could they find freedom and empowerment in a religious tradition that had been so overtly hostile to them and other members of their community? How do comfortably mainstream Christian groups find models for responding with compassionate activism when remote judgment is the prevailing option? What does the Gospel look like to Christians who have been told they have brought God's scourging justice upon themselves? And how does one have theology in an epidemic?

CHAPTER 1: PHILADELPHIA, JESUS, AND THE BURDENS OF HISTORY

Orienting Perspectives

Despite a general prevalence in the popular discourse of the gay/religious dynamic, much scholarship within the last several decades has focused on the ways in which sexuality and religion – and particularly gay identity and Christianity – are not always defined in opposition to one another. Several more nuanced works on the intersections of AIDS, queer issues, and Christianity have been published in the last several years. In particular, Anthony Petro's *After the Wrath of God*¹⁴ takes an archives-focused approach similar to the one I use here, though on a national level and over a longer time scale; his conclusions trace the consequences of the various US Christian responses to AIDS and map them onto subsequent public social policy. While Petro's work spends much time looking at Christian antagonism toward LGBT individuals, he also shows how more progressive denominations and congregations, such as the ones discussed later in this dissertation, were also galvanized by AIDS to social action. The title of Justin Lee's *Torn: Rescuing the Gospel from the Gays-vs.-Christians Debate*¹⁵ leaves little doubt as to the author's further rejection of this paradigm of necessary opposition, reflecting a growing desire among many Christians for an identity of reconciliation. Taking a narrower focus, Angelique Harris' *AIDS, Sexuality, and the Black Church: Making the Wounded Whole*¹⁶ and Sandra Barnes'

¹⁴ Petro, Anthony Michael. *After the Wrath of God: AIDS, Sexuality, and American Religion*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2015.

¹⁵ Lee, Justin. *Torn: Rescuing the Gospel from the Gays-vs.-Christians Debate*. New York: Jericho Books, 2012.

¹⁶ Harris, Angelique C. *AIDS, Sexuality, and the Black Church: Making the Wounded Whole*. Vol. 11.

*Live Long and Prosper: How Black Megachurches Address HIV/AIDS and Poverty in the Age of Prosperity Theology*¹⁷ focus on how those intersections play out specifically in African-American congregations.¹⁸ Gay activism has always had its personal accounts of individual journeys to reconcile (Christian) faith and (homo)sexuality, particularly from the first-person perspectives of gay men; while my work discusses several of these from before and during the first decade of the AIDS epidemic, this is a genre that has not died out in the years since. Volumes such as Michael McColly's *The After-death Room: Journey into Spiritual Activism*¹⁹, Archbishop Carl Bean's *I Was Born This Way: A Gay Preacher's Journey through Gospel Music, Disco Stardom, and a Ministry in Christ*²⁰, and Thomas L. Long's *AIDS and American Apocalypticism: The Cultural Semiotics of an Epidemic*²¹ continue this autobiographical tradition in works ranging from the confessional to the academic, respectively; meanwhile, Timothy F. Murphy's *Ethics in an Epidemic: AIDS, Morality, and Culture*²² contextualizes the importance of this testimonial genre, stressing the ability of confessional narratives to humanize and familiarize the seemingly untouchable. While a number of volumes have been produced in the past decade regarding interactions between Christian churches and AIDS, the majority of these focus beyond the

Martin Luther King, Jr. Memorial Studies in Religion, Culture, and Social Development. New York: Peter Lang Publishing, 2010.

¹⁷ Barnes, Sandra L. *Live Long and Prosper: How Black Megachurches Address HIV/AIDS and Poverty in the Age of Prosperity Theology*. New York: Fordham University Press, 2013.

¹⁸ That Barnes' work pays the least attention to non-hetero sexualities reflects changes in the public profile and infection dynamics of AIDS that began in the early 1990s; these are discussed in greater detail in Chapter 4.

¹⁹ McColly, Michael. *The After-death Room: Journey into Spiritual Activism*. Cambridge, MA: Transition Books, 2006.

²⁰ Bean, Carl, and David Ritz. *I Was Born This Way: A Gay Preacher's Journey through Gospel Music, Disco Stardom, and a Ministry in Christ*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 2010.

²¹ Long, Thomas L. *AIDS and American Apocalypticism: The Cultural Semiotics of an Epidemic*. Albany: State University of New York Press, 2004.

²² Murphy, Timothy F. *Ethics in an Epidemic: AIDS, Morality, and Culture*. University of California Press: Los Angeles, 1994.

borders of the United States, particularly in Africa.

However, much recent work on the queer Christian experience in the United States has not focused itself around AIDS as a category of interest, in part because (as discussed later in my analysis) AIDS is not nor has ever been the whole of gay life. Though much of said scholarship still focuses on the controversies between American Christian identity and growing queer cultural visibility, many writers and scholars have turned their attention more toward places where these categories overlap positively. Some, such as Eric Rofes' *Dry Bones Breathe: Gay Men Creating Post-AIDS Identities and Cultures*²³ explicitly situate themselves after the scope of the epidemic; others such as the diverse pieces in *Sexual Orientation & Human Rights in American Religious Discourse*²⁴ and *Queer Christianities: Lived Religion in Transgressive Forms*²⁵ extend their scope of inquiry often far beyond the recent past, locating queer sexualities not as a contemporary challenge to churches, but a long-time part of the Christian tradition. Dann Hazel's *Witness: Gay and Lesbian Clergy Report from the Front*²⁶ charts many of the late-twentieth-century denominational changes regarding sexuality, using both open and closeted clergy as points of comparison. While many of these use the same narrative and confessional approaches Murphy identifies above, the growing body of scholarship shows that queer Christian communities in the United States are present and visible enough that they are no longer

²³ Rofes, Eric E. *Dry Bones Breathe: Gay Men Creating Post-AIDS Identities and Cultures*. New York: Haworth Press, 1998.

²⁴ *Sexual Orientation & Human Rights in American Religious Discourse*. Edited by Saul M. Olyan and Martha Craven Nussbaum. New York: Oxford University Press, 1998.

²⁵ *Queer Christianities: Lived Religion in Transgressive Forms*. Edited by Kathleen T. Talvacchia. New York: New York University Press, 2015.

²⁶ Hazel, Dann. *Witness: Gay and Lesbian Clergy Report from the Front*. Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2000.

their only advocates.

The final category of scholarship that has come to bear on this dissertation has been that surrounding queer readings of the Bible. Emerging largely in the 1970s, these gay-friendly interpretations do not even necessarily come from LGBT individuals; they are, however, unified in a belief that biblical texts cannot and should not be used as proof of divine condemnation of contemporary, loving same-sex sexual relationships. While this work makes reference to a number of popular volumes which would have been available to the individuals producing the texts considered here, my own understanding of what these texts mean to queer and genderqueer Christian readers has been influenced by a broad scope of scholarship around these issues. A significant portion of this interpretive tradition has involved not only responding to and historicizing biblical texts commonly found in anti-gay rhetoric, but going through the Bible as a whole and seeing the ways the characters and stories there reflect the lived experiences of modern LGBT people. The various essays contained in *Take Back the Word: A Queer Reading of the Bible*²⁷, *Queer Commentary and the Hebrew Bible*²⁸, *The Queer Bible Commentary*²⁹, and *Bible Trouble: Queer Reading at the Boundaries of Biblical Scholarship*³⁰ exemplify the variety of approaches taken toward the matter of re-reading the Bible; ranging from the respectably thorough to the intentionally outrageous, these pieces reflect the same sort of diversity found in the Philadelphian materials: a set of readings united in purpose if not in approach. In fact,

²⁷ Goss, Robert E. and Mona West, eds., *Take Back the Word: A Queer Reading of the Bible* Cleveland: Pilgrim, 2000.

²⁸ Stone, Ken. *Queer Commentary and the Hebrew Bible*. Cleveland, OH: Pilgrim Press, 2001.

²⁹ Guest, Deryn, Robert E. Goss, Mona West, and Thomas Bohache, eds., *The Queer Bible Commentary*. London: SCM, 2006.

³⁰ Hornsby, Teresa J., and Ken Stone. *Bible Trouble: Queer Reading at the Boundaries of Biblical Scholarship*. Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature Atlanta, 2011.

academia somewhat counterintuitively leaves a larger space for more outright incendiary readings, such as Dale Martin's *Sex and the Single Savior: Gender and Sexuality in Biblical Interpretation*³¹, Marcella Althaus-Reid's *The Queer God*³², Theodore Jennings' *The Man Jesus Loved: Homoerotic Narratives from the New Testament*³³, and Stephen Moore's *God's Beauty Parlor: And Other Queer Spaces in and Around the Bible*³⁴. Still, as texts from Christian leaders such as MCC founder Troy Perry show, even conventional congregational Christianity is not devoid of eroticism, the affirmation for which is repeatedly located by these queer theologians in scripture. Stories of desire and satisfaction both terrestrial and divine pepper many of the more personal accounts found both in the aforementioned texts and in other works marketed toward a more popular audience, sometimes autobiographical in nature, other times as re-imagined biblical tales interpreted through lenses of same-sex desire.

Most of this scholarship postdates the period I am examining in this dissertation, which means said texts would not have been available to these Philadelphian Christians before 1992. However, it is my hope that this work will contribute to the ever-growing patchwork picture of gay Christian life in the United States which has emerged over the last several decades. While the vast majority of archival material contained here has not been readily available for previous consideration – indeed, some of these papers have not seen the light of day since not long after their creation – my examination of these texts also

³¹ Martin, Dale B. *Sex and the Single Savior: Gender and Sexuality in Biblical Interpretation*. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2006.

³² Althaus-Reid, Marcella. *The Queer God*. London: Routledge, 2003.

³³ Jennings, Theodore W. *The Man Jesus Loved: Homoerotic Narratives from the New Testament*. Cleveland: Pilgrim Press, 2003.

³⁴ Moore, Stephen D. *God's Beauty Parlor: And Other Queer Spaces in and Around the Bible*. Stanford, Calif: Stanford University Press, 2001.

provides insight on regional and (inter)denominational groups which have barely been the focus of significant scholarly attention, if at all. Perhaps the most curious omission in the aforementioned texts is one of geography: the lack of attention paid to Philadelphia itself. My Philadelphia-specific findings not only contribute to the general understanding of the various intersections of sexuality, Christianity, and AIDS provided by the aforementioned recent publications, they do so by providing proof of how these intersections play out in a particular set of geographic, political, cultural, and demographic contexts.

City of Otherly Love

Philadelphia does not loom large in the American imagination as a great epicenter of gay activity, certainly not in the way cities like San Francisco and New York City do.³⁵ It lacks 1969's Stonewall Riots or 1978's assassination of Harvey Milk, local events that rose to national significance. It boasts few pilgrimage sites. Located only two hours away, New York City dwarfs Philadelphia in terms of both population and major LGBT centers. Even the 1993 film *Philadelphia*, which tells a story specifically about a gay man with AIDS, leans more on the 'brotherly love' part of the city's name than on any location-specific plot elements; the brief flashes of gay culture it depicts are generic enough that they could almost have happened anywhere.³⁶

³⁵ For example, as comprehensive as Petro's work is, Philadelphia goes all but unmentioned. Similarly, several national gay history archives contain relatively little about Philadelphia, especially when compared to material held about gay life in San Francisco and New York; the collected Philadelphian material from the first decade of the AIDS epidemic dwindles search results to all but nothing.

³⁶ A lack of authentic Philadelphia-ness is of course not the only representational problem in the film; for a more detailed discussion of the ways in which Demme's legal drama fictionalizes its portrayal of gay culture to greater acceptability – and portrays "homophobia as visceral rather than ideological" – see Robert J. Corber's "Nationalizing the Gay Body: AIDS and Sentimental Pedagogy in "Philadelphia"".

But to those who know queer American history, Philadelphia has been a critical location for many major developments in gay history and culture. Its large black, Catholic, and Jewish populations have created spaces for LGBT cultures that do not always fit the larger narratives of gay culture. From ball culture to Pride, from the Walt Whitman Bridge to the Gayborhood, Philadelphia is a city shaped by people from a variety of sexualities. Marc Stein's *City of Sisterly and Brotherly Loves: Lesbian and Gay Philadelphia, 1945-1972* charts the gay history of Philadelphia through oral histories, following largely the trajectories of social and activist movements during that time period. As happened in many of the other large cities in the United States around that same era, various gay and lesbian organizations formed, dispersed, and occasionally re-formed under new banners. Overwhelmingly, these organizations were not lesbian and gay, but lesbian *or* gay; publications and social clubs tended to address either gay men or lesbian women. Homosexual so often also meant homosocial, with exceptions largely being reserved for visible political activism.

Visibility, however, was a major goal for many of the gay and lesbian Philadelphian activists, and as such "the continuing effort to build a sense of community that would encompass lesbians and gay men is striking"³⁷ in those actions. Perhaps the most visible of all of these outside the queer communities was the annual Fourth of July demonstration, which began in 1965 as a way for Philadelphia's gay men and lesbians to make themselves known by peacefully carrying protest signs in front of Philadelphia's historic Independence Hall. These demonstrations, also known as the Annual Reminder, continued through 1969,

³⁷ Stein, 231.

when the Stonewall riots became the louder, more energizing flashpoint around which gay activism and pride parades coalesced. ("Ironically," Stein notes, "Philadelphia's post-Stonewall celebrations have been among the smallest of those held in large U.S. cities."³⁸) Despite scanty media coverage, these Reminders did not go unnoticed.

An awareness of the possibility for productive dialogue between Christianity and gay causes in Philadelphia predates the crucible of AIDS. The Janus Society of Delaware Valley (formed after a reorganization of Mattachine Philadelphia) hosted speeches in the early sixties, among them one by Robert W. Wood, an openly gay Congregationalist minister and author of *Christ and the Homosexual* (1961); when he came to speak in 1963, the *Philadelphia Bulletin* would not print a written advertisement for the talk until the title of his work was removed and Wood identified only as the author of a "controversial" book.³⁹ In August of that same year, a conference entitled "Homosexuality – Time for Reappraisal" was hosted in Philadelphia by the East Coast Homophile Organizations, or ECHO, a collective formed from Mattachine New York, Mattachine Washington, Daughters of Bilitis New York, and Janus. Taking a cue from the American Psychological Association meeting scheduled there shortly afterward, the conference focused largely on contributions from psychologists, sexologists, and policy-focused activists; however, Episcopal minister Edward Lee, from Philadelphia's Church of the Holy Trinity⁴⁰, gave a talk on "The Church and Homosexuality" in which he "declared that the Judeo-Christian tradition did not recognize homosexuality but that the church should understand and help homosexuals".⁴¹

³⁸ Ibid., 299.

³⁹ Ibid., 221.

⁴⁰ Though material from the Church of the Holy Trinity is not included in the archival material for this dissertation, the congregation is active today in LGBT causes in the community.

⁴¹ Stein, 223.

Lee's argument here uncovers a dilemma at the heart of Christian responses to AIDS: namely, how to proceed when working under the auspices of a religious tradition that does not often mince words on the unacceptability of sexual activity outside of very specific parameters. While the earliest English versions of the New Testament predate the word 'homosexual' (to say nothing of the original writings themselves), it and 'sodomite' have become common modern translations of the curious (pseudo-)Pauline *malakoi* (1 Cor. 6:10) and *arsenokoitai* (1 Tim. 1:10), making what seems at least in English an airtight case against same-sex sexual activity. Levitical prohibitions and Genesis 19's Sodom story are hardly kinder, and the historical interpretive tradition that backs them up is largely unequivocal in its reading of these passages and subsequent conclusion. In that sense, Lee is right: Christian tradition historically has not recognized homosexuality – at least, not as a valid, God-ordained sexual identity. Lee's call to understanding and assistance, then, falls more in line with the 'hate the sin, love the sinner' approaches, urging helping fellow human beings without giving any validation that the choices they have made with their lives are the correct ones.

The recorded reaction to Lee's above statement from a New York lesbian – "You're preaching hate"⁴² – gets to the heart of another issue with the limits of abstract compassion as a model for Christian action. Respectability is an approach taken by a group that wants not tolerance, but acceptance and inclusivity. That same desire can be seen in the Annual Reminders themselves, as the organizing body's "Rules for Picketing" laid down requirements that participants' dress be "conservative and conventional" – "Men will wear

⁴² Ibid.

suits, white shirts and ties; women will wear dresses"⁴³ – in order to help maintain the argument that homosexuals were not some distant, unknowable menace, but as unremarkably normal as their neighbors.⁴⁴ To call Lee's rhetoric 'hate' in light of other anti-gay language available at the time may seem hyperbolic – but to individuals seeking to be included as a variant on normalcy, patronizing charity is just as othering as condemnation. This kind of abstracted compassion would become a major Christian response to AIDS as the epidemic progressed, giving Lee's entreaty to 'understand and help' a specific context.

In much of the scholarship that discusses these histories, Philadelphia's gay community's connection to various religious traditions is not given great weight. This is not unusual, considering how, as stated earlier, 'gay' and 'religious' are often two concepts that the discourse sets necessarily at odds with one another. Part of this is deliberate on the parts of both groups representing gay identity and groups representing religious identity, each side of which has often taken pains to define itself in terms of opposing the other. As the New Christian Right rose to prominence in the 1970s, one of its major rallying cries was that something needed to be done to stop the moral degradation in the United States, especially that symbolized by the (slow-)growing acceptability of gay culture; as a result, anti-gay sentiment has become one of the major self-defining characteristics of white evangelical Protestant Christianity today (the other being opposition to legal abortion). Rev. Mel White uses the term 'spiritual violence' – which he defines as "the use of religious

⁴³ "Rules for Picketing." Topical File, Demonstrations. 1965-1966. MS Gay Rights Movement, Series 1 Box 3, Folder 21. New York Public Library. *Archives of Human Sexuality and Identity*.

⁴⁴ This 'just like you' approach has its own problems, mostly in that it seeks to better white, middle-class, high-heteronormative gay (and sometimes lesbians) at the expense of less socially normative queers; most recently, objections to it as a platform for activism have been raised by those concerned so much effort has gone into marriage equality, leaving other causes underfunded and out of the spotlight. However, it has historically been the starting point for gay activism in the United States.

beliefs to justify hate speech against gays"⁴⁵ – to characterize the response of many Christian organizations and governing boards; White himself was a writer for and friend of many prominent conservative evangelicals until his 1993 decision to make his sexuality public found many of those ties politely but firmly severed,⁴⁶ a reaction familiar to many LGBT Christians.

In response to these anti-gay campaigns from Christian-aligned sources, many gay activists pinpointed faith-based opposition to homosexuality as their major source of continued oppression, responding by articulating a response to conservative social policies that rejected and often targeted religiously connected individuals and groups as the cause of gay misery in America.⁴⁷ At the same time, well-meaning approaches to tolerance and calls to compassion from more liberal strains of Christianity (such as Edward Lee's aforementioned talk) did little to dismiss the idea that homosexuals were anything but an "other" to Christianity. Love them or hate them, gays and lesbians remained the "them" that Christianity often seemed to be engaging without embracing.

However, as a dichotomy, 'gay' and 'religious' are not identities which exist solely in a framework of two mutually exclusive spheres. Instead, especially in the United States, there is significant overlap between people who are gay or gay-friendly and people who

⁴⁵ Shackford, Scott. "Out for compassion." *The Advocate*. December 7, 1999, p. 36.

⁴⁶ Colker, David. "In a State of Grace : Religion: Writer and Minister Mel White Was a Christian Evangelical Success Story until He Came out of the Closet. That's When Former Colleagues including Jerry Falwell and Billy Graham Cut Him Off. But White Says He Is Finding Peace: 'I Am Gay, I Am Proud and God Loves Me.'" *Los Angeles Times*, July 26, 1993. http://articles.latimes.com/1993-07-26/news/vw-17120_1_rev-mel-white-evangelical-jerry-falwell.

⁴⁷ Lierman's work focuses on ACT UP's very influential New York City chapter, which composed most of its anti-religious sentiment around the Archdiocese of New York in general, and the person of John Cardinal O'Connor in particular. However, the airing of these specific grievances against the Catholic hierarchy was not confined to Catholic targets; "indeed, at times, it seems that all of Christian faith as a whole is painted with the same brush of universal intolerance, rigidity, and greed, and not only by ACT UP but by a wide variety of gay and lesbian activist groups." (Lierman, 97-98)

consider themselves members of a faith tradition. Some of these gay-identified practitioners have felt so excluded from their home religious traditions that they have set out to create new congregations and even entire denominations which not only welcome but specifically court LGBT individuals; of these, perhaps the most prominent is the Rev. Troy Perry, who founded the Metropolitan Community Church in Los Angeles, California in 1968. Many others, however, have remained in established religious identities, even if those religious groups do not necessarily have open and affirming policies about sexual diversity. In more conservative traditions, parachurch ministries and unofficial networks often emerge as a way of connecting pro-LGBT individuals and congregations without being subject to approval from larger governing boards. Despite various experiences of spiritual violence from their respective traditions, many queer Christians have found ways to reject the harmful teachings associated with those traditions without rejecting a religious identity entirely. ACT UP member and theologian Robert Goss observes that "the gay and lesbian community is deeply spiritual"⁴⁸, and those who have followed those spiritual yearnings have found homes in a variety of spiritual contexts, Christianity included.

Similarly, not all religious people, whether clergy or laity, understand their respective faith traditions as necessarily in opposition to non-heterosexual orientations and activity. While at times stances on this can be difficult to establish – the term 'homosexual', as noted in the introduction, only came into existence in 1869, and even then did not propagate instantly – many religions throughout the world, particularly indigenous traditions and certain New Religious Movements, consider diversity in sexuality and gender expression

⁴⁸ Goss, Robert. *Jesus Acted Up: A Gay and Lesbian Manifesto*. San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1993: xii.

elements of human experience directly connected to the Divine. Some have entire sacred categories set aside for those who do not fit into binary gender roles or more common expressions of sexuality; others give no particular religious weight to them, but have places to understand these individuals socially and culturally.⁴⁹ Acceptance and incorporation varies around the globe and at different periods throughout histories of different cultures, but there is no general definition of religiosity that necessitates understanding sex and sexuality only in contemporary Western heteronormative terms.

In the United States, however, being authentically "religious" often carries with it the implication that someone is Christian⁵⁰; leaving aside the debate of whether or not the United States is a Christian nation, a majority of people in the United States identify themselves as religiously Christian.⁵¹ The term 'Religious Right' rhetorically grabs ownership of the concept of "religion" in general while wedding it to conservative political ideology; while there are certainly politically conservative members of all faith traditions represented in the United States, they are not welcome to rally under that particular big tent. Since the rise of the New Christian Right (NCR) in the 1970s, evangelical Protestant Christianity has anchored its cultural identity most of all to opposing abortion and homosexuality, the two forces it has held up as being at the forefront of the moral

⁴⁹ A number of these traditions (though certainly not all) are addressed in essays collected in the anthology *Que(e)rying Religion*, edited by Gary David Comstock and Susan E. Henking; contemporary examples include Native American berdaches and two-spirit people, devotees of the goddess Yellamma in South India, and practitioners of a variety of Wiccan traditions.

⁵⁰ Or *perhaps* Jewish, but the popular inclusion of the 'Judeo-' in the 'Judeo-Christian' vision of America dates back less than a century and is often more a supercessionist appropriation of past traditions than any meaningful incorporation of modern Jewish input. For more on this, see Silk, Mark. 1984. "Notes on the Judeo-Christian Tradition in America". *American Quarterly* 36 (1). Johns Hopkins University Press: 65–85.

⁵¹ "America's Changing Religious Landscape" Pew Research Center Report. May 12, 2015. <http://www.pewforum.org/files/2015/05/RLS-08-26-full-report.pdf>.

degradation of society.⁵² However, despite prominent NCR voices' attempts to establish these positions as a necessary part of Christian identity, many Christians, such as the ones whose materials make up the basis of this work, find acceptance and embrace of LGBT individuals to be as biblically mandated as other Christians find the opposite to be true.

While I do not attempt many grand categorizations throughout the work, often because groups and coalitions tend to be mutable, it is helpful to note that certain divisions in organization and approach can be found in these Philadelphian groups, but are not themselves unique to the area. Sociologist Mark Kowalewski's "Religious Constructions of the AIDS Crisis" examines Christian and (a much smaller sample of) Jewish publications and survey responses across the United States and constructs what he refers to as a three-part "typology of religious responses to AIDS": "blaming the victim", "embracing the exile", and "helping the victim"⁵³. The first type of response is not to be found inside the texts examined from these Philadelphian communities; indeed, victim-blaming is precisely the approach these individuals and groups are working *against*. By contrast, responses that fit into the third category appear throughout – yet come almost exclusively from individuals, churches, and denominations that can only address AIDS by sidestepping issues of sexual morality. Most publications that attempt denomination-wide or interdenominational calls to activism employ this rhetorical approach, either acknowledging the perceived sinfulness

⁵² The Manhattan Declaration (http://manhattandeclaration.org/man_dec_resources/Manhattan_Declaration_full_text.pdf), signed in September 2009 and still accruing signatures, puts those two issues at the forefront and adds a third – "religious liberty" – as issues that are of particular significance to Christians in the modern US, which the authors and signatories of the Declaration deem worthy of immediate attention above other concerns.

⁵³ Kowalewski, Mark. "Religious Constructions of the AIDS Crisis." In *Que(e)rying Religion a Critical Anthology*, by Gary David Comstock and Susan E. Henking, 366-71. New York: Continuum, 1997. p367.

of homosexual relationships in a "but we are all sinners" manner, or seeking to distance AIDS from a necessarily gay context so that they may elicit compassion without being sidetracked by concerns over promoting immorality.

The majority of materials examined here, however, land square in the middle category of this typology. Responses from groups with majority-gay membership almost exclusively take the approach of "embracing the exile", addressing AIDS as a medical, not moral, issue; the moral failing of AIDS, then, becomes the church's shameful lack of response to crisis or compassion for the afflicted. While Kowalewski points out that it is possible for groups that take this approach to do so without being gay-affirming, and notes that "no denomination in this type official condones even monogamous gay relationships,"⁵⁴ he notes that local support for gay rights and inclusion is often strong. He even ties this specifically to gay and lesbian affirmation in the name for this category, which comes from gay psychotherapist John Fortunato's unequivocally LGBT-positive 1982 book, *Embracing the Exile: Healing Journeys of Gay Christians*. Fortunato's use of the term 'exile' is not intended to be a negative one; in fact, he argues, "the spiritual depths down to which gay people are often thrust isn't such a bad place to be. In fact, it may be the only sane place to be. A blessing."⁵⁵ This formulation assumes that though being a member of a marginalized identity is difficult – especially, Fortunato says from personal experience, being a gay man in 1982 – accepting the goodness of that identity and its unique perspective is far better than struggling against it. After all, Fortunato notes, Jesus gave particular attention and

⁵⁴ Ibid., p.369. Here the limits of Kowalewski's scope start to show through; even in 1990, when this essay was originally published, had he included in his calculations the MCC, Unitarian Universalists, Quakers, or Beth Chayim Chadashim, he could not have said this.

⁵⁵ Fortunato, John E. *Embracing the Exile: Healing Journeys of Gay Christians*. New York: Seabury Press, 1982. p.107.

compassion to those rejected by society: "He identified with them, accepted their lot as his own, and loved them as they had never been loved before."⁵⁶ If anything, the Philadelphian groups here often take this embrace a step further, welcoming the ways in which the crucible of AIDS creates an opportunity for the righteousness of gay and lesbian Christians and their relationships to show through. In this conception, AIDS is absolutely not God's punishment, but neither is it strictly value-neutral – its meaning is not in its existence, but in the response it elicits. As with the Johannine parable of the man born blind (discussed below), the lesson is in the opportunity.

Christian Particulars

While many religious traditions and individuals in the United States have weighed in on issues of sexual orientation and gender identity, the focus of my work in this dissertation is on Christianity. Certainly, there are many prominent religious traditions represented in Philadelphia, many of which have made significant positive impacts on both the AIDS epidemic and Philadelphia's LGBT groups, and their contributions should not be ignored or downplayed. However, there are certain factors that have led to my decision to narrow my scope of inquiry:

Diversity of material: From almost its advent, Christianity has been a religion that declares itself the singular way to salvation yet has no real internal agreement on even its most basic tenets and practices. The earliest Christian ecumenical councils sought to create

⁵⁶ Ibid, 125.

definitive statements on what Christians (should) believe, but to do so, they had to make decisions about beliefs among the multiplicity found among early Christians, dividing the world into orthodox and heretical. From that point forward, the history of Christianity has been peppered with disagreements over every conceivable issue, leading to excommunications, schisms, sects, and the occasional (memorable) bloody conflict. In the modern world, it is tricky yet not impossible for two people to hold beliefs wholly antithetical to one another's and still each sincerely consider themselves Christians.

Thus, the archival material for this project spans a number of Christian traditions and stems from use and interpretation of the same set of sacred texts, but does not reflect a monolithic approach. Some of the material is directed toward members of a single denomination or even a single church; some comes from multi-denominational and even interfaith groups. However, it all comes from traditions that consider themselves Christian and rely on much the same stories and scriptures as part of their religious language. Even though many Christian denominations have texts, prayers, rituals, theological treatises, catechisms, and even occasional books of the Bible that would be largely unfamiliar to many other Christians, all of the denominations and Christian groups in this work share the same core narrative of the Old and New Testaments as authoritative for both faith and practice. Thus, even in that diversity exists a kind of unity.

Prominence of the Christian Right: Christian communities such as the ones discussed in this material were not introducing religious language into the narrative; instead, they were responding to a conversation already taking place. The social and political prominence of individuals affiliated with groups such as the Moral Majority meant that

some of the earliest voices opining on AIDS were doing so from a conservative Christian perspective – and those opinions were overwhelmingly negative.

Therefore, there was no question as to whether or not AIDS was an appropriate discussion topic for Christian contexts. The most recognizable figures in US Christianity had already established a discourse around religion and sexuality, and AIDS fit loudly into it; due to media coverage, even non-Christians would have been aware of this language and its effect on public policy. Therefore, many of the texts examined here were produced in response to this already-present discourse, providing counterarguments to the inescapable condemnations of the leaders of the Christian Right.

Volume of material: Though Philadelphia is home to people from many different faith traditions, houses of worship in the city are overwhelmingly Christian, and Christians tend to leave quite a paper trail: church newsletters, transcripts of sermons, vestry minutes, printed orders of worship, and bulletin inserts, just to name a few. In addition, many churches are fastidious about preserving their archives, especially ones in places that put such an emphasis on history, such as Philadelphia. The material that serves as the basis for this work was, in general, kept not as a public record, but as a private archives accessible to the public upon request. In the case of groups such as Dignity Philadelphia, a gay Catholic fellowship, and MCC Philadelphia, the city's congregation of the gay-friendly Metropolitan Community Church, neither of which has maintained its own archives, the William Way Community Center in downtown Philadelphia was able to provide significant records.

The Great Physician: Despite the diversity of the Gospels and other early Christian writings, Christianity has from early on connected the figure of Jesus with the idea of healing, both spiritually and physically. Christianity has no shortage of scriptural material, therefore, when faced with a crisis of medical proportions - and no shortage of metaphors into which AIDS and those affected by it can fit. When groups connected with Christianity speak of illness and disease, then, it is often difficult to do so *without* resorting to religious metaphor.

"That Jesus considered the healing of disease an important, or even an essential, feature of his work is apparent both from his practice and from his words," writes Scottish theologian Marcus Dods, arguing that the primary purpose of Jesus' healing miracles, as recorded in the Gospels, was not to prove his Messianic status, but

to relieve distress. He came to proclaim and establish God's kingdom among men, to manifest God's presence and love. This he did more effectually by his works of healing than by his teaching. [...] Disease, Christ felt, is incongruous with the kingdom of God; and if he is to exhibit that kingdom, it must be manifested in the physical as in the spiritual sphere. He was grieved when confronted with disease and death. This, he felt, is not the world as the Father would have it and means it to be. In so far as he had power to remove the distresses of men he felt called upon to do it. These healings were the works given him by the Father to do. They manifested God's love because done out of pure compassion in the Father's name.⁵⁷

While Dods' view is not a universal articulation of the Christian theology of illness, it addresses the degree to which the healing miracles of the New Testament were not mere

⁵⁷ Dods, Marcus. 1900. "Jesus as Healer". *The Biblical World* 15 (3). University of Chicago Press: 169–77. <http://www.jstor.org.ezproxy.lib.uh.edu/stable/3137062>.

magic tricks with incidental benefits to those nearby, but instead formed an important part of Jesus' divinely authoritative mission. The Gospels present God (usually in the person of Jesus) as more interested in healing afflictions than causing them, especially when said afflictions are as social as they were physical (various lepers, assorted demoniacs, the woman with the euphemistic 'issue' of blood). One would be hard-pressed to read Jesus as endorsing disease, especially approaching the text as Dods does. Instead, the *imitatio Christi* calls on the believer who wants to follow Jesus' example to reject illness as contrary to God's design for humanity.

Personal experience: I was born and raised in a United Methodist congregation, and I have a Master of Divinity from a United Methodist seminary. Protestant Christianity, with all its jargon and metaphor, is my first language; the material examined in this dissertation both coincides with chronologically and reminds me of my own childhood and adolescence as an active member of a large Southern church. I grew up in the midst of the crises that produced these texts, and though they are from congregations sometimes unlike my childhood church home, the responses are not unfamiliar.

I am also a queer woman, and one who has had significant difficulties with her denomination because of this; in fact, my sexuality would have meant instant disqualification from ordination in the United Methodist Church, and thus was one of the primary reasons I decided to pursue a more academic approach to religion. At the time when it became clear that I could not reconcile the anti-gay aspects of Christianity with my own spiritual path, I began to seek out alternate interpretations from progressive thinkers and theologians, many of whom made arguments very similar to the material I have found

in these archives.

Queer Christians occupy a difficult position, caught between ostensible scriptural prohibitions and lived experiences of love and grace. To occupy the margins of Christianity and not reject it necessitates re-reading it. While AIDS made this task more difficult by presenting a tangible crisis that was often (loudly) interpreted as actual Divine condemnation of non-monogamous non-heterosexuality, the actual work of finding space inside of an outwardly hostile Christian environment changes little, regardless of the context. Embracing one's exile is a continual process.

Plague by Numbers

The progress of AIDS through Philadelphia, at least in terms of data, is clear via the reporting of AIDS cases by the Philadelphia Department of Public Health, which began in November 1981, with a single patient. The next nine cases came throughout 1982: one each in January, April, May, July, August, and November, then three in December. From there the rate climbed: in 1983, except for April, no month went by without a reported case, and excepting again October, no month had fewer than two. 1984 saw a minimum of four new cases each month; 1985's slowest month, March, had a mere seven.⁵⁸ As new reports came out, data from previous years were often altered, presumably as patients' earlier diagnoses were understood in light of the presence of HIV.

In May of 1986, the Philadelphia Department of Public Health released its findings: by

⁵⁸ 'Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome (AIDS) Cases in Philadelphia and Philadelphia Primary Metropolitan Statistical Area (PMSA): Monthly Report'. Div. of Disease Control, Philadelphia Department of Public Health. May 2, 1986.

the time of the report's publication, 300 AIDS cases had been diagnosed among adults in the Philadelphia area, with another four cases in children. Including the other seven adjacent counties comprising Philadelphia's Primary Metropolitan Statistical Area (PMSA) in the count, 106 additional cases had been diagnosed, bringing the total number of adult AIDS cases to 406 – of which 247, or just over 60% had already died.⁵⁹ Less than five years into Philadelphia's encounter with the epidemic, hopes for survival among the diagnosed already looked grim.

A further report published in March of 1989⁶⁰ shows the sharp upward curve in the infection rate: while the first five years of the epidemic saw only 300 reported cases, the next three years added 1019 more to that initial number; when adding in the entire Philadelphia PMSA, the total number of reported, confirmed cases had shot up to 2497. The United States, in the same time period, had reported 88,096 confirmed cases, with 50,670 deaths. The total case fatality rate barely nudged upward to 61.6%, though by that point, that average was skewed by the large number of recent diagnoses; excepting 1981, all epidemic years from 1985 back now showed case fatality rates of 92-100%. In contrast to the single 1981 case documented in the 1986 report, the 1989 report lists four cases from that year: three from Philadelphia county and one from the surrounding counties. Of those four infected individuals, one was still alive at the time of the 1989 report's compilation, when no one else diagnosed prior to 1984 was; though statistics later in the report do not indicate this person's sex or method of transmission, their race is listed as white. Long-term

⁵⁹ Ibid.

⁶⁰ 'Philadelphia Department of Public Health Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome (AIDS) Monthly Report.' April 3, 1989.

survival with AIDS was clearly becoming a statistically unlikely prospect at best.

Even by 1986, patterns were emerging in the demographics of the epidemic which mirrored the spread elsewhere in the United States.⁶¹ 78.8% of the non-pediatric cases in the Philadelphia PMSA were individuals identified as "Gay/Bisexual", with an added 6.7% being "Gay/Bisexual + IV Drug User".⁶² By 1989, those categories made up 73.4% and 8.4% of total infected cases, respectively.⁶³ For nationwide contrast, in August 1989, the CDC published an article on the occasion of the 100,000th reported AIDS case in the United States, saying that "of the AIDS cases reported in the first 6 months of 1989, 56% were homosexual/bisexual men with no history of IV-drug use, 23% were female or heterosexual male IVDUs, and 4% were sex partners or children of IVDUs or their sex partners."⁶⁴ If anything, these numbers show that for Philadelphia, as in the rest of the United States, AIDS was in its first decade a disproportionately great threat to gay men.

Identified infected individuals were so overwhelmingly male at this point that the 1986 report does not nuance the category of "Gay/Bisexual" by gender; of the total 406 cases as of that May, only thirteen were female – ten from Philadelphia, three from New Jersey – and of those thirteen, three were classified as having "no risk group positively identified by investigation".⁶⁵ By 1989, seventy-nine of the Philadelphia cases were female – only 6% of the total infected population. The actual number of female PWAs at that time can never

⁶¹ As race is not a significant component of my analysis, I have chosen not to include more comprehensive numbers here. However, it is interesting to note that, at least through the 1980s, Philadelphia's AIDS patients were almost equivalently black and white.

⁶² Philadelphia Department of Public Health, May 1986.

⁶³ Philadelphia Department of Public Health, April 1989.

⁶⁴ "Current Trends First 100,000 Cases of Acquired Immunodeficiency Syndrome – United States " *MMWR Recommendations and Reports*, August 18, 1989 / 38(32);561-563

⁶⁵ Philadelphia Department of Public Health, May 1986.

be known, given that women in general were underdiagnosed, particularly given that the CDC's parameters for AIDS did not include female-specific manifestations of immune deficiency until 1992.⁶⁶ In addition, at that point there still existed significant disagreements about whether heterosexual transmission of AIDS was a possibility at all, meaning that women who were not IV drug users, were not transplant/transfusion recipients, and had only sex with heterosexual men could be denied a diagnosis on the basis of having no identifiable means of transmission.⁶⁷ Seropositive women were often accused of being prostitutes, the assumption being that only through sex work could a woman's body have taken in so much virulent semen that even her "rugged vagina"⁶⁸ could not prove able to stave off infection.

Despite identification and publication of other vectors of transmission, the initial association of the HIV and AIDS with the gay male body proved nearly impossible to shake, especially in the epidemic's first decade. Images of AIDS' 'innocent' victims, though present in the discourse, were not nearly as prominent as they would become in later years. Conceptually, if in no other way, AIDS remained through 1992 – the end of this work's frame of inquiry – an overwhelmingly gay, male disease. Thus, the bodies that exist as both subject of the rhetoric surrounding AIDS and the text of the epidemic itself are equally overwhelmingly those of homosexual men.

⁶⁶ Castro, Kenneth G. et.al. "1993 Revised Classification System for HIV Infection and Expanded Surveillance Case Definition for AIDS Among Adolescents and Adults." *MMWR Recommendations and Reports*, December 18, 1992 / 41(RR-17).

⁶⁷ Further discussion of the social construction of AIDS as a disease (almost) exclusively of the gay male body can be found in the work of Paula Treichler and Cindy Patton.

⁶⁸ A term introduced to the discourse by John Langone's wildly inaccurate "Why AIDS is Likely to Remain a Homosexual Disease" insert in his larger cover story, "AIDS: The Latest Scientific Facts", from *Discover's* December 1985 issue; see below for further discussion.

AIDS and Response

The question of 'What should we do about AIDS?' has often come in both secular and religious discourse with a silent second part: *and to whom will something happen if we do not act?* From a conservative Christian standpoint, while AIDS's cultural status as a disease of the marginalized gave some cause to celebrate the excellent targeting of God's Judgment, those who did not take pleasure in the death toll in othered groups still did not necessarily feel a call to action. The 4-H model of high-risk groups – homosexuals, hemophiliacs, heroin addicts, and Haitians – warned of danger, but in the same breath described it as targeting individuals with whom most 'average' Americans had no regular contact. (Despite its outward blandness, even the term "risk group" carries semantic othering weight; Susan Sontag describes the term as "that neutral-sounding, bureaucratic category which also revives the archaic idea of a tainted community that illness has judged."⁶⁹) To that end, the price of the majority's early inaction on the question of AIDS was bearable to the majority because it was paid by an abstract and even despised minority.

For individuals in these marginalized 4-H groups, particularly homosexuals, AIDS existed before 'AIDS' existed, as the term was only introduced into the scientific and popular discourse in August of 1982. Its previous appellations – WOGS (Wrath of God Syndrome) and GRID (Gay-Related Immune Deficiency) – each indicate a general dismissiveness toward the potential for this to become a threat to the larger population: 'GRID' specifically pins both present and further infection on the gay community, while

⁶⁹ Sontag, Susan., 1990. *Illness as metaphor ; and, AIDS and its metaphors*. New York: Doubleday. p.134.

'WOGS' (though never any kind of official designation⁷⁰) declares this an affliction upon the deserving. The incremental triumph of science over communicable disease especially during the first decades of the twentieth century led to an air of scientific invulnerability that left the scientific community and the public equally unprepared for the advent of AIDS; behaving little like anything researchers had ever seen before and difficult to pinpoint for how it did not outright kill but instead left the body vulnerable to opportunistic infections, in the first few years of the epidemic, AIDS might as well have been the wrath of God for all the luck biomedical science had tracking it down.

Despite its connections (however specious) to the other three high-risk groups, medically, AIDS has been tied from the start to male homosexuality. The Centers for Disease Control's *Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report* of June 5, 1981 – the first official report of what would later be identified and labeled as AIDS – identified *Pneumocystis* pneumonia in five gay men in Los Angeles, two of whom by the time of the report's writing had died.⁷¹ Each subsequent report of mysterious immune system failures over the following months had as a unifying factor that the patients were all previously healthy gay men. Once even the earliest scientific consensus began to settle on HIV's primary transmission vector as intimate contact with infected body fluids, the presence of AIDS in other populations could be explained either by the damage done by homosexual contamination (gay addicts sharing needles, gay donors infecting the blood supply) or insufficiently heterosexual heterosexuality (the 'abnormal' sexual practices ascribed to

⁷⁰ Treichler, Paula A. 1999. *How to have theory in an epidemic: cultural chronicles of AIDS*. Durham: Duke University Press. p.27.

⁷¹ Centers for Disease Control (CDC). "Pneumocystis Pneumonia - Los Angeles," *Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report* 30, no. 21; June 5, 1981. pp250-52.

citizens of and immigrants from Haiti, and later the rest of Africa and other 'Pattern II'⁷² countries).

This connection translated from scientific supposition to cultural fact, until as far as most of the public was concerned, not only were all infected bodies gay, all gay bodies were infected. Long had the New Christian Right been concerned about the "transmission" of homosexuality – when the Briggs Initiative in California tried to remove gay schoolteachers from their positions, it did so by painting gayness as a contagious threat, one which could be passed from teacher to student. Since homosexuals could not by themselves reproduce, the argument went, they had to recruit and indoctrinate, and placing them in front of classrooms was as good as condemning all their pupils to dangerous deviancy. The advent of AIDS took this viral threat from metaphorical to literal, providing detractors at last with concrete proof of the lethal consequences of straying from the narrow and straight, and turning AIDS into what historian Sean Gill describes as "a powerful weapon with which to undermine the human worth and dignity of gay men".⁷³ Worst-case-scenario scare tactics were a mainstay of twentieth-century mainline Christianity's attempts to evoke good behavior from children and adolescents, using variations on what writer and critic of evangelical culture Fred Clark calls the "the great *memento mori* of our time: 'You

⁷² The Pattern I/Pattern II model of AIDS argues that though AIDS itself does not differ from country to country, its epidemiology does. Industrialized countries where gay men are the primary vectors are described as Pattern I, while developing nations where most cases can be linked back to heterosexual sex are described as Pattern II. The problems associated with this model are legion, and thus I will not be using these terms; for further discussion of the multiple racial and colonial fallacies involved with these designations, see Cindy Patton's *Inventing AIDS* (1990).

⁷³ Gill, Sean, ed. *The Lesbian and Gay Christian Movement: Campaigning for Justice, Truth, and Love*. London: Cassell, 1998: 56. Gill's history provides an interesting contrast, as it focuses on the United Kingdom, where the epidemic played out differently; though the Church of England's anti-gay response to AIDS was significant, it never reached the influential or vituperative levels of discourse that the NCR had access to in the United States.

could walk out that door and get hit by a bus."⁷⁴ To this way of thinking, one should always be right with Jesus, because one never knows when this "hypothetical bus" might strike. AIDS made that hypothetical a lot less so; if the unforeseen tortures of Hell were not threatening enough to make young gay men turn from the lifestyles that would surely send them there, then perhaps seeing the tortures of disease cut down their friends would make them acknowledge they'd been wrong all along.⁷⁵ The tale of the young gay man returning penitently to his family, his church, and his faith before dying of AIDS appears time and again throughout various Christian works throughout this period, the Prodigal Son for the modern age, though welcomed back far more conditionally than the figure from the parable.

The perception of AIDS as a deserved disease is key to understanding Christian responses from all points on the spectrum. Christian views of suffering as informed by the Bible come from two very different places: the Old Testament⁷⁶ and the New Testament. Both of these collections of texts approach the issue of getting what one deserves from sharply different positions.

Gospel stories of healing have strong social connotations, wherein healed persons are not only physically repaired, they are restored to a correct place in the community. Physical suffering, therefore, is an affliction not only of the body, but of relationships. Owing to prevalent Jewish thought about suffering as the manifested consequence of sin, Jewish

⁷⁴ Clark, Fred. *The Anti-Christ Handbook: The Horror and Hilarity of Left Behind*. Amazon Digital Services LLC, 2015.

⁷⁵ Despite the fact that AIDS is no longer the 'gay plague' it once was, the great divorce between the epidemic and homosexuality has not happened in much of U.S. evangelical culture. For an example of how the specter of AIDS is still used to scare young people (sexually) straight, see the 'Hell Houses and the Evangelical Theater of Horror' chapter from Jason Bivins' *Religion of Fear* (2008).

⁷⁶ My choice of terminology here is intended to reflect a specifically Christian engagement with the biblical texts, which is why I use the term 'Old Testament' instead of 'Hebrew Bible'.

communities depicted in the New Testament often marginalized infected and disabled individuals. One of Jesus' most notable healing stories happens in the Gospel of John, wherein Jesus is called upon to answer the question about sin as the causation of suffering, here represented by a man born blind; Jesus' response is that 'Neither this man nor his parents sinned; he was born blind so that God's works might be revealed in him' (John 9:3, NRSV), a statement which simultaneously denies the hereditary legacy of sin while affirming God's inherent control over the human physical condition. While worldly suffering is not desirable, it is not a sign of a larger spiritual defect. Jesus' own death contradicts the idea that only good comes to the good, as all the stories of his arrest, torture, and crucifixion make clear that he dies messily, painfully, and in a state of undisputed innocence. His eventual resurrection then functions as proof of God's divine control over life and death, promising by proxy for believers a better world in the life to come.

All of which is not to say that New Testament Christianity puts aside bloodthirstiness for a happy hand-holding friendship circle; one need only read the Revelation to find fantastic and enthusiastic Christian visions of fiery death and planetwide destruction. However, from its powerless state as a marginalized Jewish sect in first-century Palestine, early Christianity cheered on the idea of God's eventual cataclysmic reordering of the world largely because its members lacked any agency of social change themselves. The more the world fell into the clutches of the forces of evil, the more the forces of evil would turn on the forces of good – meaning that *necessarily*, the more one suffered painfully (and, often, died messily), the more righteous the state of one's soul. Terrestrial suffering in this context becomes not trivial so much as immaterial, insignificant when compared to the Kingdom come once God steps in for a radical overthrow of human history.

What happened to Christianity at the start of the fourth century was something its earliest adherents would never have expected – the religion that had formed its whole identity about being persecuted by the state quite suddenly *became* the state, possessed of all the power it had once characterized as the evil it must necessarily oppose. With Constantine's support, Christianity found itself possessed of a great deal of power, influence, and capital, and though intermittent and local persecutions in the more remote parts of the Empire were not stopped entirely until several decades later, the fact of the Emperor's cultural and legal endorsements necessitated a change in the way Christianity understood itself. Plans for hunkering down and waiting out the end of the world were put aside in favor of going into the world and making of all disciples – by force if necessary.

Nowhere is this new Christian ideology articulated more clearly than in Augustine of Hippo's *City of God*, a fifth-century theological treatise arguably second only to the Bible in terms of texts that have influenced Christian thought. Augustine maintains much of the same stark Greek-influenced dichotomies present throughout the New Testament, but concretizes them in two larger concepts: the City of God and the Earthly City, more traditionally referred to in English as the City of Man. Humanity inhabits the City of Man, a sphere where God's eternally righteous justice is more an ideal than an actual lived concept. Because it is a dim reflection of the City of God, the perfect state of being which will triumph at the end of history, the City of Man sometimes demands of its righteous inhabitants imperfect ends to justify divine means. Thus, by Augustine's reasoning, as suffering can still be the means by which an imperfect world perfects a righteous believer in faith (for instance, beating a disobedient wife into a more subservient, godly state), there exists a connection between the pain one endures and the pain one deserves. To the

Christians of that time, this meant God's tacit approval of killing heretics; to Crusaders six centuries later, it justified the slaughter of all manner of "heathens" on the way to reclaiming Jerusalem. While few Christians in modernity are more than passingly familiar with Augustine, and fewer still have read any of his writings, his ideas have percolated down through nearly all strains of Christianity. Christians have justified some of the greatest atrocities in human history by this logic – colonization, slavery, genocide, subjugation, forced conversion – believing themselves God's people in an imperfect world, and thus given authority to claim dominion over others, particularly those viewed as less beloved by God.

In modern US Christianity, advocating the outright murder of others is a mercifully fringe view. However, identifying certain people as "worthy" of catastrophe is a position that spans political and denominational lines, whether the person making that judgment call is wishing down future calamity on individuals for their lifestyle choices or blaming past tragic events on the country itself for persistently ignoring systemized inequalities.⁷⁷ Such became the overwhelming narrative in response to AIDS, which was often ignored in the critical early days of the epidemic because the people getting sick from it were from groups that evoked little mainstream sympathy. Prominent voices from the Christian Right grabbed AIDS as the rhetorical evidence they'd been seeking that homosexuals were more than just a threat to the American "family values" – they were now literally disease- and death-carrying, capable of seducing children not only into deviant lifestyles, but into the

⁷⁷ Perhaps the most notable case of this on the left/liberal side of the spectrum is Rev. Jeremiah Wright's fiery 2003 message, "Confusing God and Government" – better known as his post-9/11 "God Damn America" sermon. For further discussion on the speech's use and misuse, see Bernard W. Bell's "President Barack Obama, the Rev. Dr. Jeremiah Wright, and the African American Jeremiadic Tradition".

grave. While these arguments were not new to the America public, the added specter of an unknown but fatal disease gave them added weight, and gay Americans, who had never enjoyed an overabundance of social capital, found themselves even more outcast. This disregard for persons with and at risk from AIDS was hardly internal talk; as secular activist Larry Kramer noted in his seminal 1983 article "1,112 and Counting" (referring to the number of diagnosed cases at the time of his writing), "Southern newspapers and Jerry Falwell's publications are already printing editorials proclaiming AIDS as God's deserved punishment on homosexuals."⁷⁸ Though these arguments for further condemnation and marginalization came from specifically religious sources, they were paired with calls for secular political action, putting both the fear of infection and the fear of God into the public. While there was often at least some small crumb of compassion offered to the 'innocent victims' of AIDS (mostly pediatric cases), the unspoken corollary to that terminology paints all other infected individuals as 'guilty' of crimes worthy of a viral death sentence. Many Christians in the United States at the time would have been quickly and vocally willing to agree with the comment that "the good thing about AIDS is that it's killing all the right people."⁷⁹

An American Epidemic

Rock Hudson's public disclosure of his HIV+ status in July 1985 marked a major

⁷⁸ Kramer, Larry. "1,112 and Counting." *New York Native*, Issue 59, March 14-27, 1983

⁷⁹ A statement overheard in the hospital by *Designing Women* creator Linda Bloodworth-Thomason, whose mother contracted AIDS from a blood transfusion and later died from complications. Part of this statement later became the title of an October 1987 episode of the show, featuring a young, HIV-positive male character. (Capsuto, Steven. *Alternate Channels: The Uncensored Story of Gay and Lesbian Images on Radio and Television*. p.221-222.)

turning point in popular perceptions of what AIDS was and – more importantly – who was vulnerable to it. Randy Shilts wrote, "Doctors involved in AIDS research called the Hudson announcement the single most important event in the history of the epidemic, and few knowledgeable people argued."⁸⁰ While there were no doubt individuals in the United States who had never (at least to their knowledge) encountered even a single one of the four H's, Hudson's status as an actor and a heartthrob had made him a household name long before his diagnosis. Though Hudson speculated he had been infected through a blood transfusion, *People Magazine* published an article that August confirming Hudson's homosexuality as an "open secret"⁸¹. After flying to Paris for unsuccessful treatments (on a private plane whose chartering fee was more than the last four years of the research budget for the specialist he was consulting⁸²), Hudson died of AIDS-related complications in October of that same year.

With Hudson's death, the media had a new face for AIDS, one who already had a place in the American public's collective star-struck heart. Anonymous, scandalous homosexuals and menacing drug-users had been used to paint the terrifying picture of AIDS, but it was a picture that did not match the public's perception of Hudson. His diagnosis gave the media a sympathetic face, and that sympathetic face earned an equally sympathetic treatment; a *People* article on Hudson quotes William Hoffman, author of *As Is*, a Broadway play about AIDS, characterizing public response to news of the diagnosis: "If Rock Hudson can have

⁸⁰ Shilts, Randy. 1987. *And the band played on: politics, people, and the AIDS epidemic*. New York: St. Martin's Press. p.579.

⁸¹ Yarbrough, Jeff. "Rock Hudson: On Camera and Off, The Tragic News That He Is the Most Famous Victim of An Infamous Disease, AIDS, Unveils the Hidden Life of a Longtime Hollywood Hero", *People Magazine*, Vol. 24, No. 7, August 12, 1985.

⁸² Treichler, 72.

it, nice people can have it. It's just a disease, not a moral affliction."⁸³

If AIDS was a moral affliction, then the best way to avoid it was moral rectitude, something most heterosexual Christian Americans could pride themselves on - and if not moral rectitude, then at least promises of forgiveness of sin and its deadly consequences via Jesus. If it was a mere disease, though, then assurance of one's own eternal salvation might not be enough to keep the sickness at bay. Hudson might have been the first big "nice" person to get AIDS, so far as the media were concerned, but he was not to be the last. The same month Hudson made his announcement, *Life* magazine published its July 1985 issue with "NOW NO ONE IS SAFE FROM AIDS" in terrifying red block letters across its cover; Treichler describes how beneath it, "in living color, photographs of people with AIDS stared out at the reader: an African-American soldier in uniform, saluting; the Burks, a white all-American nuclear family (father, mother, daughter, baby son); and an attractive young blonde woman."⁸⁴ Miles from even the cleanest-cut of the earlier cover-story homosexuals, these individuals presented faces much more familiar to the general American public - and not one of them had contracted AIDS via gay male sex. Perhaps no one had been safe before that particular issue of *Life* hit the newsstands, but now they had the magazine to prove it.

Much has been said about the responses (or lack thereof) to the epidemic from various city, state, and national governments - in fact, much was said at the time, though that largely from gay groups frustrated by a withholding of funding and responses that unquestionably made the spread of AIDS worse. The writings of the eternally outspoken Larry Kramer are

⁸³ Yarbrough.

⁸⁴ Treichler, 74.

perhaps the best historical record that exists of the frustration felt by these groups as larger government structures ignored them; in his 1985 play *The Normal Heart*, Ned Weeks (Kramer's admitted self-insert) repeatedly accuses government players at all levels of letting AIDS do the extermination work they themselves could not – in other words, letting it kill all the right people. While there may be no way to judge the degree of malice behind government inaction at the time, the sentiments expressed by the NCR's Moral Majority, on whose support Reagan had ridden into office, made such a conclusion hard *not* to draw.

While the federal government could hardly be expected to do much about the wrath of God, it couldn't ignore a disease to which Middle America now understood itself to be vulnerable. Gay Americans found an unlikely ally in Surgeon General C. Everett Koop, whose nomination they and other progressive groups had opposed in 1981. By the end of 1986, Koop was at the forefront of a proactive government response to AIDS, rejecting ideas of quarantine and compulsory identification of infected individuals while pushing AIDS education as soon as children were capable of learning about it. Again, what changed American perception of AIDS was the messenger as much as the message. Shilts characterizes the curious pairing of unlikely public figures as follows:

Koop's impact was due to archetypal juxtaposition. It took a square-jawed, heterosexually perceived actor like Rock Hudson to make AIDS something people could talk about. It took an ultra-conservative fundamentalist who looked like an Old Testament prophet to credibly call for all of America to take the epidemic seriously at last.⁸⁵

Despite (or perhaps because of) his Moses-like countenance, Koop gathered national attention and concern to what had become the AIDS crisis, but did not divorce it in the

⁸⁵ Shilts, 588.

minds of the American public from the idea of a plague worthy of Exodus. As noted rather sardonically by Treichler, even "objective" scientific visions of the virus seemed to reaffirm its status as a moral (or at least morally conscious) affliction; Treichler characterizes the December 1985 issue of *Discover* magazine, which contained a wealth of prevailing scientific information gleaned from the most recent AIDS research, as suggesting in its cover story article

that the virus enters the bloodstream by way of the "vulnerable anus" and the "fragile urethra"; in contrast, the "rugged vagina" (built to be abused by such blunt instruments as penises and small babies) provides too tough a barrier for the AIDS virus to penetrate.⁸⁶

Again, a fine victory for monogamous, heterosexual, penis-in-vagina sex and the people who have it. Of course, not all women were saved by the toughness of their reproductive organs; women who had a great *deal* of promiscuous penis-in-vagina sex could be thus infected, through engaging in unprotected penetrative sex with so many men that they became reservoirs of semen by which men could infect each other and, eventually, the women (through whose bodies they'd been unwittingly having contaminative gay sex all along).⁸⁷ Scientific proof could then supplement or even replace biblical proof as the crux of the Christian argument for AIDS as a moral plague – after all, the Word of God only carries so much weight beyond certain circles, but by the 1980s, biomedicine's triumph over most of the contagious diseases of the twentieth century had earned it a place of great

⁸⁶ Treichler, 17.

⁸⁷ Women's bodies have been notoriously invisible in the AIDS epidemic, and this inequality is not often addressed by the primary source materials that make up the backbone of my work. Treichler's work has perhaps been the most thorough on this gap between perception and reality, especially "The Burdens of History: Gender and Representation in AIDS Discourse, 1981-1988", found in *How to Have Theory in an Epidemic* (1999).

authority in the mind of the American public.⁸⁸ As can often be the case with Christians who use the Bible to support their anti-gay theses, accusations of bigotry can be easy to deflect with the argument that it is not one's personal belief, but objective facts that make a stance the correct one. The vision of science as the work of active agents reporting back on a passive world, as anthropologist Emily Martin characterizes Western attitudes toward scientific knowledge, absolves those who claim a scientific perspective from having to own their particular viewpoints; thus, scientific knowledge is disconnected from the flaws and biases of those who produce it.⁸⁹ Not unlike the Bible in many conceptions of Christianity, it is seen as having descended from some inarguable Truth, untainted by petty human meddlings. That language, culture, context, and in some cases even translation might have influenced the findings is not up for consideration.

Even as the media confirmed the vulnerability of the general population, it was in a way that reaffirmed the distinctness between "normal" America and the high-risk groups still most associated with the epidemic. The cover story of the January 1987 issue of *US News and World Report* proclaimed that "The disease of *them* suddenly is the disease of *us*."⁹⁰ Not only does this statement show the media's hand regarding their presumed readership, but it confirms the idea that while AIDS may be transmissible, it is far from the great equalizer. Still, the confirmation of heterosexual transmission as a valid vector meant that some greater action was needed than had been given in the past.

⁸⁸ Martin, Emily. 1994. *Flexible bodies: tracking immunity in American culture from the days of polio to the age of AIDS*. Boston: Beacon Press.

⁸⁹ Ibid.

⁹⁰ McAuliffe, Kathleen. "AIDS: AT THE DAWN OF FEAR." *U.S. News & World Report*, January 12, 1987. p.60.

At last, on April 1, 1987⁹¹, then-President Reagan gave his first public address on AIDS; later that year, America Responds to AIDS (ARTA) became the first real federal AIDS initiative, one focused on education and prevention. Even this campaign, however, was heavily censored and modified at the behest of the political wing of the Christian Right, led primarily by Jesse Helms (at that time a Republican senator from North Carolina) and his eponymous amendment to the Labor, Health and Human Services and Education Appropriation Bill. Said amendment – argued for in what journalist and author John-Manuel Andriote describes as "one of the most hate-filled, yet amazingly persuasive, speeches ever delivered in the U.S. Senate"⁹² – prohibited "the use of funds made available to the Centers for Disease Control to provide **AIDS** (acquired immune deficiency syndrome) education, information, or prevention materials and activities that promote or encourage homosexual activities."⁹³ [emphasis/lowercase in original] That the language in those materials was discussing rather than evangelizing for same-sex sexual activity was beside the point; even acknowledging non-heterosexual sexual behavior without the appropriate horrified condemnations, at least to Helms and his supporters, was tantamount to pushing young boys into bathhouses. As a result, the eight-page *Understanding AIDS* brochure that arrived in American mailboxes in early 1988 lacked all but the most general references to sexual activity, and even that was clearly directed more to anxious

⁹¹ A date more brilliant in its irony than any fiction could have invented.

⁹² Andriote, 144.

⁹³ U.S. Congress. Committee on Appropriations. *Departments of Labor, Health and Human Services, Education, and Related Agencies Appropriations for Fiscal Year 1988 Hearings before a Subcommittee of the Committee on Appropriations, United States Senate, One Hundredth Congress, First Session, on H.R. 3058 an Act Making Appropriations for the Departments of Labor, Health and Human Services, and Education, and Related Agencies, for the Fiscal Year Ending, September 30, 1988, and for Other Purposes*. 100th Cong. Cong. Bill. Washington: U.S. G.P.O., 1987.
<https://www.congress.gov/bill/100th-congress/house-bill/3058>.

heterosexuals than to populations at greatest risk,⁹⁴ leaving gay male populations once again to rely upon more targeted outreach programs from within more sympathetic communities for education about AIDS.⁹⁵

The white Protestant evangelicals of the Moral Majority, however, were not the only Christians whose anti-gay and anti-sex positions came to bear on their responses to the epidemic; though the New Christian Right held most of the political sway on national and many state levels, in New York, the prominence of the Catholic Church made its condemnations that much more strongly felt. ACT UP (the AIDS Coalition To Unleash Power), founded in 1987 as a more political counterpart to the GMHC, had New York City as its base of operation, and thus centered much of its activism on opposing public statements made by the Catholic Church in general, and Cardinal John Joseph O'Connor, then-Archbishop of New York, in particular. 1989's Stop the Church action was a large, controversial act of organized civil disobedience, one that focused on a single church: Manhattan's famous St. Patrick's Cathedral. According to ACT UP's own action update, "Our frontline issues are safer sex education, condoms and needles, abortion, homophobia, and violence against gays and lesbians. Our underlying issues are freedom of choice, the right to control our own bodies, and the separation of church and state."⁹⁶ Even though that church and all others remained un-stopped when the dust of the protest settled, the fact of

⁹⁴ United States, and Centers for Disease Control (U.S.). 1988. *Understanding AIDS*. Rockville, MD: U.S. Dept. of Health & Human Services, Public Health Service, Centers for Disease Control.

⁹⁵ One loose, undated brochure, published by an otherwise-unidentified 'Aids Awareness Committee' and stuffed in the archival materials from Jim Littrell, minces far fewer words: 'If you want to be 100% safe, Don't have sex! However, if you live in the real world, Don't get fucked!' and "**Those testing negative did not stop having sex; they simply stopped fucking!**" [emphasis in original] While many recipients of *Understanding AIDS* might not have known the difference between sex and fucking, the distinction would not have been lost on the gay male community.

⁹⁶ Blasius, Mark, and Shane Phelan. 1997. *We are everywhere: a historical sourcebook of gay and lesbian politics*. New York: Routledge. p. 623.

the demonstration at all went far to solidifying the rhetorical incompatibility of gay life and religious life – at least as far as the gay side was concerned.⁹⁷ While few Christian churches and organizations had been gay-positive prior to the late 1980s, many had not been openly gay-hostile, preferring tacit disapproval over declarative statements of condemnation. As groups such as the Catholic Church became more vocal and politically active in opposition to gay causes and AIDS education, gay and gay-friendly Christians were faced with a variety of difficult questions: To what extent did being part of a denomination indicate approval of larger denominational positions? Could support at the congregational level outweigh policies decided upon by far-removed governing bodies? Was there any chance that these hierarchies might change their stances on the issues, or was the only solution to shake the dust off one's feet and go?

1991 saw another major landmark in AIDS coverage and perception: Erwin "Magic" Johnson's disclosure of his own, heterosexually acquired HIV+ status brought AIDS home especially to straight and African-American communities.⁹⁸ A second notable announcement came the following year, as Arthur Ashe confirmed in April of 1992 rumors that he was living with HIV. Both black, straight athletes, Johnson and Ashe did not fit the longtime narrative of AIDS as a disease of gay men and drug users. (Johnson admitted to having had multiple unsafe heterosexual encounters; Ashe is assumed to have been infected by post-surgical blood transfusions.) By then, the decreased stigma surrounding the diseases had led multiple uninfected celebrities to begin to attach their fame to fundraising for AIDS-related causes; hemophiliac Ryan White's activism had gained the attention of

⁹⁷ Lierman, 126-7.

⁹⁸ Treichler, 73-74.

several big names, among them Elton John and Michael Jackson, and their support for AIDS awareness and research continued beyond White's death in 1990. Though "fun run"-type events had been held since the mid-'80s to raise money for education and clinical trials, by the early 1990s, several had gained prominence and significant participation from far beyond the gay community.

Though 1993 did not mark the end of the AIDS crisis by any measure, by then, over a decade into the epidemic, science, education, and increased awareness and visibility had taken AIDS from an unfathomable malady caused by God's judgment to a communicable, sometimes treatable disease that was definitively transmitted by some behaviors and not by others. By then, the FDA had approved three separate drugs for HIV, and to activists and researchers alike "it seemed to make sense to try them together"⁹⁹; by 1995, drug cocktails had become standard approved treatments for AIDS, and these various combinations could slow the process of the virus in individuals dramatically.¹⁰⁰ 1993 also brought audiences to *Philadelphia* in theatres as Hollywood's first major attempt at portraying AIDS on the big screen, and when Tom Hanks took the stage to receive his (well-deserved) Academy Award for Best Actor the following year, he did so with a prominent red ribbon pin on his lapel. The accusations of AIDS as a moral affliction now flew in the face of not only the niceness of Rock Hudson, but in the public admiration for many celebrities. Churches that did not want to condone or even discuss sexual politics could not ignore the growing global crisis, which especially in Africa was captured in

⁹⁹ Andriote, 372.

¹⁰⁰ And for a demonstration of "dramatically", the documentary *How to Survive a Plague* (2013) brings home the success of the cocktails by contrasting the swaths of HIV+ gay men dead so quickly of AIDS before 1995 with how many of the ones who made it to the cocktails are still alive nearly twenty years later.

photographs of suffering women and children¹⁰¹, and could in good conscience direct relief efforts overseas. AIDS was still here, but the gay plague was on its way out.

The Language of Morality

To think of AIDS as a medical condition changes nothing and everything at once. The virus itself is not affected; what people call it does not make it shift its infection patterns or alter its course through the human body. However, the semantics of AIDS can literally mean the difference between life and death. Paula Treichler's oft-quoted phrase characterizing AIDS as an "epidemic of signification"¹⁰² encapsulates how language is a critical component of AIDS's epidemiology. What AIDS *is* often comes secondary to the discourse surrounding what it *means*. It controls who "gets" to have AIDS – not whose body can host the biological reality of the virus, but whose body fits the official definition of an infected body sufficient to merit a diagnosis (which thus qualifies the person in the body for protection against discrimination, drug trials, financial support, etc.). It creates categories of risk whereby people are given parameters to judge the relative safeness or danger of their bodies and other bodies, often irrespective of actual immediate risk. It others entire cultures, dividing the world into semantic patterns of infection and declaring heterosexual transmission only possible in the face of "incorrect" heterosexuality. How appropriate, then, that one of the earliest scientific controversies surrounding AIDS was

¹⁰¹ These images had been a present and even prevalent part of the AIDS narrative since long before the early '90s, but the *New York Times'* increased focus on the epidemic in Africa significantly influenced perceptions in the United States of "African AIDS". See chapter 7 of Treichler's *How to Have Theory in an Epidemic*, "AIDS, Africa, and Cultural Theory".

¹⁰² Treichler, 19.

simply what to *call* the newly discovered virus: LAV, HTLV-III, IDAV, ARV, HIV. Petro's claim that "our rhetorical choices nonetheless bear discernable moral and political consequences"¹⁰³ shows how far beyond simple representation these linguistic choices stretch.

This kind of signification is no different when it comes from the mouth of the Church. In general, my research findings indicate two general kinds of responses from the exile-embracing Christian groups whose materials make up the bulk of this dissertation. The first are practical: Some of these church organizations were the primary sources of information their congregations had. What precisely constitutes this information depends on the readership – early responses from majority-gay groups include warnings about condom usage and locations of testing sites, while later handouts from majority-straight congregations give statistics on AIDS around the world and clear facts about how AIDS can and cannot be transmitted – but no group confines its commentary to the theological. Here, in a way, these groups agree with Hoffman: This is a disease, not a moral affliction.

The second, however, are pure counter-narrative. There is no way to erase the language of condemnation and damnation: it is out there, it is present, it is a bell that cannot be unrung, and there is simply no way it has passed over the ears of these congregants and newsletter-readers. To simply reject the conclusions of groups like the Moral Majority risks getting into an am-not-are-so battle more worthy of a playground than a pulpit. The prevailing discourse has established its authority with a Bible in its hand, setting the terms of the argument; these counter-narrative texts attempt to engage it on its own terms and

¹⁰³ Petro, 13.

provide more authentically compassionate Christian readings.

In August 1988, Rev. Elizabeth Eisenstadt, an Episcopal priest, put together a report for the Philadelphia Commission on AIDS at the University of Pennsylvania; this report, titled 'AIDS and Religion: The Philadelphia Reponse' sought to do a short survey of major Christian and Jewish denominations¹⁰⁴ and their coordinated responses to AIDS, on both national and local levels. Though Eisenstadt found enough material for a fairly detailed survey, her summary of her findings comes early in the report: "[W]hy are religious groups in Philadelphia so far behind?"¹⁰⁵ Behind cities like New York, whose Bailey House and St. Peter's Lutheran she mentions, but also behind the crisis itself; by 1988, as reflected by the earlier numbers from the Philadelphia Health Department, AIDS had obviously emerged as a major health issue in the city – one that, Eisenstadt felt, was not receiving a significant or coordinated effort from the city's religious groups.

In 1988, AIDS was still a hot-button cultural issue, and the major religious (read: Christian) voices in the public discourse were softening their language about it and those infected by it, but had by no means begun to step significantly away from 'sin' language. By contrast, Eisenstadt notes that she 'found little evidence of the word "sin" to describe a person with AIDS who had gotten it through homosexual intercourse or drug use.'¹⁰⁶ Her

¹⁰⁴ Eisenstadt, Elizabeth. *AIDS and Religion: The Philadelphia Reponse*. Report. Philadelphia: Philadelphia Commission on AIDS at the University of Pennsylvania, 1988. Despite the blanket term of 'Religion' in the title, Eisenstadt's survey includes only eleven Christian and two Jewish groups: the National Council of Churches, the Union of American Hebrew Congregations, United Synagogues of America (Conservative), the Unitarian Universalist Association, Roman Catholics, the Evangelical Lutheran Church in the United States, the Presbyterian Church in the USA, United Methodists, the Episcopal Church, the Society of Friends, the United Church of Christ, the American Baptists, and the Metropolitan Christian Council of Philadelphia. Eisenstadt also includes a section for chaplains from Christian and Jewish traditions.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid, 7.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid, 5.

remark betrays a kind of surprise that this should be true, especially in light of the way popular discourse's loudest Christian-representative voices were discussing the topic at the time. Luminaries of the New Christian Right such as Jerry Falwell and Pat Robertson had already taken to the airways to present multiple condemnations of AIDS and people with it as though theirs were the unified Christian positions on the matter – what Kowalewski characterizes as "blame the sinner" responses. In light of that expectation, one would not be hard-pressed to imagine why a larger, quieter contrary response might be startling.

I would suggest that part of the lack of 'sin' language in her findings is no doubt due to Eisenstadt's choice of survey groups. The report includes American Baptists, for instance, but not Southern Baptists, who have historically taken a much harsher stance on sin and culpability. Similarly, her use of material from mainline Protestant denominations but not non-denominational Charismatic/Evangelical churches omits congregations more likely to use "blame the victim" rhetoric of judgment and condemnation when talking about AIDS. While an Orthodox rabbi features in the section on chaplaincy (along with an observation that AIDS' having a large effect on the tight-knit Orthodox community would be like its having a large effect on the Amish, equally improbable and cataclysmic¹⁰⁷), all other Jewish responses featured therein come from the more liberal Conservative and Reform traditions. In addition, as discussed in further detail in Chapter 3, by 1988 there had also begun to be a shift in the way the American public talked about AIDS, corresponding to a greater frequency of responses that bypassed discussions of culpability and deservedness entirely in order to accomplish larger, more concrete goals.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid, 54.

However, it is also worth noting that Eisenstadt's work reflects how some of the earliest responses to the AIDS epidemic formulated by major Christian and Jewish groups in the United States were indeed compassionate. A majority of the denominations in this report could hardly be described as 'gay-friendly'; several had at that time (and some still do today) doctrine and polity statements affirming celibacy and heterosexual monogamy as the only correct expressions of human sexuality. Nonetheless, the practical questions raised by AIDS were significant enough that they inspired equivalent reactions. Regardless of these denominational positions on the issue of sexual sin, Eisenstadt's findings reflect a larger cultural turn near the end of the 1980s toward religious groups' approaching AIDS not as a reason for organized condemnation, but cause for education and sympathy.

This report also reflects the not-infrequent disconnect between policy established at the denominational level and action taken by individual clergy and congregations. Depending on the denominational structure, congregations have different degrees of freedom to disagree with the governing body before there are repercussions for not toeing the party line. Denominational stances also tend to be more milquetoast, as they affect congregations in all parts of the United States, if not all over the world; radical progressive positionality from most major Christian governing bodies in particular happens only once in a very blue moon. Eisenstadt's work notes that the individuals and congregations most involved in creating positive, compassionate, proactive responses to the AIDS epidemic are those most directly personally touched by it. In my research, I have found this to be true as well; the major sources of materials have been from congregations either composed primarily of LGBT individuals or with a small but beloved number of gay congregants, with other congregations joining in primarily as their own congregants begin dying. It seems the

fastest way to induce a religious group to care about AIDS is to have it hit home.

Philadelphia Christian Groups Researched

This work is not intended to be a comprehensive survey of the AIDS epidemic in Philadelphia, religiously or otherwise. Many groups with religious affiliations who played major roles in the first decade of the epidemic are not represented here, and most for the same reason: They did not produce or preserve enough archival material for consideration. Extemporaneous religiosity does not leave much of a paper trail, after all, meaning that many of the more Charismatic Christian traditions in Philadelphia are underrepresented here. The decades-long technology gap has proven prohibitive as well; many sermons, speeches, and worksheets were located only on floppy discs and old hard drives that have been lost to time. Some of the other religious groups not included were from religious traditions other than Christianity, and while some of those are present in later interfaith actions, they are not considered individually. And of course, the majority of AIDS-focused organizations in Philadelphia at this time had no particular religious affiliation at all.

Instead, looking at surviving material produced by these groups is intended to provide snapshots of the diverse ways in which marginalized Christianities deal with crisis. These materials are often not representative of entire denominations, or even of entire congregations. What they do represent, however, are some of the ways in which Christians use the paradigm of religion and its metaphors to respond to the world.

The following are short histories of the major congregations and organizations whose clergy and congregants produced the materials that make up the bulk of this dissertation.

St. Mary's, Hamilton Village

An Episcopal congregation, St. Mary's had its original cornerstone laid in 1824, and the current building out of which it still operates was completed in 1873. Located on the campus of the University of Pennsylvania, it is sometimes called St. Mary's at Penn. Since the 1980s, St. Mary's has provided meeting spaces for both Dignity and Integrity (see below), and since the late 1980s has provided several AIDS ministries that focus on practical support for PWAs, especially children; in particular, the basement of the church has hosted for many years a respite center for children and families affected by the AIDS epidemic. Many LGBT congregants marched in Philly Pride and participated in AIDS walks under the church's name.

During the 1990s, most of St. Mary's clergy were openly gay, including the Rev. James H. "Jim" Littrell, a prominent figure in AIDS activism both sacred and secular in Philadelphia, who was the rector at St. Mary's from 1997 to 2012, but who was involved with the Episcopal Church in Philadelphia prior to that appointment. Littrell served as the Founding Executive Director of the Philadelphia Lesbian and Gay Task Force, the president of ActionAIDS, president of the AIDS Resource Group, and the Executive Director of the Philadelphia AIDS Consortium. He was one of the founders of the AIDS Law Project of Philadelphia, organized and contributed to a number of educational programs, and served on many interfaith committees. The majority of the archival materials considered in this dissertation that are not associated with a specific congregation come from Rev. Littrell's personal archives.

University Lutheran Church of the Incarnation

University Lutheran ("UniLu", for short) is an Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA) congregation located in University City, Philadelphia. Founded in 1888, its primary identity today is as a Lutheran Campus Ministry, one which maintains its Lutheran affiliation while opening its doors to congregants of all denominations.

From 1983 to 1995, the pastor at University Lutheran was Jeffrey A. Merkel. Under Pastor Merkel's leadership, the congregation began to offer a weekly meal for homeless individuals living with AIDS. During this same period, University Lutheran also voted to become a Reconciling in Christ congregation, a status by which a Lutheran congregation can affirm its public welcome to LGBT individuals; the ELCA has overtly rejected homophobia and discrimination since the mid-'90s, but has not adopted more denomination-wide stances on acceptance until more recent years.

Metropolitan Community Church of Philadelphia

The Metropolitan Community Church Philadelphia (now Whosoever Metropolitan Community Church of Philadelphia) is part of the larger Metropolitan Community Church, founded by Rev. Troy Perry in 1968. The Philadelphia congregation has existed since 1971, making it if not "Philadelphia's oldest LGBT organization"¹⁰⁸ then certainly *one* of the oldest, and more likely the oldest with a Christian identity. With fewer than a hundred

¹⁰⁸ Middleton, Josh. "Metropolitan Community Church Name Change | G Philly." Philadelphia Magazine. April 22, 2014. <http://www.phillymag.com/g-philly/2014/04/22/mcc-changes-name-mission-reflect-inclusiveness/>.

congregants, the church has never had its own worship space, needing instead to share facilities with other congregations, such as the First Unitarian Church of Philadelphia; at present, MCC Philadelphia rents space from University Lutheran and meets in the evenings to accommodate the other congregation's worship schedule. Despite its small size, however, the church has had a long history of visibility, especially at events such as Philly Pride. Its newsletter, *The Metropolitan Community Church Philadelphia Bellringer* (also referred to as the *MCC Bellringer*, or, more simply, the *Bellringer*), is preserved not in the church's own archives, but in the archives of the William Way Community Center.

Germantown Mennonite Church

The oldest Mennonite congregation in America, Germantown Mennonite (GMC) was established in 1683; it is not located in the center of Philadelphia, like the other congregations, but in Germantown, a community in the northwestern part of the city. Another small congregation, GMC grew in the 1980s from having around thirty-five people in worship each week at the beginning of the decade to having 110 regular attendees by 1989, a level of growth that necessitated its finding a new building to house its weekly services.

John Linscheid, a longtime congregant, describes the 1980s at GMC as a period of "don't ask, don't tell", wherein the church was operating as a fully inclusive congregation, many members of which were themselves openly gay and/or HIV+, but so as to comply with the denomination's guidelines did not pass any official resolution.¹⁰⁹ However, not all

¹⁰⁹ Linscheid, John. "Archival Research and Germantown Mennonite." E-mail message to author. February 17, 2014.

members at the time were comfortable with this inclusivity, as reflected in a number of congregational discussions and personal correspondences with the pastoral staff.

Dignity

Dignity Philadelpha (sometimes written as DIGNITY/Philadelphia) is part of the larger Dignity movement, an international organization founded in 1969 and described as "the oldest and largest national lay movement of lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (GLBT) Catholics, our families, and our friends"¹¹⁰. The Philadelphia chapter "began in the early 1970's when a small group of Roman Catholic and Anglican gays held prayer services and liturgies in the homes of some of the individuals in the group"; the chapter received its official charter from the larger organization in 1975.¹¹¹ Near the end of the 1980s, the following identifying text began appearing regularly in its newsletter, *The Independence*:

Dignity/Philadelphia is a chapter of Dignity/USA, a national movement of lesbian and gay Roman Catholics and their friends working within the Church for the development of its sexual theology, for the acceptance of lesbians and gays as full and equal members, and to elicit responsive approaches both inside and outside the Roman Catholic Church.

Much of the focus of its activism during the 1980s was changing the Catholic church's official policies about homosexuality, through advocacy and presence. Despite its lack of any official parish support, several priests were still involved with the group, some pseudonymously. However, even without any officially Catholic affiliation, Dignity was a major social and spiritual hub for gay men and lesbians of all faith traditions. It presented,

¹¹⁰ Helminiak, Daniel. "Frequently Asked Questions About Being Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, or Transgender and Catholic." DignityUSA. 2000. <https://www.dignityusa.org/~dignityu/sites/default/files/pdf/faqs.pdf>.

¹¹¹ "Brief History of the Philadelphia DIGNITY Chapter." *The Independence* 8 (September 1981): 4.

especially to its gay male members, what Leonard Primiano calls "an occasion outside the bar scene"¹¹² for meeting other queer Philadelphians and organizing fundraisers and outings." During the time covered by the materials in this inquiry, the group "kept a consistent membership of between 200 and 250 members,"¹¹³ though like MCC Philadelphia, it never occupied a dedicated worship space, and instead met in facilities owned by sympathetic Philadelphia Protestant congregations. Also like MCC Philadelphia, Dignity Philadelphia's regular monthly newsletter and other publications were preserved by the William Way Community Center.

We the People

We the People, PWA/ARC, Philadelphia was 'an organization of, by and for People With AIDS (PWAs), People With AIDS-Related Complex (PWARCs), & concerned friends.'¹¹⁴ Founded in the summer of 1987, this secular association was a resource and aid organization concerned with both advocacy and dissemination of information. According to its initial statement of purpose, one of the primary purposes for which this organization was formed was "to foster and encourage the philosophy and practice of self-empowerment"; another was "to gather and disseminate information about all facets of living with AIDS/ARC".¹¹⁵

¹¹² Primiano, Leonard Norman. "'I Would Rather Be Fixated on the Lord': Women's Religion, Men's Power, and the "dignity" Problem." In *Prejudice and Pride: Lesbian and Gay Traditions in America*. New York: New York Folklore Society, 1993. p. 91.

¹¹³ Primiano, Leonard Norman. "The Gay God of the City: The Emergence of the Gay and Lesbian Ethnic Parish." In *Gay Religion*, edited by Scott Thumma and Edward R. Gray, 7-29. Walnut Creek, CA: AltaMira Press, 2005.

¹¹⁴ 'We the People Organizational Assessment'. AIDS Resource Group Consulting Team, November 16, 1989.

¹¹⁵ Chickadel, David T. *We the People Philadelphia PWA/ARC Coalition Statement of Purpose*. Report. Vol.

While the organization was indeed primarily secular, its newsletters contained information about where its readers could go for support; many of the organizations in its short articles and directory were specifically religious, particularly those related to offered twelve-step programs. While We the People is absolutely the least-represented group of the ones mentioned here, I include it in this section for the frequency with which it supported extant religiously affiliated efforts to fight AIDS – something of a change from the regular order of things, where interested Christian groups would more frequently join and contribute to outside, secular initiatives.

St. Luke and the Epiphany

Located in Center City, Philadelphia, the Church of St. Luke and the Epiphany is an Episcopal congregation. Incorporated as St. Luke's Church in 1839, from nine different Episcopal parishes in the Philadelphia area, the congregation joined with the Church of the Epiphany in 1898, creating the church by the name it is known today. Its current pastor, Rev. Roger Broadley, was installed as its eighth rector on Friday, March 2, 1984,¹¹⁶ and has served over thirty years.

Known as a "longtime hub for Philadelphia's gay and lesbian community"¹¹⁷, St. Luke's did not have a significant LGBT population during the 1980s, in terms of either congregation or leadership, but still provided meeting space and several services specifically tailored to LGBT populations. Describing the church as "galvanized" by AIDS

1. Philadelphia: We the People, PWA/ARC, 1987.

¹¹⁶ *Service Leaflet for the Institution of Rev. Rodger Broadley as the 8th Rector of the Church of St. Luke and The Epiphany. March 2, 1984.* The Church of St. Luke and The Epiphany, Philadelphia.

¹¹⁷ Giordano, Scott A. "Church Faces a Crossroads." *Philadelphia Gay News*, January 17, 1997.

in 1986, Broadley was one of the few pastors willing to open his church to and perform funerals for PWAs, even if they hadn't been church members. This, in turn, saved the church, whose membership had been aging and tapering off;¹¹⁸ today church membership is around 300.

Like We the People, St. Luke's is included in this section less for the materials it produced and more for the degree to which it is represented by other materials. St. Luke's services to the LGBT community include both direct assistance and sponsorship support for organizations. After significant (and costly) renovations, the parish was able to give space and the occasional tax-exempt status to groups that include the NAMES Project Philadelphia, ACT UP, and the AIDS Law Project of Philadelphia. The St. Luke's Hospitality Center for People With AIDS opened in 1989, providing PWAs and their caregivers with support groups, bereavement counseling, and assistance in obtaining necessities such as food and health care. Since 1986, St. Luke's has also been one of the primary meeting places for Dignity (as well as for its Episcopal equivalent, Integrity).

These groups were not all active in AIDS work throughout the whole of this period of inquiry, nor did they all produce or preserve materials consistently over the first decade of AIDS. Some have significant gaps in their record-keeping; others did not keep their own records at all, meaning that without the William Way Center and James Littrell's collections, scant evidence would exist of their involvement during this eleven-year stretch. In addition,

¹¹⁸ "Center City Church Marks 30 Years Serving Those Affected By AIDS." Interview with Rodger Broadley by Molly Daly. CBS Philly. June 6, 2011. <http://philadelphia.cbslocal.com/2011/06/06/center-city-church-marks-30-years-serving-those-affected-by-aids/>.

not all groups preserved the same texts, making most immediate comparisons difficult. Therefore, absence in these pages cannot be understood as silence or apathy.

Instead, these texts are a patchwork of thoughts, feelings, reactions, activism, compassion, reassurances, grief, and celebration. They span whole ranges of human emotional experience as they capture the terror, confusion, frustration, and hope of the AIDS epidemic from inside the moment. They do not provide a comprehensive account of Philadelphia during the AIDS's first years, but put together they reflect realities of responding to the incomprehensible and the overwhelming – especially during the first years of the epidemic, where AIDS was not only a great unknown, but one that seemed to know just where to strike.

As reflected in the diverse issues and histories covered in this chapter, the material covered in this work sits at the confluence of a number of complicating, influential factors: the particular characteristics of Philadelphia, historical and contemporary Christian attitudes toward suffering and disease, the complicated political and scientific understandings of the AIDS epidemic, secular and religious concepts of body and sexuality, and the difficulties facing anyone trying to articulate any of these concepts toward a workable response to the mounting epidemic in the 1980s. The complexity of the landscape should not be underestimated, nor the difficulties of navigating it in the middle of crisis. The materials discussed in upcoming chapters are always responding to a number of factors both sacred and mundane, working with the best information available to equip communities with the best available scientific information while still providing spiritual reassurances and counterarguments against prevailing narratives of the Christian Right.

CHAPTER 2: "THIS IS GOING TO KILL ME AND EVERYONE I LOVE": 1982-1985

It is all but impossible now, after decades of knowledge and awareness, to image without having lived through the events directly what the early, panicked yards of the AIDS epidemic were like for the gay community. The nascent gay rights movement in the United States – which concretized in but certainly did not begin with the 1969 Stonewall Riots – was more often than not a split, paired movement, one that often found gay men and lesbians at separate, if not cross, purposes. While lesbian movements tended to focus on political and feminist causes (often when said causes, such as NOW, did not want them there), sexual liberation became a major, visible component of what it meant to be an openly gay man in the second half of the twentieth century. From bathhouses to porn theaters to getaways like Fire Island, NY, some of the most visible parts of gay life in the United States began to revolve around locations where sexual encounters were plentiful and often anonymous. Men who had in the past been forced to hide their sexualities could come to these places to join larger communities of like-minded men, who collectively began to consider the ability to have sex freely and openly a key part of establishing a new, unafraid gay identity. If their expressions of sexuality were what in the past had put them at risk of social and physical danger, then to engage in those expressions without shame was to refuse to live under the shadow of that fear. Andriote notes that this communal identification in terms of open, frequent sexual encounters even trumped individuals' desire to participate in them, as the bars and bathhouses created such an opportunity for gay men to define their lives around these social encounters that "if one was uncomfortable with

promiscuity, went the reasoning of the day, it was because he hated being gay."¹¹⁹

Part of AIDS' epidemic of signification, then, can be seen in how from the beginning, AIDS' very connection to sexuality was a political symptom. To tell a bunch of gay men to "stop fucking", as the handout mentioned in the previous chapter suggested, was not simply a suggestion regarding leisure activities – it was an attack on the very core of gay male identity, or so it seemed to many vocal members of the gay community. In his 1978 novel *Faggots*, Larry Kramer used fictionalized portrayal of the New York gay scene to critique many of the elements of the emergent gay lifestyle he saw as excessive and dangerous. Despite Kramer's being a well-known, openly gay activist, large swaths of gay Americans reacted as sourly to this book as though it had been written by the Moral Majority itself. The ability to be out and proud included the freedom to engage in sexual pursuits unencumbered by heteronormative prescriptivism, the argument went, and any attempt to curb that freedom was tantamount to shoving everyone back in the closets from whence they had so recently emerged. Shilts documents widespread resistance to the novel from New York City's gay communities, pointing out that even "Manhattan's only gay bookstore had banned the novel from its shelves while gay critics had advised readers that its purchase represented an act inimical to the interests of gay liberation."¹²⁰ Regardless of the motives behind Kramer's writing, his message was heard as betrayal, a vindication of the oppressive majority's demands for faithfulness in heterosexual marriage and chastity in singleness come from gay America's own Judas.

Thus, when the advent of AIDS led to calls for both safer and less sex, many parts of

¹¹⁹ Andriote, 19.

¹²⁰ Shilts, 26.

the gay community were already tuned to be unreceptive. The murky theories behind AIDS' origin and transmission did little to convince these men that their lives might be saved through conservative Christian ideas of sexual morality – after all, when other medical voices were pointing fingers at everything from poppers to tainted hepatitis vaccines to government-sanctioned genocide, why surrender what had become a key part of gay identity on the *off* chance that it might kill you?

The more AIDS became identified with New York (and, not far behind it, San Francisco), the less gay men in other parts of the country were inclined to take it seriously. Kramer's March 1983 article, "1,112 And Counting" – with its memorable first line, "If this article doesn't scare the shit out of you, we're in real trouble"¹²¹ – now reads like a chilling portent of what was to come, but at the time it seemed to many gay readers just another bout Kramer's histrionics, especially when taken in light of *Faggots*. 1,112 is in real ways both a large and a small number, one devastating when all your friends are counted in it, but remote when viewed from a distance. In his introduction to the 1985 edition of Kramer's play "The Normal Heart", novelist and essayist Andrew Holleran writes:

At the time the Gay Men's Health Crisis sounded vaguely like a church social (Were any of the members cute? we asked), and the whole brouhaha tangential to the life I and my friends lived – no one we knew was sick. Indeed, not only was AIDS still so rare that homosexuals in other cities considered it a New York problem – like high rents, or the IRT – it took *chutzpah* to go out to the Pines and appear among the sailboats, striped awnings, and men in Speedos with a suggestion that the party was over.¹²²

However, Holleran concedes, as time went on and the people he knew *did* begin to fall

¹²¹ Kramer.

¹²² The Normal Heart, p.23-24.

ill, first sporadically and then in what seemed like a wave, the gay community in New York and beyond began to acknowledge that Kramer was right to be afraid. In many cases, it turned out to be not that gay men like Holleran didn't know anyone who was sick, but that they didn't know what sick looked like. The change between the 1986 and 1989 charts of AIDS cases in the Philadelphia metro area shows not only that new diagnoses were added to the years past 1986, but that they were also added to years prior to it – a belated acknowledgment of what could only be seen in hindsight.

The enormity of the epidemic was such that even the mainstream press, despite frequent editorial directions to the contrary, could not continue to ignore what was happening. The August 8, 1983 issue of *Newsweek*¹²³ features a pair of men on the cover, looking masculine and healthy enough – except that the white text reading "GAY AMERICA: Sex, Politics, and The Impact of AIDS" superimposed above them let the reader of the time know they were neither. The key article inside, titled "Gay America in Transition", paints a terrifying, grotesque, and outsider-ish vision of the gay male condition, tellingly under the heading of "Punishment?": "To be a male homosexual today is to be afraid of catching AIDS; since the incubation period can last as long as two years, many gays can only wonder whether some day soon their first symptoms will appear."¹²⁴ In short, no longer were gay men to be allowed to construct their own identities around sexual freedom – now they were their bodies, and those bodies were contaminated.

¹²³ This and the other articles that ran in *Newsweek* in the early 1980s were there largely because of the influence of editor Vince Coppola, whose brother had AIDS. While many media sources gave short shrift to the epidemic or refused to cover it all, Coppola pushed for its elevation to the front page. See: Kinsella, James. *Covering the Plague*. p.92-93.

¹²⁴ Morganthau, Tom. "Gay America in Transition." *Newsweek*, August 8, 1983. 30.

One of my professors from seminary, Dr. Terry Todd, himself an openly gay man, remembers that issue of *Newsweek* as the first time he heard about AIDS. Reading its coverage of the epidemic and its proclamations of near-certain doom for gay men everywhere, he had the clear thought: *This is going to kill me and everyone I love.*

This chapter discusses the material from the earliest years of the AIDS epidemic, when confusion and misinformation reigned supreme. This is the 'gayest' collection of materials – nearly all individuals and organizations represented in this chapter were self-identified members of Philadelphia's gay community – and together they paint a picture of a marginalized group coming to terms with an enormity. I look first at how these concerns necessitated these groups' creating of programs to address issues raised not only by AIDS itself, but by the prevailing popular discourse surrounding it. The Christian Right had already worked the virulence of AIDS into its anti-gay rhetoric, spurring church groups to quell the fears of congregants while serving as sources of practical information and education. Chaplains in particular were called to articulate counter-narrative visions of grace to the dead and dying.

Next, I examine the way in which the theologies of grace and suffering began to emerge in order to address the concerns of those who had internalized conservative rhetoric of AIDS as deserved punishment. Specific AIDS-related prayer services began to emerge, specifically to address the needs of infected persons, their caretakers, and others in the community fearful of contracting the virus. At the same time, individuals still located inside traditions that ministered to people of all sexualities had to work to make sure that those

congregations and denominations did not further compound the double marginalization of gayness and (perceived) seropositivity.

Not all such responses were about spiritual well-being, however. I also locate these groups' practical fundraising and activist responses inside of the larger cultural trust in biomedicine. Downplaying ideas of miraculous faith healing, these groups instead prayed for God to aid scientific inquiry in locating a cure for AIDS, as it had for so many diseases before that. Calls to activism included calls to political involvement, advocating for bills that would increase funding for research and outlaw discrimination. Taking action to respond to AIDS – as well as to other concerns that predated the epidemic – was framed not only as something one should do out of one's own self-interest, but as a Christian mandate to better the world.

The Early Days of AIDS

Even Philadelphia's proximity to New York City didn't automatically mean it shared the larger city's concerns about AIDS. If hundreds in New York were barely enough to raise the attention of its gay community, a handful wasn't unlikely to spur Philadelphia to action – especially since, given the close geography of these communities, odds were high that said early cases would have been found among gay men with some easily identifiable New York connection. AIDS might as well be tropical virus picked up on vacation, nothing native.¹²⁵

¹²⁵ In fact, the necessary 'foreign-ness' of AIDS was part of almost every early understanding of the epidemic, regardless of location. One early popular attempt at armchair epidemiology speculated that the reason two of the H's were homosexuals and Haitians was that AIDS had first jumped the Atlantic

Thus, in terms of material produced by Philadelphia's Christian communities, 1982 was relatively quiet on the subject of AIDS – and it is a notable silence, considering the activist nature of some of these publications. Catholic group Dignity Philadelphia's newsletter, *The Independence*, provides its readership with multiple calls to action for and awareness about practical and legislative concerns affecting the gay community. In the July issue, a two-page article by author "Matt L." encourages readers to get in touch with then-Senators Arlen Specter and H. John Heinz and voice their objections to the Family Protection Act, challenging from an explicitly Christian (and particularly Catholic) position the idea that the "family values" espoused by the bill are universal.¹²⁶ On other fronts, Dignity's Social Committee agenda in the December newsletter lists local opportunities for giving: a clothing drive for Mercy Hospice for Women and St. John's Hospice for Men, and a toy drive for Franciscan-run St. Francis Inn Ministries.¹²⁷ Throughout, items announce meetings of Bible study groups alongside meetings of interreligious groups committed to working on issues of racism and sexism, and discussions of inclusivity in Christian communities address the conditions of not only lesbian and gay Christians, but women, racial minorities, and members of other religions.

What appears in these early pages shows that while AIDS changed everything for gay life in the United States, it did not do so immediately, nor for all gay men at once; the quotidian concerns here reflect none of Kramer's undisguised terror. The November

from Africa to Haiti, the latter identified as a popular vacation spot for gay men; one prominent appearance of this theory can be found in Langone, John. "AIDS: The Latest Scientific Facts." *Discover*, December 1985, 27-52.

¹²⁶ L., Matt. "The Family Protection Act." *The Independence* 9 (July 1982): 3-4. Though the Family Protection Act itself was defeated, its language returned in the Helms Amendment's attempts to deny federal funding to anything that might be interpreted as advocating homosexuality.

¹²⁷ Denise and Nina. "Chapter Notes." *The Independence* 9 (December 1982): 5.

Independence issue even includes a small note: "Plans are underway for a blood drive sponsored by Dignity,"¹²⁸ no doubt one of many held before the FDA's 1985 ban prohibiting gay men from blood donation; the December issue gives the date more explicitly as "some Sat. in January"¹²⁹. A similar item appears in the February 1982 issue of the Metropolitan Community Church's *Bellringer* newsletter, reminding its almost entirely gay and lesbian community members of its recently revived Red Cross Blood Bank account and setting an annual donation goal of twenty-five pints. "As Christ gave His blood for the salvation of humanity and particularly and individually for you and me," MCC congregant Elaine Prather reminds readers, "so we ought to try to give our blood to save human lives."¹³⁰

As might be expected from church groups, these early materials do not to any real degree address the specifics of sexuality, save from either abstract, moral perspectives or attempts to refute Bible-thumped claims condemning same-sex sexual activity and those who practice it. What organizations like Dignity and denominations such as the MCC offered were not so much first-time conversion experiences to Christianity as ways for those who were already Christians to reconcile faith and sexuality. The evangelism, such as it was, was almost exclusively internal; exegetical articles and theological entreaties were structured not as a way to get folks to come to Jesus, but to assure them that Jesus had never left them in the first place, despite what their home congregations may have been telling them.

¹²⁸ Spiritual Life Committee. "And More Chapter Notes." *The Independence* 9 (November 1982): 5.

¹²⁹ Denise and Nina, 5.

¹³⁰ Prather, Elaine. "Red Cross Blood Drive." *Metropolitan Community Church Philadelphia Bellringer*, February 1982, 1, 7.

However, one should be careful not to assume that the promiscuous faggots of Kramer's world and these churchgoing Philadelphian gays belonged to two wholly separate circles. While Dignity's membership in 1982 was around 125¹³¹, the number of people involved in programs and activities sponsored by the group was much larger and less well-tallied. Individuals who were not official members of the organization still made appearances at its various social and activist events; many were not even Catholic, but were still welcomed to participate along with the Catholic services. Furthermore, many affiliated individuals were not open about their sexualities and could not have risked the outing-by-proxy of being visibly connected to an LGBT group, such that many contributions to the newsletter were anonymous or pseudonymous, and nearly all issues of the *Independence* carried the following disclaimer (with only slight variations in wording) at the back:

Articles published in the DIGNITY/PHILADELPHIA newsletter entitled THE INDEPENDENCE are not necessarily the opinion of the Officers or Steering Committee of DIGNITY/PHILADELPHIA or of the Editors. Publication of names, organizations, and/or photographs in THE INDEPENDENCE is not to be construed as an indication of the sexual preference of such a person, employee, and/or member of said organization.

They had valid reason to fear. Despite the city's "brotherly love" reputation and sizeable gay population, gay activists in Philadelphia had made several attempts at passing an antidiscrimination amendment to the city's administrative code since the early 1970s, but would not see one passed until 1985.¹³² Neither the state nor the federal level offered much recourse for individuals disenfranchised because of actual or perceived sexual orientation.

¹³¹ M., Mark. "Officer's Message." *The Independence* 9 (December 1982): 3.

¹³² Mumford, K. J. "The Trouble with Gay Rights: Race and the Politics of Sexual Orientation in Philadelphia, 1969-1982." *Journal of American History* 98, no. 1 (June 01, 2011): 49-72.

Furthermore, the fact that Dignity operated without official support or recognition from Catholic Church, to which most of its members belonged, meant that those connected to the organization had the added denominational pressure to keep their sexualities and support for gay causes secret.

As such, the early activism that these groups urged their members toward could be done either in secret or with a great cloak of plausible deniability. There are no equivalents to the Annual Reminder endorsed in these pages, pushing individuals to public visibility in the way that secular Philadelphian homophile activist groups gathered at Independence Hall every year on the Fourth of July, demonstrating for equal rights for gay men and lesbians. That, in fact, was probably the *last* thing that Dignity's members would have wanted, considering the environment at the time. Lack of legal protections at local, state, or federal levels, combined with social stigma that often led families, especially religious ones, to marginalize or outright ostracize their gay members, being 'out' in the '80s was not something most gay-identified people could afford to risk. Letter-writing campaigns and donation drives gave members of the community an opportunity to give back and make a difference without sticking their own necks out too far.

Disclaimers such as the above indicate an awareness that the publications were likely to reach beyond the official Dignity membership, and perhaps beyond the gay community entirely. As internal as the Dignity newsletters are intended to be, they are also shrouded beneath a thick layer of intentional obscurity. Sometimes they read almost like a code: first names with only a last initial, epithets for individuals regular attendees no doubt knew on sight. There are no photographs. A few bold souls, usually members identified as part of the leadership, use their full names and some identifying details, but for the most part,

Dignity members remain nameless and faceless to the newsletters.

Wrath and Mercy

By April 1985, two years after *Newsweek* ran its first significant cover story on AIDS ("EPIDEMIC: The Mysterious and Deadly Disease Called AIDS May Be The Public Health Threat of the Century. How Did It Start? Can It Be Stopped?"¹³³), the MCC *Bellringer* announced a Saturday workshop titled "What's a Person of Faith to do about AIDS?" Said four-hour workshop promised to address five different issues:

First, "[sic] AIDS! What is it? Where do we stand locally and nationally?" will be a quick review of the syndrome and its opportunistic diseases, together with where we in Philadelphia fit into the jigsaw. Second, "AIDS IS a woman's issue!" came out of a moment of devastation when a Lesbian friend made a negative comment in the presence of some Gay men, which led to a sense that the issue had to be dealt with. The third, "How can I help a friend with AIDS? and How can I help other helpers?" will attempt to review some of the practical ways people can give help to persons with AIDS and to the organizations already helping...but especially to people in our own circles. A very special fourth section, "Is AIDS God's wrath on homosexuals?" will break up into Protestant, Catholic, Jewish (and possibly Quaker) subsections. Each group will be facilitated by religious figures from the particular grouping. The day will end with a fifth section, "How about my own mortality and my ability to provide tender loving care?" which will attempt to deal with the impact made on caring people involved in the lives of people who are mortally ill. This section will deal with the 'the worried well' and other issues.¹³⁴

Several things are notable about the text and content here, perhaps most superficially the optimism involved in believing all of this could be contained in a single four-hour span.

¹³³ Cover text accompanying the April 18, 1983 issue of *Newsweek's* set of feature articles on AIDS.

¹³⁴ "What's a Person of Faith to Do about AIDS?" *Metropolitan Community Church Philadelphia Bellringer*, April 1985, 7.

Keeping in the practical vein that featured in the earlier newsletters, the workshop begins with education – a key starting point, considering that the individuals in attendance could quite possibly have been exposed thus far to nothing but speculation. The combined dearth of prominent media coverage and deafening silence from government sources left great spaces for rumor to breed; in the absence of other credible sources, then, churches like the MCC took it upon themselves to provide their parishioners with the most reliable information possible. While the sum total of what would have been available as hard evidence in April 1985 leaves (at least by standards now) something to be desired, science was in fact the MCC's friend, as cold, rational science provided the strongest evidence *against* claims that AIDS was served to sinners from the hands of an angry God.

The presence of the "very special" fourth section, as well as a note at the end inviting anyone in the community to attend, broadens out the concept of a "person of faith" in a way that does not concede that title to a single tradition. Interesting, too, is that surely all three (or four¹³⁵) representatives would lead their breakout groups to examine the question of "Is AIDS God's wrath on homosexuals?" and come to the same conclusion – *no, it's not, you're okay* – but the differences in the journeys to that conclusion were deemed notable enough to divide the larger group. Presenting these different arguments as a rhetorical exercise in interreligious dialogue would have demanded each one be given equal time to speak to all; the program's willingness to separate people out into their own home traditions

¹³⁵ While Quakers would generally be put under the 'Protestant' heading, especially if the two options were that or Catholic, the structure of their theology and worship is different enough that having a separate group for them would make sense; my assumption is that the only reason the separate Quaker section might be a conditional prospect is the concern that there might not be enough Quakers in attendance to form a suitably large discussion group. Despite the large Muslim population in Philadelphia, there is no Muslim section offered here for presumably similar reasons.

suggests that those in attendance would not be attending out of academic curiosity, but of a need to reconcile the epidemic with their personal beliefs.

I contend that these discussions were crucial to the spiritual survival of gay Christians, because already by the mid-1980s, AIDS was a full-fledged American theological issue. It did not emerge *ex nihilo*, but came *de profundis*, surfacing from the murky depths of the Christian Right's extant language about homosexuality to form a new threat rhetoric. In August 1983, the *Moral Majority Report* ran a two-page spread with the banner headline: "AIDS: Morbid Reality of the Epidemic Overshadows the 'Hysteria'"¹³⁶. A smaller article beneath it fits under the headline "Reports of AIDS Outbreaks Increase as Public Health Officials Frantically Search For a Cure". However, the article comes illustrated with two photographs: each focuses on a different male couple holding hands in the middle of a crowd scene; each couple has one participant who is completely shirtless and one who is dressed a touch scantily (a white sleeveless undershirt and short shorts for one picture, a black midriff and cutoff denim shorts in the other); the captions on both identify them as having been taken during a June gay pride parade in Washington, D.C. Nowhere in the article, save for the captions, does the text mention Pride Week, pride parades, or anything even remotely pride-related other than a brief paragraph to note that formerly thriving gay bars and bathhouses have reported falling on hard times. To the Moral Majority's members, though, the connection would have been obvious: "Whatever else it may be," writes anthropologist and theorist Paula Treichler, "AIDS is a story, or multiple stories, and read to a surprising extent from a text that does not exist: the body of the male homosexual.

¹³⁶ Mawyer, M. "Reports of AIDS outbreaks increase as public health officials frantically search for a cure." *Moral Majority Report*, (August 1983) :10.

People so want – need – to read this text that they have gone so far as to write it themselves."¹³⁷ The version written by members of the Christian Right existed in a strange liminal place: like a train wreck, too horrifying to look at, too horrifying to turn away from. This dual function served the Christian right's agenda well, making sure that its readership walked away emboldened to action by the appropriate amount of revulsion, but stayed glued to the page long enough to get the message.

The advent of AIDS naturally complicated the issue, adding an extra, measurable facet to the purported destructive capacity of the increasingly visible gay community. While network news coverage sought to navigate the discourse through a variety of narratives tailored to fit what scientific information (and speculation) was available at the time¹³⁸, leaders of the Moral Majority such as Jerry Falwell were clear that "AIDS was simply the wrath of God."¹³⁹ Thus, I would argue, if anything, AIDS should have been *less* terrifying to the Christian right than it was to the secular press because of its connection to immorality: God's penchant for saving the morally upright while bringing down devastating judgment on the unrighteous, after all, is a matter of (biblical) record. However, AIDS also provided an opportunity for the Christian right to hammer home its long-standing point about the threat of gay culture to 'normal' American society, and as a self-professed political organization, the Moral Majority did not pass by an opportunity to forward its agenda while reporting on current events. Lierman notes that the *Moral Majority Report* uses the

¹³⁷Treichler, 19.

¹³⁸ For a more detailed discussion of television-network news and its eight primary visual themes of AIDS, see Konick, Steven. "Visual AIDS: Looking at Early Network News Coverage of the Epidemic." In *Media-Mediated AIDS*, edited by Linda K. Fuller, 23-42. Cresskill, NJ: Hampton Press, 2003.

¹³⁹ Kinsella, James. *Covering the Plague: AIDS and the American Media*. New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1989. 173.

juxtaposition of text and image each to augment the horror of the other, until very idea of gay men becomes weaponized:

The physical facts of AIDS transmission are as skirted in the *Report* as they were at the time in mainstream news sources, and probably for similar reasons, but even when AIDS is the main issue, any subject touching on gay men cannot be discussed without accompanying images of what are to the Moral Majority's eyes acts of transgression: parading in costume, shirtless, holding hands, displaying themselves. What the reader is supposed to see in these images, in turn, seems obvious: a male body not only vividly sexualized and brought forcibly to the reader's attention, but assumed to be loaded with disease, a kind of dirty bomb in every possible sense.¹⁴⁰

The resultant rhetoric may seem somewhat strange to outsider eyes, then, declaring AIDS a disease of the unapproachably Other while still demanding that members of the Christian right live in fear of contracting it. But I note the intrigue of contradiction: the attractive/repulsive bodies of gay men became the bridge to span that contradiction by embodying that push and pull, utterly alien and perilously close at once. I would argue that said bodies also became the rhetorical glue that held together science and religion, at least insofar as the former proved the Moral Majority's vision of the latter. In this, despite its reality as a medical concern, AIDS became a theological condition by its insertion into the existing religious rhetoric – and then became the proof-text needed to justify continued discrimination on social and political levels.

AIDS was a useful tool for the Moral Majority, then, because by the latter half of the twentieth century, the Christian Right's biblically based rhetoric disapproving of homosexuality had begun to falter. Some serious challenges had come to it from

¹⁴⁰Lierman, 182.

theologians and activists like the Rev. Troy Perry, whose provocative (and often scandalously explicit) 1972 autobiography *The Lord is My Shepherd and He Knows I'm Gay!*¹⁴¹ presented an experiential counterargument to the narrative that said all gay men were self-hating and miserable; rather, Perry's story tells of his being lifted up from depression *through* a Christian acceptance of his sexuality, refusing to reject the childhood faith tradition that seemed to have rejected him. Other, more textually focused approaches, such as Father John J. McNeill's 1976 work, *The Church and the Homosexual*¹⁴², had begun to highlight both the very small number of available "clobber passages" traditionally used in anti-gay arguments and how few of them could stand up to scrutiny in terms of modern applicability.¹⁴³ Not only were specifically Christian anti-gay arguments no longer as persuasive in an increasingly non-Christian and secular society, but now even other Christians were beginning to present alternatives to the idea that to be Christian was necessarily to reject everything outside the bounds of heteronormativity. The advent of AIDS became the Christian Right's evidence, then, of the error of homosexuality – evidence that came not from the disputed ground of scripture, but as discussed in the previous chapter, from the mouth of science itself.

The rejection of this logic is evident in the October 1983 issue of the *Bellringer*, and comes from MCC Philadelphia's newly installed pastor, Rev. Joseph Gilbert – in fact, his very first pastor's corner is labeled "The AIDS Blasphemy", and in it he argues that not

¹⁴¹ Perry, Troy D., and Charles L. Lucas. *The Lord Is My Shepherd and He Knows I'm Gay; the Autobiography of the Rev. Troy D. Perry, as Told to Charles L. Lucas*. Los Angeles: Nash Pub., 1972.

¹⁴² McNeill, John J. *The Church and the Homosexual*. Kansas City: Sheed Andrews and McMeel, 1976.

¹⁴³ These 'clobber passages' or 'clobber verses' are the biblical texts most frequently used as proof that the Bible condemns homosexuality, such as the Sodom story of Genesis 19 or the sex laws in Leviticus 18 and 20. The most prominent readings against them were informed by approaches used by feminist biblical scholars, such as Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, Bernadette Brooten, and Phyllis Trible.

only were Fallwell and "other big-buck electronic evangelists" wrong, but that their wrongness came in "a lie issued in the name of God."¹⁴⁴ For Christians, blasphemy is a serious charge, and Gilbert both uses the word boldly and backs it with scripture, citing Romans 8:38-39¹⁴⁵. This particular corner fills a page and a half; on the other half of the second page is an announcement of the October 8, 1983 National AIDS Vigil in Washington, DC, and the penultimate paragraph of Gilbert's column encourages MCC members to attend if possible and to be involved in local fundraising for staging the Vigil. As before, these Christian calls to action are explicitly political and practical, and inclusive of "Third World persons", which Gilbert already identifies as "disproportionally hurt by this epidemic".¹⁴⁶

Gilbert's last paragraph, however, makes explicit the need for the church to participate in discussions of "difficult but important questions about sexuality and social responsibility, discussing facts, fears, and feelings about responsible sexual relating during this health crisis."¹⁴⁷ As the gay community's reaction to Larry Kramer's works shows, the concept of 'responsible sexual relating' was a fraught one in that time period, and doubly so coming from a religious source. Given the MCC's founding history, there was little uncertainty about where it would come down on the issue of divine acceptance of same-sex sexual activity, but calls for decreases in or abstention from sex ran the risk of sounding like some of the more centrist Christian positions of the time, ones that acknowledged a biological

¹⁴⁴ Gilbert, Joseph. "Pastor's Corner: "The A.I.D.S. Blasphemy"" *Metropolitan Community Church Philadelphia Bellingranger*, October 1983. 3.

¹⁴⁵ As presented in the *Bellingranger*, the scripture reads: "For I am certain that neither death nor life, neither angels nor principalities, neither the present nor the future, nor powers, neither height nor depth nor any other creature, will be able to separate us from the love of God that comes to us in Christ Jesus."

¹⁴⁶ Gilbert (October 1983), 6.

¹⁴⁷ Ibid.

reality of homosexuality yet demanded those with non-heterosexual desires remain celibate. Despite this rhetorical danger, however, speaking factually about AIDS to gay communities necessitates addressing sexual behavior, and when approached from a Christian perspective, sex always has a moral component. According to its 1983 Statement of Position and Purpose, Dignity's attitude toward sexuality is as follows: "We believe that gay men and lesbian women can express their sexuality in a manner that is consistent with Christ's teachings. We believe that all sexuality should be exercised in an ethically responsible and unselfish way."¹⁴⁸ One of its 1984 library additions was Dr. Jay Gale's *A Young Man's Guide to Sex*, a secular volume with frank, direct discussions of male hetero- and homosexuality, as well as masturbation and AIDS.¹⁴⁹ Explicit calls to the goodness of diverse sexualities in practice help establish the concept of a Christian ethics of queer sexuality that prescribes moderation, especially in light of the potential for both contracting and transmitting disease, but does not necessitate abstinence for holiness.

Dignity was not far behind in adopting the same language of blasphemy, though without the word itself: "Fundamentalist preachers tell the lie that AIDS and other diseases are God's wrath against us," reads a 1984 piece signed only by "A Priest Who Loves You"¹⁵⁰. Two pages later is a "Statement of Concern" from the Religious Advisory Committee of the Philadelphia-based AIDS Resource Center, Inc., that both echoes the rejection of the Wrath of God Syndrome formulation and calls on the language of science to reject instead

¹⁴⁸ "Statement of Position and Purpose." *The Independence* 12 (December 1983): 7.

¹⁴⁹ Education Committee. "Committee Reports: Education." *The Independence* 11 (September 1984): 3.

¹⁵⁰ A Priest Who Loves You. "To Dignity With Love." *The Independence* 11 (August 1984): 3. Though that priest never confirms his identity in the documents, he acknowledges in later columns that many in the community no doubt know who he is, but asks them to keep his identity quiet nonetheless.

of enforce discrimination:

AIDS is not God's punishment. The AIDS Crisis calls on us not to stand in judgment but to grow in compassion, to acknowledge humbly the limitations of our human knowledge and ability, and to prayerfully seek the counsel and power of God's spirit while devoting our resources to expanding our scientific knowledge of the human immunological system.

So we call upon our religious communities to:

1. refrain from judgments which fan the flames of fear and prejudice;
2. advocate and lobby for adequate funding of research that will lead to the causes and cure for what has been called the number one health problem of the nation;
3. use this opportunity to engage the religious community in reflection on the causes and dynamics of various forms of social stigma, especially homophobia; and
4. exercise neighborly compassion for our brothers and sisters and the strangers in our midst who suffer from AIDS.

Our respective faiths, and our hearts, move us to stand firm in stating that *God stands by, and will stand with, people with AIDS.*¹⁵¹

Interesting here is that this statement does not rely on scientific certainty, but rather praises its very uncertainty, downplaying by proxy the declarative sting of conservative arguments backed with medical findings. The implied contrast is clear: Science and human understanding are limited, while God and the knowledge of God are infinite; thus, basing condemnation of AIDS and PWAs on the former without taking into consideration the compassion of the latter is to side with the wrong knowledge.¹⁵² Instead, I find that of greater concern are human connections, established using language immediately recognizable to a Christian audience: both the "brothers and sisters" language of fellowship

¹⁵¹ "Statement of Concern Made by the Religious Advisory Committee of the AIDS Resource Center, Inc." *The Independence* 11 (August 1984): 5.

¹⁵² One might well note the irony of how this formulation is not unlike conservative Evangelical arguments raised in opposition to other scientific declarations, such as evolution.

in Christ as well as the "stranger in [your] midst" designation of those to whom showing hospitality is a frequent biblical imperative.

Biblical language forms the core of the theological responses that go deeper than obvious, outright rejection of the idea of AIDS as God's punishment. "God's voice is not in the violent things of nature,"¹⁵³ says the 'Priest Who Loves You', citing both Elijah's encounter with the "tiny whispering sound" of God's voice, following said voice's absence in the noise of the earthquake and the fire (I Kings 19), and Jesus' reaching out for Peter as Peter's attempts at replicating Jesus' water-walking feat began to fail (Matthew 14). By citing time and again the "clobber verses", the Christian Right established the Bible as valid grounds on which this battle could and should be waged; options to counter these approaches, then, become either to reject the Bible's authoritative status entirely or to engage scripturally. For Bible-believing Christians, the choice is so simple as to be no choice at all.

Even so, significant biblical discussions of AIDS and its meanings did not emerge in the 1982-1985 issues of these publications. While presumably much was being done in unrecorded meetings such as the MCC's workshop, these positions were not being gathered and presented for publication. Instead, textual discussions about AIDS often centered around more practical and measurable approaches.

No doubt part of this delay in creating full theological responses to AIDS was tied to popular trust in the demonstrated ability of modern biomedicine to cure the incurable. By the end of the twentieth century, modern medicine had produced vaccines for most of the

¹⁵³ A Priest Who Loves You (1984), 3.

major infectious diseases that had proven deadly for so much of human history, eliminating and even eradicating scourges such as polio, which had been a nightmare only decades before. A lack of faith in the all-encompassing nature of scientific knowledge did not correspond to a lack of faith in science itself; indeed, the Statement of Concern above calls for an increase in funding for the appropriate research. What looked like Divine Judgment might turn out to be just one more nasty bug to be squashed. In that case, biomedicine would deliver the fatal blow to the Christian Right's finger-pointing alarmism far faster than any theological debate could.

Inclusion, Compassion, and Belonging

From their beginnings, groups like Dignity and the MCC advertised inclusion as one of their main tenets – and not just inclusion, but inclusion specifically opposed to the exclusion on the basis of sexual orientation practiced by the larger Catholic Church and other Protestant denominations. Language that emerged out of the AIDS epidemic became part of the way these groups continued to define themselves. Less than a year after the previous blood drive announcements and target goals, the April 1983 *Bellringer* declared the MCC to be a church of "God without signs", in specific opposition to descriptions of signs posted at Red Cross blood drives warning potential blood donors who were gay men, IV drug users, and/or Haitian immigrants that their belonging to those categories meant their attempts at donation would be deferred. "It's not pleasant," MCC congregant Michael Gibson writes of the experience of coming up against such barriers, "but at least they are

up front."¹⁵⁴

Less forthcoming about their welcoming policies, Gibson continues, are many other modern churches. In this, his critical discussion of inclusion echoes the same concerns about Christian demands for celibacy and silence as a prerequisite for homosexual acceptability. Somewhat bitterly, he suggests a similar warning sign be placed on those churches, warning members of sexual minorities, members of racial/cultural/ethnic minorities, and feminists: "If you wish to worship here you may do so quietly as long as you are invisible, are deeply repentant, and leave immediately after the service."¹⁵⁵ In other words, a fate worse than being outright rejected is the fate of being a part of something that refuses to let you be a part of it.

Such was the case Dignity was facing, as a Catholic group unacceptable to the Catholic hierarchy. "Dignity is not allowed to set foot on any Roman Catholic property in the Archdiocese, having to hold it's [sic] masses in an Episcopalian kindergarten," notes Dignity Philadelphia's December 1984 response to the Archdiocese of Philadelphia's Statement of Homosexuality.¹⁵⁶ After pointing out that many other members of the Catholic hierarchy have opened church property to other Dignity chapters and held masses for Dignity members, Michael D. Flynn, Dignity's president at the time, called out Philadelphia's Catholic leadership as being particularly unfriendly to gay Catholics. "Courage," the Archdiocese's own membership-moderated support group for gay Catholics

¹⁵⁴ Gibson, Michael. "MCC - God Without Signs." *Metropolitan Community Church Philadelphia Bellringer*, April 1983, 5.

¹⁵⁵ Ibid.

¹⁵⁶ "Re: Statement on Homosexuality, Archdiocese of Philadelphia." Michael D. Flynn to Tim Owick and Fr. Donald Walker. December 18, 1984. In *Dignity Philadelphia*. Philadelphia, 1984.

who wished to conform with the Church's teachings on sexless homosexuality, earned particular ire from Flynn: "While we have the greatest respect for anyone, straight or gay, wanting to lead a celibate lifestyle, Courage continues to treat gay people as reformed alcoholics, with their homosexuality as a 'disease' and the gay and lesbian community as a 'near occasion of sin' which they are asked to avoid."¹⁵⁷ One can easily imagine what the 'courage' in question is intended to convince the gay Catholics in question to (not) do.

This has been the choice for many gay Christians who wish to remain both gay and Christian: to stay in unfriendly home denominations, working and hoping for change, or to leave for unfamiliar territory until they find sufficient assurance that their sexualities not will disqualify them from being welcomed into fellowship. While the MCC has always promised the latter type of welcome, its consistently small membership is evidence of how many more gay Christians choose to stay with their home denominations. Members of groups such as Dignity, then, often find themselves in the unenviable position of trying to claim affiliation to a church structure that regards them negatively, when it notices them at all.

Similar things could be said about gay men's relationship to the rest of the United States at the time – that while they were still beholden to the laws and policies of the country, their sexuality disqualified them from being "real" Americans, marking them as irreconcilably different from the "normal" population.¹⁵⁸ When *US News & World Report*

¹⁵⁷ Ibid.

¹⁵⁸ Margot Canaday's *The Straight State* (2009) details how the United States as a nation went from specific policing to more sweeping regulation of its gay citizens, using twentieth-century bureaucracy to police sexuality in ways that made a gay 'underclass'. While the time frame for Canaday's work stops in 1983, leaving the AIDS epidemic unaddressed, there is a clear trajectory from the policies of otherness present before the 1980s and the receptivity of American laws and population to further expansion of those policies as justified by fear of contagion.

declared in 1987 that the "disease of them is suddenly the disease of us,"¹⁵⁹ it was not establishing new boundaries of belonging, but reaffirming what had long been the semantic case. In the first years of the epidemic, AIDS rhetorically reinforced the outsider status of gay Americans, and the extant marginalized gay identity turned back and defined AIDS by proxy as a disease of the "us" in question. How American are gay Americans? How Christian are gay Christians? The relationship of the subset to the larger group is never fully clear, not least because the larger group neither will claim nor can fully eject its queer members.

It should come as no surprise that one of the other early places evidence of the intersection between the church and AIDS begins to emerge is in the hospice. Preparing one's self for death is rarely easy, but said preparations became almost universally harder in the case of gay men diagnosed with AIDS – not only were these men often estranged from their families, medical staff often did not want to provide them with a standard of care equivalent to that received by other patients.¹⁶⁰ Uncertainty about the very nature of AIDS meant hospitals' medical and custodial staff would often refuse to enter rooms or even wings housing AIDS patients without significant protections, if at all.

AIDS presents a unique challenge to Christian pastoral care, in that it demands love for people that have often been characterized by the church as the pinnacle of unloveability. The suffering that one "deserves" – e.g., cancer in the lungs of a lifelong smoker – does not

¹⁵⁹ McAuliffe, 60

¹⁶⁰ In both visual and textual fiction dealing with gay PWAs from the early 1980s, this is almost a cliché: the patient, isolated and tragically underserved by the hospital staff, so that some brave seronegative person can come and, like St. Francis with the leper, prove themselves unafraid. It is a cliché built from reality, however, as almost every nonfiction account from the early years of the epidemic describes some facet of neglectful, dehumanizing medical care.

mitigate the compassion one is meant to receive, but the Christian understanding of repentance as a critical element of salvation demands from the sufferer some acknowledgment of culpability – e.g., said smoker, prior to passing away, admits the folly of falling into longterm nicotine addiction. Luke's parable of the Prodigal Son ends in full and happy reconciliation of the eponymous young man with his father, but does not skip over the part where he both rehearses and then casts himself at the old man's feet to give a speech about how he was so wrong. That kind of redemption narrative is a staple of Christianity, especially evangelical Christianity; David Bebbington's "quadrilateral of priorities" that defines evangelicalism lists first "*conversionism*, the belief that lives need to be changed".¹⁶¹ Of course, the degree to which things must change remains up for debate, and few Christians are univocal about what behaviors must be eliminated to signify that the new has come and the old has gone.

Especially in the early 1980s, many Christians wanted to show compassion to "the homosexual", but in a way that did not at the same time condone same-sex sexual behavior or gay identity. The "love the sinner, hate the sin" formulation prescribes compassionate behavior, but in a way predicated on first judging the sinner in question *as* a sinner, then in bringing around the sinner to the point of hating the sin as well. Then best, then, that many gays and lesbians could hope for was not a declaration that their sexuality was not bad, but a promise that it was not *uniquely* bad. When confronting an elderly man about his only grandson's death from AIDS, Baptist pastor William Amos could only offer assurances "that homosexuality was not the unforgivable sin; alone, it would never keep anyone out

¹⁶¹ Bebbington, David. *Evangelicalism in Modern Britain: A History from the 1730s to the 1980s*. London: Unwin Hyman, 1989. 2.

of heaven. I believe that heaven will be filled with all kinds of forgiven sinners."¹⁶² While this was a compassionate move as far as the grandfather's immediate condition was concerned, stricken as he was with both grief *and* the potential of his beloved grandson's eternal damnation, it does not let the young man or his lifestyle off the theological hook.

Therein, so far as this paradigm of deserved suffering goes, lies the critical failure of happy homosexuals: that they are both happy and homosexual. Though many gay men who contracted AIDS repented of their sexual orientations and practices – the things that had ostensibly led them to the point of their deaths – scores more did not. While some Christians, like Amos, were willing to concede that same-sex attraction might not be an unforgivable sin, proud gay men understood their identities as something that needed no forgiveness at all. Even as it became clear that risky male/male sexual practices were a major transmission vector for HIV, these men were not going to reject the identity and community had brought them some of the only happiness and acceptance they'd felt – and especially not to embrace a deity that was on record as having rejected them wholly.

Where the ethical part of the medical system was set up to fail PWAs, and especially seropositive gay men, was when those ethics met internalized social fears that echoed the same Christian-voiced rejections of the groups whose members were deemed highest-risk. The deadly combination of fears of transmission, negative views of the social worth of infected individuals, and the terribly fraught concept of 'plague' in the Western imagination combined to create an environment where compassion for PWAs was in short supply.¹⁶³ Anthropologists Paul Farmer and Arthur Kleinman identified the "lonely and medicalized

¹⁶² Amos, William E. *When AIDS Comes to Church*. Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1988.

¹⁶³ Friedland, Gerald. "AIDS and Compassion." *JAMA*. 1988;259(19):2898-2899.

death"¹⁶⁴ waiting at the end of AIDS diagnoses in the 1980s as the result of an over-individualistic society that connects all malady to personal responsibility and the privileging of biomedical and mechanical approaches over human interaction. Thus, they argue, AIDS is a disease of tremendous suffering, devastating in its ability "to menace and hurt, to burden and spoil human experience, and to elicit questions about the nature of life and its significance."¹⁶⁵ The necessity for compassionate care in even the most calm and long-expected end-of-life situations highlights both the necessity of that care for PWAs and the lack of what came. Longstanding rifts between patients and their families exacerbated the isolation experienced by many PWAs. Some parents were reluctant to approach their dying sons for fear that doing so might imply some approval of their children's sexual preferences; others had disowned these relatives years ago and had no desire to restart the relationships. Similarly, patients whose experiences with their parents had been negative resisted the idea of adding yet another emotional confrontation to the list of stressors at the end of their lives.¹⁶⁶ Perhaps most cruelly, narrow official designations of who constituted 'family' allowed hospitals to limit and even prohibit visitation from friends and lovers whom the patients often most wanted to see.

Much of this demand for compassionate response, then, fell to the chaplains tasked with end-of-life care for PWAs – especially since, as Farmer and Kleinman note, AIDS demands answers to existential questions, ones religion is uniquely eager to address. A letter dated

¹⁶⁴ Farmer, Paul, and Arthur Kleinman. 1989. "AIDS as Human Suffering". *Daedalus* 118 (2). The MIT Press: 135–60. <http://www.jstor.org.ezproxy.lib.uh.edu/stable/20025240>. 146.

¹⁶⁵ *Ibid*, 139.

¹⁶⁶ Christensen, Michael J. *The Samaritan's Imperative: Compassionate Ministry to People Living with AIDS*. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1991. Christensen, an ordained elder whose ministry led him to spiritual care of PWAs, recounts and alludes to a number of stories with very similar dynamics.

November 3, 1983, comes from the Rev. George A. Burn, chaplain and the Director of Pastoral Care at the Reading Hospital and Medical Center in Reading, PA; in it, he asks Rev. Jim Littrell for help finding material pertaining to pastoral care. Following a presentation by Dr. Brett Cassens, a Philadelphia physician involved in AIDS work, Burn wrote: "Our facility has treated two individuals in the past and presently are treating another person. I feel it is important that we get in on the ground floor in terms of patient care with a comprehansive [sic] understanding of the issues."¹⁶⁷ Though a great many books about pastoral care and AIDS have been published since, at the end of 1983, his options were few; Burn's desire to get in on the ground floor was really more metaphorically akin to his having to pour the foundation himself.

Around this letter in the archival folder are several undated scraps of paper with names and telephone numbers handwritten on them; some are even on pages from notepads distributed by pharmaceutical representatives. One particularly poignant piece gives the name of a gay man in his late twenties with Kaposi's sarcoma and shingles, with a handwritten note at the bottom indicating this patient had been brought to the attention of Littrell by Cassens. "Pt. has not discussed AIDS [with] a priest yet," it reads, then continues, "He would like communion Friday."¹⁶⁸ These two sentences from this unsigned, undated note encapsulate the dilemma of many PWAs from religious backgrounds: the difficulty of going to religious leaders for spiritual guidance, and the desire for the comfort of familiar rituals and practices.

In no way was this particular young man's reluctance to discuss his condition

¹⁶⁷ George A. Burn to Jim Littrell. November 3, 1983. Reading Hospital and Medical Center, Reading, PA.

¹⁶⁸ Contained in Jim Littrell's personal archives, 'AIDS/PASTORAL CARE' folder.

unreflective of reality. One of the *Independence*-recommended articles, "Our Fragile Brothers,"¹⁶⁹ brings up another complication in ministering to those afflicted by AIDS: the caregiver's fear. As New-York-City-based Father Jim Nieckarz talks about overcoming his own anxieties, he recounts stories told to him by the patients he ministered to, tales of insufficiently caring attempts at pastoral care. AIDS' rhetorical connection to sexuality put it squarely into a category uncomfortable for many Christian leaders to discuss, and even more uncomfortable for celibate Catholic priests in particular – some of whom, such as the Priest Who Loves You, were themselves gay and closeted. Nieckarz's article mentions a priest who experienced great discomfort with ministering to AIDS patients, and who then died of AIDS himself a few months onward.¹⁷⁰ In that sense, too, AIDS could be a cruel "outing", forcing acknowledgment of sexuality and sexual behavior in ways that other ailments did not. *Angels in America*'s fictional Roy Cohn demands his doctor change his diagnosis from AIDS to liver cancer because he – and playwright Tony Kushner, and every gay person in the 1980s – knows that there are things worse than dying.

There are, on the whole, very few individuals cited throughout these public materials, regardless of the year. By and large, members of these congregations were *not* prominent activists, and especially in the early 1980s, few PWAs were willing to announce their seropositive status, whether in life or in death. Chapter notes from the 1985 issue of the *Independence*, by Dignity president Michael Flynn, echo this need for anonymity even in the relatively familiar, safe space of Dignity's newsletter: "I'd like to thank the congregation for their generosity for the funeral expenses of a member of the gay community who died

¹⁶⁹ Nieckarz, Jim. "Our Fragile Brothers." *Commonweal*, July 12, 1985, 404-06.

¹⁷⁰ Though Nieckarz never even speculates about how said priest might have become infected, the silence is telling.

recently and was given [burial] services by the AIDS Task Force."¹⁷¹ Similarly, without context, the February 1983 issue of *The Independence* includes a poem, "In Memoriam Michaelum"¹⁷², on a page opposite an announcement that GMHC had bought out Madison Square Garden for a Ringling Bros., Barnum and Bailey Circus performance, with proceeds to go to AIDS causes. The freeform poem does not identify its author or its subject, save for details presented in the poem: Michael Cepis, an attractive dancer and practitioner of yoga, a young man from a working-class Catholic family. No specific date or cause of death is given, but his description at the time of his death as "A shadow of a shadow / Of our memories of him" echoes language used elsewhere to describe the wasting death from AIDS-related causes; the last stanza begins, "There at the base of the spine / Was death's seat," a possible reference to a strain of herpes that can cause shingles, which can be fatal to persons with weakened immune systems. This and the reference to the "member of the gay community" provide enough information for recognition that those who need to know already do, and keep the individuals in question safe from those who don't.

Many of these letters and private documents, however, preserve specific details, even if only as names scrawled in margins or telephone numbers jotted on the backs of other pages. Even as the more accessible literature generally restricts its naming members of the organization to identifying visible leaders and contact people, these scraps of information indicate a much larger network of individual care and concern operating away from places such information might become public. Chaplains and hospital administrators coordinating care did their level best to make sure their patients with AIDS did not have to die abandoned.

¹⁷¹ Flynn, Michael. "Chapter Notes." *The Independence* 12 (January 1985): 3.

¹⁷² "In Memoriam Michaelum." 10 (February 1983): 7.

Despite hope found elsewhere for a speedy scientific solution to the epidemic, the gay men here were beyond the reach of any cures but the miraculous. Few came.

Liturgies of Illness

One of the ways these churches adapted to the presence of AIDS in their communities was to create specific liturgical opportunities and coordinate prayer services. The September 1983 issue of *The Independence* brings a report from the Liturgy Committee:

The Liturgy Committee initiated a time to pray the rosary for AIDS victims and the speedy discovery of a cure for AIDS on the Vigil of the Assumption. A group of about twenty Dignity members and friends participated in this event which was held after Mass in the downstairs room at Trinity Memorial. The Spiritual Life Committee agreed to continue this practice under the coordination of BOB D. [sic] which will be held the third Sunday of every month after the social hour. Extra rosary beads will be provided if you need one. Remember "A family that prays together stays together," and we all need support especially through this crisis on AIDS.¹⁷³

For Catholics, praying the rosary is a familiar ritual, one that necessitates nothing more than knowing a (literal) handful of familiar prayers and the order in which to say them. Calling not only for group support but *family* support both gives a tongue-in-cheek play on "family" as a term for gays and lesbians¹⁷⁴ and reinforces the idea of unity in a community whose members had often become estranged from or been disowned by their blood relatives. Two years later (and after Bob D.'s relocation to another part of Pennsylvania),

¹⁷³ Liturgy Committee. "From the Liturgy Committee." *The Independence* 10 (September 1983): 8.

¹⁷⁴ I first heard this term myself in 2002, when my former pastor, his teenaged daughter, and I found ourselves in a shoe store in Bangor, Maine. The male clerk was *very* friendly and chatty in my pastor's direction, and as we left, his daughter elbowed him in the side for not flirting back and said, "Dad, I think he was *family*."

need for an organized prayerful response to AIDS had not negated the usefulness of communal rosary prayers, but had grown such as to merit a more multifaceted response. Starting on Monday, September 9, 1985, Dignity's Spiritual Life Committee began a weekly prayer service: "The sole purpose of this gathering will be to pray for persons with AIDS, their families and friends, and most importantly, that God will lead medical science in the direction of finding a cure for this dreaded disease. These meetings, by and large, will be very informal, and will cover the gamut of prayer styles (scripture reading, quiet meditations [sic], rosaries, hymn singing, etc.)."¹⁷⁵ The October issue repeats the announcement, specifying that these services would focus "on those people with A.I.D.S., those who minister to them, and those who are fearful of getting A.I.D.S."¹⁷⁶ While the fearful no doubt made up the largest part of the population served by Dignity, the other two groups were also growing in number.

Rejecting any supernatural or God-directed origins of AIDS goes hand-in-hand with looking to human medical solutions as the source from which a cure would arise; if it's not God's mess, after all, then there's little use in expecting God to be the one to clean it up. Praying for God to *lead* medical science does not put the whole burden of that cure's discovery on faith – and, more importantly, cannot be read as indicating a *lack* of faith if and when that cure does not come. Prosperity theology, which has seen a rise in popularity in the United States since the middle of the twentieth century, teaches that material success and physical well-being are clear signs of God's favor, and that sickness and poverty

¹⁷⁵ Spiritual Life Committee. "Committee Reports: Spiritual Life Committee." *The Independence*, September 1985, 4.

¹⁷⁶ Spiritual Life Committee. "Committee Reports: Spiritual Life Committee: Prayer/Support Group Formed By Dignity." *The Independence* 12 (October 1985): 2.

indicate a lack of faith sufficient to convince God to correct these conditions. I would argue that this refusing to consider miraculous intervention as a potential solution discounts that kind of proof-by-results metric as a valid evaluation of God's approval or disapproval.

Similarly, when the MCC speaks of spiritual healing, it does so by reprinting a Methodist chaplain's answers from a years-past workshop, wherein the chaplain draws a hard line between it and faith healing – faith healing, after all, demands by its very name some measure of faith, and reflects badly thereupon if the asked-for healing does not come. As Pastor Gilbert writes in this particular Pastor's Corner, "It's very cruel to say to somebody, 'If you had more faith you wouldn't have been sick'"¹⁷⁷ – and crueler still, by extension of that logic, to say, if you and your friends had been created in line with God's design for human heterosexual monogamy, you wouldn't all be dying right now. Nonetheless, that accusation colored a significant amount of the Christian Right's rhetoric about sexuality and AIDS, especially when put forth as evidence of the moral correctness of prescribed conservative sexual dynamics.

"I don't believe in a theology of disease,"¹⁷⁸ said Rev. Troy Perry, encapsulating the rejection many Christians, and especially gay Christians, felt of the idea that AIDS (or any other malady, for that matter) originated as God's intentional punishment. Though there are clear antecedents in the Hebrew Bible where calamity and malady come as responses to poor behavior as judged by God's stated standards, the New Testament texts' more frequent visions of suffering come at the hands of a wicked world, not an angry God. Any theology

¹⁷⁷ Gilbert, Joseph. "Pastor's Corner: Healing." *Metropolitan Community Church Philadelphia Bellringer*, October 1985, 3.

¹⁷⁸ Dawsey, Darrell. "80 Arrested as AIDS Protest Is Broken Up." *Los Angeles Times*, April 7, 1989.

of disease seeks, among other things, to place blame on the origins of illness – to find, as in John 9's story of a man born blind, whose sins are to blame for a present malady. But Jesus opts out of the entire discussion in much the way Perry does, by refusing to engage with a narrative of blame¹⁷⁹ and instead focusing on present action.¹⁸⁰ And from a purely outcome-based perspective, praying for guidance and comfort in communal services is more likely to produce what is being asked for than is praying for instant, complete healing.

Religious and ecumenical gatherings also became a place for AIDS activism and fundraising. On June 13th, 1985, Dignity, the MCC, Integrity, and Beth Ahavah (a local gay and lesbian Jewish congregation) held a Celebration of Lesbian and Gay Pride, with an offering to benefit the Philadelphia AIDS Task Force.¹⁸¹ The order of worship does not preserve the non-musical contents of the service, leaving out the text of the "GAY PRIDE REMARKS" given before and after the intermission by representatives of Dignity and Integrity, respectively, but one would be hard-pressed to imagine that such a service, especially one held in the middle of 1985 with a stated purpose of funding an AIDS charity, could gloss over the idea of the epidemic. (That the bulletin identifies its worship team participants not by name but as "Representative of" each of their respective organizations is as likely a result of a decision not to publish full names as it is an acknowledgment that finding speakers for events like these can often be a last-minute proposition.)

¹⁷⁹ For a country-specific example of how such a narrative of blame can have disastrous consequences for already marginalized and vulnerable communities on local, national, and global scales, see Paul Farmer's *AIDS and Accusation: Haiti and the Geography of Blame*.

¹⁸⁰ That Jesus can perform immediate miraculous healings and Perry (to all evidence) cannot does change the outcome of the story somewhat, but their essential approaches to problems of the origin of sin are in essence the same. And conveniently for Perry's side in this discussion, Jesus is the Christian trump card to the entire rest of scripture.

¹⁸¹ "A Celebration of Lesbian and Gay Pride" (religious service, St. Luke and the Epiphany, Philadelphia, June 13, 1985).

Other, less specifically religious support groups formed to address specific needs created by AIDS. A calendar of events appears on the back page of every *Independence* issue from this time period, and the December 1985 issue lists contact information for several Philadelphia AIDS Task Force-run support groups. The list includes groups for PWAs, parents/families of PWAs, lovers/friends of PWAs, and parents/families of deceased PWAs, as well as a special bereavement support group for individuals whose lovers had recently died of AIDS.¹⁸² AIDS was no longer an abstract, New York threat; by the halfway mark of the epidemic's first decade, there were enough people affected by AIDS in Philadelphia to justify creating an entire support network to address multiple facets of grief. Though groups like these were not organized or run by religious communities, Dignity's choice to publicize their information to its members indicates support for the services provided there.

While keeping separate support groups and worship gatherings specifically to deal with the fallout from AIDS provided an environment in which specific cares and concerns could be addressed, this segregation also reflected a discomfort on the part of the larger church about what to do about the part of the Body of Christ that was now infected. In September 1985, Jim Littrell wrote a letter addressed to both clergy and lay people of the Southwark Deanery (an area including all Center City and South Philadelphia parishes), in which he relates overheard concerns about the common cup and AIDS.¹⁸³ During celebration of the Eucharist, the ritual commemorating Jesus' last meal with his disciples before his crucifixion, some congregations choose to use a common cup: a single vessel containing

¹⁸² "Calendar of Events." *The Independence* 12 (December 1985): 6.

¹⁸³ "To the Clergy and People of the Southwark Deanery." Letter from James H. Littrell. September 30, 1985. Philadelphia, 1985.

wine¹⁸⁴ out of which all participants drink. Littrell first presents the basic medical data he has available to him, stressing the relative difficulty of contracting AIDS (excepting, he notes, if someone has an "open lesion of the oral cavity by which blood might be transmitted to a neighbor at Table"), then broadens the problem of exclusion of gay people from the life of the church from a single event to a larger, long-term status. He cites statistics – nearly 150 people from Philadelphia's gay community infected, 60% of whom had already died – and calls on them not only to stay passively open to all, but to reach out actively in ministry to gay men.

"For some of us," he writes, "AIDS is a perfect metaphorical opportunity to become the people society and, sometimes ourselves, believe us to be: sick and deadly. Every day I counsel with people who have absorbed this metaphor and who are living it out – by self-isolating and self-hating behavior."¹⁸⁵ In response to this, Littrell proposes a separate metaphor, comparing PWAs to the lepers with whom Jesus interacted, who were themselves "isolated, scorned, and finally left to die alone with their own kind". Since the Middle Ages, lepers have been the blank text on which society has written whatever shame and degradation concerns it most at the moment¹⁸⁶, yet their significant presence in Christian canonical texts means they belong necessarily as part of a Christian redemptive discourse. While the modern leper metaphor for the marginalized has its own semantic problems – namely that it justifies disproportionate social reaction by attaching it to the idea of a legitimate medical reason for quarantine, and that it suggests the marginalized in

¹⁸⁴ Or grape juice, for the more historically teetotaling denominations.

¹⁸⁵ "To the Clergy and People of the Southwark Deanery."

¹⁸⁶ Though Sontag mentions leprosy in particular only briefly in *Illness as Metaphor*, it has far more enduring a hold on the Christian imagination in particular than tuberculosis or cancer ever could.

question need to be cured in some way before being allowed to rejoin normal society – as a cry for compassion for outcasts and untouchables, Christianity has few better.

The lepers of the New Testament were not only physically afflicted and socially marginalized, they were spiritually unclean, commanded away from the larger Jewish community regardless of the actual level of contagion threat.¹⁸⁷ Individually and in groups, in stories and in verses, they collectively serve as the principal medium through which Jesus shows evidence of his divinity by performing many of his Gospel-recounted healing miracles. Compassion toward lepers in particular has become the defining trait of many prominent Christians throughout history; Mother Teresa's ministry in India led to the creation of several group homes and hospices for those afflicted by leprosy, and one of the most famous stories about St. Francis of Assisi involves his meeting on the road a disfigured leper, embracing him, and kissing his hand as a sign of God's love. While there are many human conditions and physical issues unaddressed for whatever reason by the New Testament, Jesus' compassion for the lepers he encounters is something that requires no special interpretive skill to understand. Connecting these PWAs to the lepers of Jesus' time, then, provides the rhetorical counter to any suggestion that their continued marginalization for the good of the uninfected community members is even remotely spiritually permissible.

Because there is no AIDS in the Bible, nor are there any openly gay men to be found

¹⁸⁷ Leviticus 13-14 has excruciatingly detailed regulations for how to diagnose and what to do about *tzaraat*; translated as 'leprosy', the word can actually refer to a variety of topical afflictions that can manifest on one's skin, clothing, and even possessions, few if any of which are the same as the modern condition of leprosy, or Hansen's disease.

there¹⁸⁸, neither the disease nor the group most associated with it can be approached biblically without some interpretive metaphor between them. The metaphor of the AIDS leper is one that simultaneously acknowledges and dismisses the dangers of contagion. To pretend that AIDS cannot be transmitted from one person to another is scientifically inaccurate, and to pretend that a fear of that contagion and the wasting death that comes from it should be ignored is to deny human nature. To call for compassion for the leper, therefore, is to demand one's Christian faith serve as assurance that there are indeed fates worse than death, and one of those is being seated with the goats on Judgment Day as a result of one's inaction toward "the least of these".¹⁸⁹

However, it is a metaphor that works best as Littrell uses it here, in service of eliciting sympathy for the margins from the center, and has limited uses internally. It is not an exceptionally empowering metaphor: a leper's hope is to be in the right place at the right time so that Jesus (or whoever is trying to be him today) extends the healing compassion withheld by others. Power still exists with the privileged center, and the begging leper does not ask for a transfer of that power or any corresponding move toward full equality with the able-bodied, socially acceptable community. Indeed, in these documents, when language equates gay men and/or PWAs with lepers, it is usually either in cases such as Littrell's, where a gay individual is petitioning a largely straight audience for understanding and compassion, or in situations where a straight speaker is speaking to a straight audience about the "other" just outside the walls of the church. Speaking to others like them, gay

¹⁸⁸ The question of whether or not any biblical characters evidence same-sex desire or equivalent marginalization is irrelevant here; instead, my point is that there are no biblical characters that conform to modern understandings of "gay" as an identity, making one-to-one comparisons impossible (not that it stops anyone).

¹⁸⁹ See Matthew 25 for the extended apocalyptic herding parable.

people do not call themselves lepers. There is little reason to restate the obvious.

Yet Littrell does caution against further gay internalization of this outcast status, though, by not only calling for churches in the deanery to allow gay congregants all necessary access to participate in church life, but demanding that they *not* accept that resistance to full fellowship even when it comes from gay men themselves: "[T]o accept self-selection away from Communion by a gay man is to support homophobia and to urge tacitly a devastating [sic] isolation."¹⁹⁰ Note that this is not a rejection of Fortunato's idea of "embracing the exile" so much as it is an acknowledgment that while such might be a helpful metaphor for individuals struggling spiritually, if that outsider perspective is not reconciled with the larger group, it can have troubling consequences for those who see themselves as in the midst of, yet not a part of, their social setting. Minorities in larger communities can become dangerously adept at becoming as unobtrusive as possible in the desperate hope that the community at large will not cast them out; Littrell's argument is that the thought of rejection from Christian communities should be so far from anyone's mind as to render this type of preemptive self-quarantine unnecessary. While Littrell never rejects the comparison, he attempts to enfold the category of 'modern leper' back into the Christian community at large, demanding solidarity without drawing equivalency: "Like the lepers of Jesus' time, people with AIDS, because of hatred and ignorance and fear, are isolated, scorned and finally left to die alone with their own kind. But Jesus was clear, as I hope we will be, that our 'own kind' are all the people of God."¹⁹¹

¹⁹⁰ "To the Clergy and People of the Southwark Deanery."

¹⁹¹ Ibid.

Action and Reaction

What *was* a person of faith supposed to do about AIDS? Judging from the MCC and Dignity's newsletters, fundraising was a great, practical place to start. With the government unwilling or unable (by its own set rules) to channel money into the places it was needed most, the gay community worked hard to organize events that could function both as lively social gatherings and as ways to raise some of the funding needed for continued research. Mentions scattered throughout these pages announce various fundraising opportunities for AIDS causes, held both in Philadelphia and in large nearby cities: circus performances, galas, marches and parades, plays. The churches also focused on money held by the government that was not being or had not yet been allocated to AIDS research: The July-August 1985 issue of the *Bellringer* contains a personal account from congregant Irene Kratz of a weekend-long fast among three MCC staff and members as "the beginning of a Memorial Day project to have petitions signed, nationwide, asking for real money to be spent by the Federal Government for research to find the causes and cure of AIDS."¹⁹²

Said Memorial Day petition "also ask[ed] that the disease not be used as a political or social weapon to further oppress gay people,"¹⁹³ which by May of 1985 was a serious concern. Increased awareness about AIDS as a public health issue – raised to a fever pitch by Rock Hudson's illness and death – led to a number of political responses to AIDS that gave gay Christian communities pause, particularly when weighing the obvious political

¹⁹² Kratz, Irene. "Memorial Day Weekend - the AIDS Vigil." *Metropolitan Community Church Philadelphia Bellringer*, July/August 1985, 9.

¹⁹³ Ibid.

need for a visible response against the potential efficacy of said responses. In December 1985, the *Bellringer* encouraged MCC members to write Representative David Sweet, head of the Pennsylvania House Subcommittee on Prisons, to encourage him *not* to sponsor a bill mandating AIDS testing for all inmates: "The tests would be expensive; right now they are not accurate; and there are no clear plans on what will be done to prisoners who test positive."¹⁹⁴ The column continues, pointing out a second bill already introduced to the Philadelphia House, with eight sponsors,

to make it a crime to transmit AIDS "through sexual contact". This Bill - HB 1787 - would not incriminate drug users who spread the disease by sharing dirty needles, and displays ignorance of the way AIDS is really spread by defining "sexual contact" as an intentional touching of either the victim's or "the offender's" genital or anal area or breast either directly or through clothing." Passing this Bill would make the legislators look like fools, and, since available medical evidence makes it clear that AIDS cannot be passed by such means, the law would probably be unconstitutional.¹⁹⁵

The newsletter then encouraged readers to contact their lawmakers and encourage them to less irrational action – especially since the rising national discourse was cheering on irrational action right and left. Calls for things such as full quarantines and forcing PWAs to wear distinctive clothing were not wholly unpopular with the American people, and though clear contradictions from science and legal precedents may have made said lawmakers "look like fools" to some, bills such as HB 1787 often found public support. Even those who, by the best estimates of modern medicine, were at near-zero risk of contracting AIDS felt the Moral Majority's fear of both the disease and those associated

¹⁹⁴ "AIDS & Your State Legislature." *Metropolitan Community Church Philadelphia Bellringer*, December/January 1985-6, 1.

¹⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, 10.

with it; legislation about AIDS served as evidence to confirm that these fears were well-founded.

Though surely not all sources that raised concerns about AIDS as a public health issue were wielding it as a "political [and] social weapon", the stigma surrounding the disease did have a measurable effect on even the uninfected. Though the fears of people like Kramer had proven to be founded, his critics were also correct about the negative impact increasing any stigma on gay sex would have on gay individuals – and by 1985, the overwhelming majority of even the most gay-friendly research and information about AIDS identified unprotected male-male sexual activity as a major transmission vector. However, though pretending to be straight in public might have given many gays and lesbians the ability to "pass" beneath the level of negative scrutiny and thus ensure their private lives would go more smoothly, some argued that this would do more collective harm than individual good. Dignity's administrative secretary, Leo Palmer, opened the October 1985 issue of the *Independence* with the following Officer's Message:

With Halloween coming up, it reminds me of how some people have to lie in order that it is not found out that they are lesbian or gay. Some try to put on one face for work, then put on a second one for their social life.

Now with the A.I.D.S. crisis, many are going into the closet again because of the homophobic reaction to this situation.

For this reason, we as lesbian and gay people have to unite together. We cannot go on hiding. Some people feel that we can lie to others, but we can never lie to ourselves or to our God. God and we know what we truly are and are proud of what we have done.

So I ask each of you to just dress up for the day – the Halloween Party on October 26. I know that the entire A.I.D.S. situation is extremely frightening, but each of us must be strong and courageous in the struggle.

Let us be willing to help our brothers and sisters¹⁹⁶ who have A.I.D.S. Let people know that we are not ashamed of who we are, lesbian and gay people. Let the people who have A.I.D.S. have some faith in us, their brothers and sisters, and be assured that we will stand by them until the day a cure is found for this dreaded disease.¹⁹⁷

Two notable points emerge from this message, the latter being yet another appeal to faith in science as the primary avenue for curing AIDS – the hope identified here is one not for individual restoration, but for widespread biomedical solutions. The former, however, connects response to the AIDS crisis to two concepts unified earlier by people such as Troy Perry: gay pride and self-pride as a part of God's intentional creation. Perry's theology doesn't only allow for same-sex desire as an occasional occurrence; instead, it specifically plays homosexuality as part of the divine design. If Perry is gay, it is not because of an error on God's part or some disobedience on Perry's, but because God has created Perry with his particular sexuality, and to sublimate or reject those desires is tantamount to calling God's design incorrect – another notable Christian blasphemy. Small wonder that Palmer uses the language of the *lie* here to characterize what he sees as the wrong choice, to stay quiet about one's sexuality. Christianity's early history was built on the idea of authenticity about one's identity in the face of torture and death; saints and martyrs aplenty (real, fictionalized, and totally invented) suffered unpleasantly and met even more unpleasant ends because they refused, despite knowing the grim consequences their refusals would bring, to denounce Christianity. While Palmer does not go so far as to roll out the rhetorical Roman lions, Christian accusations of denying one's God-given truth carry a very particular

¹⁹⁶ Though now it seems obvious, at the time AIDS was *such* a rhetorically gay male disease that Palmer's specific inclusion of women in this formulation is more forward-thinking than even some of the medical science at the time was.

¹⁹⁷ Palmer, Leo. "Officer's Message." *The Independence* 12 (October 1985): 1.

weight under any circumstances.

This kind of language is also a particularly Christian take on the *come out, come out, wherever you are* rhetoric employed to defeat California's 1978 Briggs Initiative – an idea condensed and put into the mouth of Sean Penn's 2008 portrayal of Harvey Milk: "They vote for us two to one, if they know they know one of us."¹⁹⁸ Visibility here is key, not only for the benefit of the larger gay community and its political designs, but so that the people who, because of their seropositive status, *cannot* go back to hiding and pretending everything is normal are not abandoned by those with the social privilege of being uninfected. Being out and proud becomes here the way by which one makes oneself a part of a shared network of faith and community. The call here to live authentically as openly gay and lesbian people is not new to the publications of these organizations; in fact, it is part of a gay-affirming theology that predates AIDS, a formulation specifically to counter the ideas that homosexuality is an act of rebellion and that individual homosexuals are in need of repentance and/or medical care. The interesting rhetorical move here is in connecting the obligation to be proudly gay with a communal obligation to PWAs. Being visibly gay becomes here a sign of Christian solidarity with the large and nebulous group of "the infected", a social idea that grouped together perceived risk and infection, regardless of the at-risk individual's seropositive status or the infected person's membership in an identified high-risk group. As a contrast to the earlier behind-the-scenes activist opportunities publicized by Dignity to its members, 1985's rhetoric begins to encourage much more visibility and testimony.

¹⁹⁸ *Milk*. Directed by Gus Van Sant. By Dustin Lance Black. Performed by Sean Penn, Emile Hirsch, and Josh Brolin. San Francisco: Focus Features, 2009. DVD.

These and others presented in these texts were presented not as selfish or self-serving tactics, nor as survival techniques, but as divine mandates and extensions conferred upon individuals as members of the church. Acting out (if not yet ACTing UP) was a part of Christian obligation. While Jesus' commands toward compassion and healing become more explicit frameworks for action in later years, even in the early years of the church's engagement with AIDS, activism was understood as anything but optional: "God calls us to respond in many ways, but we are Called!"¹⁹⁹ Such language in Christian contexts describes not vague general directions for behavior, but individual engagement with the Divine, whereby God makes an offer people *can* but really ought not refuse.²⁰⁰

The presence of medical language in these theological contexts reflects the idea that the best prayer was one for a quick cure. After all, the great medical story of the twentieth century had been one of identifying, isolating, and in some cases even eradicating humanity's great contagious threats: smallpox, measles, rubella, yellow fever, polio. Freed from the twinned paralysis of disease and terror, a population that had once lived in mortal fear of these epidemics now moved about vaccinated and unafraid. The US gay population was well-used to living with damaging yet treatable sexually transmitted infections; if AIDS could be managed as well as the community had come to manage hepatitis C or syphilis, it could no doubt remain a constant annoyance, but not necessarily a fatal one. The infection rate was rising and the body count was terrifying, but there was still hope that science could do what it had spent the last several decades doing and use all its

¹⁹⁹ Kratz, 9.

²⁰⁰ The comical story of Jonah describes perhaps the worst-case scenario of rejecting God's capital-C Call – there are hardly enough giant fish left to go around swallowing all of us who are told to go one way but hop boats to the opposite coast – but stands as a specific example of the general warnings found elsewhere about refusing God's explicit directions.

knowledge to find a solution. With enough money, time, and prayer, anything was possible.

Considering how the earliest AIDS cases were overwhelmingly among gay men, it is not surprising that the majority of these earliest texts come from communities with almost exclusively gay membership, working from positions of self-preservation and concern for the possibility of setbacks in ongoing struggles for rights and recognition. These communities were all aware of the extant rhetoric surrounding AIDS, coming most loudly from Christian individuals and communities taking the opportunity to connect the epidemic to the perceived sinfulness of same-sex sexual activity. Thus, when these Philadelphian groups discussed and created programs helping their membership address AIDS, it was with an eye not only to the scientific and health implications, but also mindful of the spiritually damaging discourse that had gained so much American air time.

Perhaps the most notable thing is how little of these materials from this four-year span is devoted to AIDS. Even as it became a catastrophic nationwide and even global epidemic, for Philadelphia's gay Christian communities, AIDS was in these early years not all-consuming. It wasn't even the only way to die of being gay – in particular, the 1984 murder of Charlie Howard and Roy Ogden in Bangor, Maine caught the attention of gay communities in the northeast, and though it was far from the only anti-gay hate crime committed in that year or any surrounding it, the mainstream coverage made it of particular note. Less violent but no less prominent concerns included legal discrimination, reconciling sexual minorities with larger denominations, addressing the status of women in both secular and sacred spaces, making sure that gay/lesbian bars and clubs were inclusive of

all races and genders, addressing high rates of alcoholism among gay men and lesbians, finding gathering spaces sufficient to organizational needs, affirming the worth of individuals as proud queer children of God, and providing opportunities for community fellowship²⁰¹. Gay Christians in Philadelphia were not waiting around for something to do before AIDS came along, nor did they drop everything when it did.

Even so, by the end of 1985, language about AIDS had begun to take on an unmistakably grim tone. "One picks up literature in an airport and finds a headline reading 'Spread Panic Not AIDS'," reads the Christmas Pastor's Corner in the December 1985 *Bellringer*, "and wonders where is the ray of hope. And maybe it is that all of the signs are really intended to forecast a day of very real and great glory. We have been told to watch and wait for it at all times. Signs will precede its coming."²⁰² Such blatantly apocalyptic language, even when tempered with the customary Christian hopefulness about God's ultimate control of history, means only one thing: Four years into the epidemic, AIDS was starting to look like the end of the world.

²⁰¹ The September 1984 issue of the *Independence* announces AN ECUMENICAL GREAT GAY SKATEAWAY with text superimposed over clip art of a clothed, bipedal elephant on roller skates. Let no one ever call these documents dull.

²⁰² Gilbert, Joseph. "Pastor's Corner." *Metropolitan Community Church Philadelphia Bellringer*, December/January 1985-6, 3.

CHAPTER 3: "IF WE BRING FORTH WHAT IS WITHIN US, IT WILL SAVE US. IF WE DO NOT BRING FORTH WHAT IS WITHIN US, IT WILL DESTROY US.": 1986-1989

The second half of the 1980s marked a radical change in the American public's perception of AIDS, owing in part to increased education and media coverage, and in part to emerging scientific realities that in equal measure codified existing assumptions and redrew lines around risk groups. Rock Hudson's death in 1985, however, brought the topic of AIDS to the public consciousness' forefront such that straight America could no longer assume itself safe from the epidemic. The plague had always been real, but it had begun as a reality for the "other"; by 1986 it was clear that "the right people" weren't the only ones dying from it.

The most significant change in the materials from this period, when compared to the materials from 1982-1985, is that many of them come from a new and exciting demographic: straight people. While heterosexual allies make brief appearances in and contributions to materials prior to this point, they have thus far been either in conversation with or represented in the context of majority-gay publications, particularly the *Independence* and the *Bellringer*. The Gay Plague had been a concern for gay churches and Christian organizations, especially in terms of providing spiritual support and pastoral care – after all, their members were the ones for whom AIDS was more than an abstract threat. These churches' and organizations' advocacy did not wane as AIDS becomes less exclusively a gay concern; to the contrary, they continue to forward significant social, political, religious, and personal responses.

This chapter focuses on a period of significant change, during which AIDS became a concern beyond the borders of gay communities, both because the changes in public perception of the disease necessitated Christian calls for education and compassion against fear and stigma, and because new infection dynamics made clear that AIDS was not the population-targeting malady many had at first made it out to be. I first look at the same publications discussed in the previous chapter and the ways in which their contents and rhetoric adapted to reflect social change, particularly changes in gay life and visibility, and how religious language in these newsletters reflects an even greater emphasis on healing and resurrection; I focus particularly on Dignity's ongoing struggles with the Catholic hierarchy's approaches to sexuality and AIDS. Next, I examine responses from denominations and congregations with predominantly heterosexual membership and the way Christian rhetoric about AIDS changes among groups extending compassion to others rather than reacting toward issues from inside the congregation. From there, I look at interfaith networks and ecumenical gatherings that formed during this period, considering particularly the fraught rhetoric of trying to advance compassion for PWAs while dealing with divergent theological opinions on the correctness of homosexuality. Finally, I consider how these interdenominational alliances translated from theological to practical activism, including the negotiations and compromises made in the name of positive action.

Changing Gay Communities

Both the *Independence* and the *Bellringer* were going strong during this time period, and their contents reflect some of the changes happening in the national discourse around AIDS. Politically, though Reagan himself would not discuss AIDS in a public context until

April 1987 – appropriately enough to the scope of this research, at a luncheon in Philadelphia²⁰³ – members of his administration had begun public awareness and funding campaigns that brought the reality of the epidemic to the forefront of people's minds, focusing on scientific information as antidote to widespread rumor. However, the broadening understanding of AIDS from a semi-contained malady to an actual public health crisis gave rise to widespread calls for discriminatory policies and legislation intended to protect the "innocent" public, regardless of the scientific validity of those approaches. Therefore, groups such as Dignity and the MCC began to advocate for more visible approaches, encouraging members to make themselves and their voices known, despite the personal and professional difficulties this might bring individuals.

However, during these years, these predominantly gay and lesbian Christian groups were joined in these efforts by congregations whose gay-identified members were few and far between (though often beloved of their straight fellow congregants). These groups came to AIDS from a very different perspective: instead of being in high-risk groups, familiar with several people who had already died, and/or infected themselves, most of these congregants were more likely to be identified with those groups perpetuating the stigma against homosexuals and PWAs. What these individuals and congregations bring to the discourse, then, comes more in calls to solidarity and compassion than out of response to immediate crisis in their own lives.

One change on the larger cultural scale that made these religious organizations even

²⁰³ Reagan, Ronald. "Remarks at a Luncheon for Members of the College of Physicians in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania." While Reagan himself had fielded questions about his administration's response to AIDS prior to that point, particularly with regards to funding (see Boffey, "Reagan Defends Financing for AIDS"), this was his first public address on the topic.

more important to the gay community was the closing of the bathhouses and many gay bars. The bathhouses in particular were a contentious topic at the time, particularly among gay men; on the one hand, they represented the kind of freedom and sexual liberation that gay men had been trying so long to establish for themselves, but on the other, the kind of anonymous, unsafe sex they promoted made them easy places to transmit and contract sexually transmitted infections, of which AIDS was only the most recent. Christian sexual ethics vary, but not often wildly, and coupled monogamy remains the ideal in most denominations, with disagreement following therefrom over what genders and sexes those participants should be. That both Dignity and the MCC would come down on the side of supporting the closures is hardly surprising, particularly given how both organizations constructed their respective identities around politics of respectability; promiscuity does not play well in the proverbial Peoria.

However, newsletters from both organizations evidence an awareness that no matter what one thought of the sexual or biological ethics of shutting down the bathhouses, all gay men at the time knew that losing them as a cultural hub would have a major impact on the gay community. MCC congregant Bill Hoyer reflects in the November 1986 issue of the *Bellringer* that the MCC has been a critical factor in his establishing fellowship and making friends inside the gay community, especially considering that he has never visited the baths and does not frequent bars – something for which he is grateful in light of AIDS.²⁰⁴ His reduction of the gay community's available social locations to churches, bars, and bathhouses reflects the kind of isolation often felt by gay men during this era, especially

²⁰⁴ Hoyer, Bill. "7th Anniversary Thoughts." *Metropolitan Community Church Philadelphia Bellringer*, November 1986. 4.

those who did not feel comfortable in one or more of those settings. Dignity also established itself during the 1980s as a similar alternative opportunity for fellowship; as Primiano notes, "Dignity gatherings presented an occasion outside of the bar scene, where the men could assert themselves and revel within a gay institution of their own creation."²⁰⁵ The January 1986 newsletter makes mention of a sermon the previous month given as part of Dignity's liturgy by a priest identified only as "Fr. Jim M."; though the sermon itself is not preserved, Mark P., chair of the Spiritual Life Committee, notes that in it, the priest called for members of Dignity to

"speak out against our society seeking to push us back into our closets by utilizing the hysteria surrounding the AIDS crisis [and] to be willing to stand against this oppression, as out [sic] bars and bathhouses are closed (with a sigh and with a whimper?) our physical community's boundaries grow even smaller."²⁰⁶

This concept of the gay community incorporates a kind of unity that considers all things of gay (male) culture so interlinked that the closing of a secular bathhouse can be a blow to a Catholic community, not a welcome winnowing of an avenue of sin. Regardless, both Dignity and the MCC present themselves not only as ready alternatives to gay nightlife (as the frequent reports from various Social Committees would suggest), but as what might soon be the *only* options for gay gathering places. This understanding of connectivity is furthered in that same *Independence* issue, which reproduces on another page the famous

²⁰⁵ Primiano, "I Would Rather Be Fixated on the Lord." As an important aside, the point Primiano is making in this essay hinges on his use of "men" – while women were present in and ostensibly welcomed by Dignity during this period, it was an overwhelmingly male-run and -dominated organization. Evidence from the *Independence* support this characterization, such as a letter from layout editor Lee St. Clair, where he wonders if the tendency to list women first in the phrase "lesbians and gay men" is evidence of a "cruel female chauvinism". (*Independence*, January 1986) While I am more concerned with how Dignity chose to present itself than the 'truth' behind that presentation, it is worth keeping in mind throughout just how male that presentation is.

²⁰⁶ P., Mark. "From a Differing Angle." *The Independence* 13 (January 1986): 4.

"first they came for the communists" litany, attributed here to Martin Niemoller, a quiet caution against celebrating any blow struck against the less 'respectable' corners of the gay community.

Despite its frequent calls to advocacy, however, the degree to which Dignity could – or was willing to – speak for the whole gay community was limited. For all the organization's larger desire to take steps toward enacting change, it was a social and spiritual group as much as it was an activist one, and the privilege of being openly gay was one more reliably found in the leadership than in the membership. In the June 1988 issue of the *Independence*, Senior Regional Representative William C. Mayes speaks in the front-page officer's message about the problems facing himself and the other officers in terms of tempering desire for representation and visibility with respect for those who looked to the group for other means:

As officers, we must be sensitive to all our members. We must provide that safe space for members. We must remember that all members are not "out". They have come to Dignity's "safe space" to be with other persons who are lesbian and gay. **WE MUST NEVER DESTROY THAT "SAFE SPACE"**. [...] Bold activist statements to the Church and to Society must be made by the chapter and its leaders, but they must be made in such a way that they are an opinion, and not an ultimatum, for the individual member. Such actions and statements must be made in such a way that the individual members are not alienated, but respected in our differences.²⁰⁷

Unsurprisingly, then, during the second half of the 1980s, the *Independence* in particular begins to evidence a growing rhetorical separation between spiritual action and political action. While calls for both rise in frequency and ferocity, they less frequently do so in tandem. Instead, the discussion turns more sharply toward the nature of the Catholic

²⁰⁷ Mayes, William C. "Officer's Message..." *The Independence* 15 (June 1988): 1.

church as it related then to gays and lesbians, a discourse raised in part by the larger Catholic hierarchy's vocal – and often unwelcoming – responses to the growing prominence of gay individuals in the church.

In the August 1986 *Independence* issue, the Executive Secretary of Dignity, Michael J. Rocks²⁰⁸, opens the issue with an essay entitled "The Danger of Self-Oppression and the AIDS Crisis", wherein he warns of the way the Christian Right has wedded the ideas of AIDS and gay liberation, scaring liberals away from supporting either – and consequently keeping gay men and lesbians in the closet out of fear. Rocks pushes for open adoption of the gay identity not only as a means of individual liberation, but as part of communal solidarity on the way to "radical social change".²⁰⁹ One might be forgiven for picking up this issue, reading this front-page call for gay men and lesbians to assert their rights as a vocal minority able to speak truth to power, and assuming this was anything *but* a religious publication.

Only a few pages later, Dignity again prescribes the power of collective prayer against AIDS, though this time without calling together a group in a specific physical location; instead, as part of the San Francisco-based AIDS Interfaith Network, Dignity members are invited to participate in a world-wide Moment of Prayer for People with AIDS and AIDS-related conditions. As perhaps an example for those unaccustomed to praying without some sort of liturgical guide, below this announcement is an unattributed 'AIDS Prayer':

We humbly beg of you, O God, mercifully to look upon your people as
we suffer from this dread disease;

²⁰⁸ Despite the delightful improbability, this appears to be his real name.

²⁰⁹ Rocks, Michael J. "The Danger of Self-Oppression and the AIDS Crisis." *The Independence* 13 (August 1986): 1.

Protect the healthy, calm the frightened, give courage to those in pain.

Grant to the dead everlasting life, console the bereaved.

Bless those who care for the sick, and hasten the discovery of a cure.

At this time, we remember especially (personal choice)²¹⁰ and finally, O compassionate God, grant that in this and all our troubles, we may put our whole trust and confidence in your steadfast love, through Jesus Christ.

Amen.²¹¹

Notable here is how only the 'through Jesus Christ' at the end, a mainstay of contemporary Christian prayer, makes this prayer specifically Christian, and nothing makes it specifically Catholic. The first-person plural language of the first sentence, however, identifies the speakers as part of the community of the infected, if not necessarily the infected themselves. Though Dignity still identified itself as a gay Catholic organization, this prayer indicates an affiliation more gay than strictly Catholic – or even strictly religious at all, if Rocks' commentary is any indication.

The closing of the bathhouses may provide some insight into this switch: Absent the familiar locations for sexual liaisons, members of the gay community were indeed short of places to go to find welcome. For many LGBT individuals, organized religion has been the opposite of welcoming, meaning that a full-throttle exhortation to radical equality in Jesus' holy name might be at the least a bit off-putting to some of those coming to Dignity after bad experiences with Christianity. In the 1980s, (secular) gay groups and (straight) Christian groups placed themselves rhetorically at each other's throats, establishing their respective public identities over and against the other, until the incompatibility of religious

²¹⁰ As in-character for gay Christians as a prayer to God for the blessings of personal choice might be, this indicates a place where those saying the prayer may lift up names of individuals important to them.

²¹¹ "AIDS Prayer." *The Independence* 13 (August 1986): 2. Though I have seen this prayer reproduced (with slight variations) in several AIDS-related contexts, many not specific to the Philadelphia area, I believe the original attribution may be lost now to time. This entire page was also reprinted in each of the subsequent issues that year.

language with gay life became more often than not taken for granted.²¹² The Officer's Messages that take up the first pages of *Independence* issues during this era are more often than not practical, secular calls to action, quotes more likely to come from Walt Whitman than from Jesus – in essence, material more familiar to those who might seek out Dignity for its identity as a gay community before coming to it as a religious community.²¹³

Past its cover page, however, the *Independence* remains as mindful of spiritual discipline as ever, holding weekly Monday evening AIDS prayer groups, organizing Lenten fasts, and reprinting AIDS prayers from other Dignity chapters. The structure of said prayer groups reflected both the group's identification with the Catholic Church and its outreach to individuals beyond that tradition; the order of each meeting included prayers about AIDS-related concerns, readings from scripture, a period for quiet reflection, discussion time, a five-minute break, and "then for those interested", reciting the rosary.²¹⁴ An announcement from Dignity's Spiritual Life Committee marked the second anniversary of the prayer group, celebrated on September 9, 1987, which characterized the group's actions over the previous year by highlighting both the personal and practical applications of this regular spiritual discipline:

We have been praying for those who we have known, or didn't know, who have died, or become ill. We have prayed and talked about our fears and concerns in this crisis. We have seen our prayers answered by experimental treatments and drugs, a vaccine that's currently being tested, and continued education to both the straight and gay communities about safe sex.²¹⁵

²¹² Lierman, 4.

²¹³ There are, of course, notable exceptions to this, among them being the December 1987 issue's loving remembrance of Christmas by Jr. Regional Representative John Kennealy, but the miraculous birth of Jesus and the love of God are fairly heartwarming, non-confrontational facets of Christian belief.

²¹⁴ "From the Spiritual Life Committee..." *The Independence* 14 (September 1987): 4.

²¹⁵ Ibid.

In October of the same year, the newsletter announced a new Bible study, encouraging Dignity members to familiarize themselves with scripture "especially in these days of Bible thumping Christian Fundamentalism."²¹⁶ The particular 'fundamentalism' with which Integrity most concerned itself during these years was the October 1986 *Letter to the Bishops of the Catholic Church on the Pastoral Care of Homosexual Persons* – known more colloquially as *Homosexualitatis problema* (its opening words) or the "Ratzinger Letter". Then-Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger's pastoral letter to the Catholic Church's bishops spoke out against violence against gays and lesbians, calling on the Church and its members to condemn such acts when- and wherever they occurred, but concluded that homosexuality was most frequently not a natural state and called on homosexuals to "enact the will of God in their life by joining whatever sufferings and difficulties they experience in virtue of their condition to the sacrifice of the Lord's Cross," and to do so celibately.²¹⁷ Though the position itself was hardly a surprise and did not mark any change in ecclesiastical policy (certainly not in Philadelphia, where Dignity had already responded with scorn to official demands for gays to lead sexless lives), hearing the sentiments in it codified and repeated from such a prominent position²¹⁸ was a blow to gay and gay-friendly Catholics, especially as Ratzinger's words gave validity and fuel to what Dignity members already viewed as the Catholic Church's discrimination against them. Though it did in no measurable way alter the practical response of the church toward Dignity and its members, the Ratzinger Letter became a symbol of that intolerance gay Catholics felt directed at them from their own

²¹⁶ "From the Spiritual Life Committee..." *The Independence* 14 (October 1987): 3.

²¹⁷ Catholic Church and Joseph Ratzinger. 1986. *Letter to the bishops of the Catholic Church on the pastoral care of homosexual persons*. [Washington, D.C.]: [Office of Pub. Services, United States Catholic Conference].

²¹⁸ Ratzinger would become Pope Benedict XVI in 2005.

home denomination; at the top of the order of worship for the October 30, 1988 Mass, though the order that follows is itself is nothing out of the ordinary, are the somewhat ominous words "'We Remember'" and "The Second Anniversary of the Ratzinger Letter".²¹⁹ No further explanation is given; no further explanation seems needed.

Indeed, where political and spiritual concerns continue to meet in these texts – and could hardly be divorced – is in issues surrounding Catholic ecumenical church politics. The end of 1986 saw several major changes for gay Catholics, most having to do with the recall and forced resignation of priests whose support of LGBT individuals brought them to the negative attention of various individuals in the Catholic hierarchy. In particular, the Archbishop of Philadelphia at the time, Cardinal John Joseph Krol, received strong words in the October 1986 issue of the *Independence*, including accusations of betraying Matthew 25's 'least of these' commandments by refusing to acknowledge "that Dignity, lesbian and gay people, and people with AIDS exist in Philadelphia."²²⁰ The *Independence's* opening message of 1987 challenges Dignity members to greater engagement with the Catholic Church, though likely not in a way the Church itself would have appreciated: "We can idly sit by and let the church, as structure and Magisterium, attempt to drain our spiritual lifeblood from us, or you can commit ourselves to our cause and purpose and claim the church, which is ours."²²¹ By encouraging members in that same breath to "take responsibility for [their] own destiny", Mayes' Officer's Message puts an imperative spin on these actions.

²¹⁹ "'We Remember': The Second Anniversary of the Ratzinger Letter" (religious service, Dignity/Philadelphia, Philadelphia, October 30, 1988). Formatting in the original.

²²⁰ Mayes, William C. "From the President..." *The Independence* 13 (October 1986): 2. Though he is credited as 'William C. Mayes' everywhere else, this particular president's letter is signed 'Bill Mays'.

²²¹ Mayes, William C. "Officer's Message..." *The Independence* 14 (January 1987): 1-2.

The question of to whom the Catholic Church belongs is more complicated than it seems, especially given the obvious prominence of its rigid ecclesiastical hierarchy, something absent from most Protestant denominations. But the Church's global nature troubles this authoritative structure, as distance from Rome can often translate into distance from official proclamations. Having the church headed by a single leader also does not translate into a perfectly catholic Catholic experience; indeed, part of the historical successes in the spread of Catholicism have been facilitated by various willingnesses to adapt to local cultures, to the point where even in today's global age, Catholicism still looks very different in Mexico, for instance, than it does in Ireland. Immigrant Catholic populations in the United States have brought different traditions, outlooks, languages, and demographics to the mix, further decentralizing the idea of what Catholicism "should" look like. So while the relationship between gay Catholics and the Catholic church structure has almost always needed a "vs." between the two to describe it, the nature of the global church is diverse enough that gay Catholics might well understand their claim to its definition to be as valid as anyone else's. The question then becomes one of how to approach that claim, and what then to expect from it. "Is the Church meeting our particular needs as gay and lesbian Catholics?" asks a November 1988 report from the Dignity Liturgy Committee. "And if not, do we have the right to develop a theology that will help us to mature in the faith and as witnesses"?²²²

The latter question is no doubt still unsettled in the minds of many, but Dignity's answer to the former appeared even at the time a rousing *no*. The Church, however, was beginning

²²² Liturgy Committee. "From the Liturgy Committee." *The Independence* 15 (November 1988): 2.

by the end of the 1980s to meet the particular needs of PWAs, regardless (or perhaps in spite) of sexual orientation. In September 1989, Rev. John J. Dennis, the Coordinator of the Archdiocese of Philadelphia's Catholic Social Services' Office of AIDS Ministry, sent out a letter (with the generic salutation "Dear Father:") to several Catholic congregations in the Philadelphia area. This letter includes a brochure announcing programs developed by the AIDS Ministry Program, part of the Philadelphia Archdiocese. "We know that the Church is compassionate and caring for the people of God and that the AIDS Ministry is another visible sign of the Church's concern," Dennis writes to the unspecified priest.²²³ The brochure lists several services, including pastoral counseling and education, then includes the following statements:

Jesus gives all of us an example of a healing and redeeming ministry, a ministry of compassion, mutual respect and love. He befriended the abandoned, forgave sinners, healed the sick and soothed the broken-hearted.

The Church in Philadelphia seeks to extend Christ's healing ministry to all suffering people, but, especially to those affected by AIDS/ARC, their families and friends.

We come as friends and neighbors trying to follow the compassionate Jesus. It is not our intent to render judgment but rather to demonstrate our concern through pastoral ministries.²²⁴

Saying that one is not rendering judgment, though, is often a sign one is doing exactly that, while simply holding one's tongue in the process, as was the impression given to Dignity at the time. Unsurprisingly, the promised compassion seemed to remain unfelt.

One of the prevailing ideas behind much of Dignity's rhetoric remains faith in the

²²³ Letter from John J. Dennis. September 1989. Archdiocese of Philadelphia Catholic Social Services, Office of AIDS Ministry, Philadelphia, PA.

²²⁴ Archdiocese of Philadelphia Catholic Social Services, Office of AIDS Ministry. Philadelphia, 1989.

righteous inevitability of their cause, despite setbacks in hierarchy and cultural opinion. The May 1988 *Independence* reprints a piece from the 1987 Dignity/Toledo Newspaper, a humorous piece by an otherwise-unidentified "Sr. Jeannine", who "believes the October 1986 Ratzinger Letter will prove beneficial in the long run since it draws attention to lesbian and gay issues" and "believes that a majority of Catholics will approve of same sex relationships in 10 years."²²⁵ This kind of faith unfounded is similar to the faith in a quick medical answer to AIDS – by the end of the 1980s, imminent approval of gay relationships and any-minute-now expectations of a vaccine/cure were far more wishful thinking than anything supported by historical trends.

Of course, such kinds of hopes are at the core of a Christian experience, especially one trying to survive a near-eschatological crisis. The major tone of the New Testament texts is an expectant one; the hope of Christ's return and subsequent overthrow of the standard terrestrial order was what sustained early Christian communities through marginalization and persecution. Even as that hope remains unmaterialized, its delay is not a sign of its being false, but an indication that the time of its fruition is even more likely to be at hand – the longer the wait, the closer the time must be.

That hope could be found in other contexts, especially small support groups. In January 1986, the *Independence* contained information about a "Therapy Group for People Tending Toward Dysfunction Because of Fear of A.I.D.S.", a twelve-person twelve-week program facilitated by Jim Littrell and Allan A. Goldberg, MSW²²⁶; the presence of this program,

²²⁵ "Sister Jeannine's Ten C's..." *The Independence* 15 (May 1988): 3.

²²⁶ "Therapy Group for People Tending Toward Dysfunction Because of Fear of A.I.D.S." *The Independence* 13 (January 1986): 3.

offered to gay and bisexual men, reflects the need for spiritual responses to the debilitating fear of AIDS found even in uninfected individuals. Addressing a similar demographic, the MCC announced in its February 1989 *Bellringer* the meeting of Positive Plus, the "men's support group for those who have tested sero-positive for HIV".²²⁷ Membership in the group carried three requirements: being male, being HIV-positive, and being a "Person of faith", though the announcement makes clear that the last requirement is one subject to self-definition, not matching an external checklist – an important note, considering how many gay men have wound up alienated from more conservative religious traditions and would thus not be able to show church membership as proof of faithfulness in this context.

AIDS had become such a part of gay life in general by 1987 that it was inextricable from gay religious life, to the point where the MCC's sixteenth-anniversary celebrations centered around issues of personal faith as they had been tested and shaped by the epidemic. Rev. Jennie Boyd Bull, at the time a pastor at MCC Baltimore²²⁸, came to MCC Philadelphia to be a part of the commemoration, giving a Friday-night address, a Saturday series of workshops, and a closing Sunday-evening sermon, all of which addressed the spiritual components of dealing with AIDS. Her Friday message, titled "What is AIDS Teaching Us About Being the Body of Christ?", references Paul's metaphor in I Corinthians 12, comparing all individuals in the Church to parts of a body, stressing that despite their different gifts and functions, believers cannot divorce themselves from other believers any more than an eye could reject the hand of the same body it inhabits. The Saturday

²²⁷ "Positive Plus Meeting." *Metropolitan Community Church Philadelphia Bellringer*, February 1989, 4.

²²⁸ Metropolitan Community Church of Baltimore. *Metropolitan Community Church of Baltimore Church History*. Informational Packet. July 20, 2013.

http://mccbaltimore.org/images/MCCB_Information_Packet.pdf.

workshops, collectively titled "How is AIDS Deepening My Faith?", called on attendees to voice their own faith concerns raised by AIDS, then gathered the questions into categories to be addressed by the group.²²⁹ The title of the Sunday sermon was "AIDS: Bringing Forth a Resurrection People", focusing on the Christian resurrection narrative that understands that renewal not only as an event in Jesus' life story, but as a metaphorical possibility for all living Christians.²³⁰ In announcing her upcoming program in the previous month's newsletter, Gilbert quotes an unnamed "early text"²³¹ as saying, "If we bring forth what is within us, it will save us. If we do not bring forth what is in us, it will destroy us," a statement which Gilbert places at "the very heart of what we share during this important Anniversary Week."²³² This quote has particular poignancy for a community whose members are accustomed to hiding their true selves as a means of survival; the formulation here turns that concept of surviving through secrecy on its head, implying instead that the closet is what brings death, and only self-acceptance and visibility will save the gay community.

Resurrection is a common theme in Christian discourse, primarily because its prominent, arguably necessary role in the Christian faith makes it "more than a metaphor of hope"²³³, but the promise on which Christianity as a whole hinges: The doctrinal truth of Jesus' third-day return from the dead translates, via Paul, into a promise of a similar

²²⁹ Gellert, Alan. "MCC Phila. Celebrates 16th Anniversary Oct 18-25." *Metropolitan Community Church Philadelphia Bellringer*, December/January 1987-8. 5.

²³⁰ Ibid.

²³¹ It is unclear from his wording whether he is referring to the early text that is the quote's origin (Saying 70 of the Gospel of Thomas), or an early copy he has received of Rev. Bull's sermon, containing this quote.

²³² Gilbert, Joseph. "Pastor's Corner." *Metropolitan Community Church Philadelphia Bellringer*, October 1987, 3, 9.

²³³ Christensen, 175

transformation for all believers, who by this argument no longer have to fear death as the final stop on the journey. This kind of appeal to resurrection language, more importantly, does not consider death a failure – an obvious drawback, at least to those with chronic illnesses, to perspectives on faith that equate physical wellness with spiritual wellness. In many ways, resurrection is a crisis doctrine, one whose popularity in the early Christian Church reflects the seemingly insurmountable social and political hardships faced by the community members at the time; as part of apocalyptic language, it promises believers a new being to go along with the new order, one which cannot be established by mortal effort, but only by divine intervention. As a (thus far) incurable disease, AIDS is out of human hands.

Waiting around to die prior to said divine intervention, however, is not required, as shown in the continual prayers for healing and scientific advancement that appear here. The February 1987 *Independence* even announced a trip that May, organized by Dignity/New York, as a pilgrimage to Lourdes, a Catholic site associated with healing miracles; while the trip is advertised as being open to everyone, trip organizers "hope that it will particularly appeal to people with AIDS or ARC."²³⁴ In April 1988, the MCC also hosted a visit from Rev. A. Stephen Pieters, an MCC minister from California diagnosed with AIDS in 1984, whose survival and thriving he attributed to "his attitude of survival and the therapy and weightlifting and bodywork", as well as to his being one of the early recipients of Suramin treatment.²³⁵ Pieters was scheduled to return in December of that

²³⁴ "Pilgrimage to Lourdes, May 9-16, 1987..." *The Independence* 14 (February 1987): 4.

²³⁵ Though Suramin, an antimicrobial, was discontinued as an AIDS therapy not long after Rev. Pieters' message due to its severe and often fatal side effects (Kaplan, 1987. "Lack of response to suramin in patients with AIDS and AIDS-related complex"), Rev. Pieters himself was active as recently as February 2013 on Twitter (<https://twitter.com/aspeters>), where he describes himself in his bio as a "30-

year, co-sponsored by the MCC and First Unitarian Church, to conduct a workshop titled "Good Grief" and to preach Sunday services at both churches, giving a sermon titled "Fully Alive With AIDS"²³⁶; that was later delayed to February 1989.²³⁷ Congregant Dick McEllroy reminisces in the *Bellringer* about the power of that "Good Grief" expressed in community, where he tells of finally being about to mourn the loss of a friend in the context of a small sharing group at said event.²³⁸ Despite the lack of cures miraculous or otherwise, church communities provided hope for healing and support in its absence.

Individual memorials are infrequent yet present throughout these texts, though when they are for community members, they are often devoid of all but the most immediately relevant information; a brief note and a simple vine-covered cross graphic in the May 1986 *Independence* take up half a page "in loving memory" of Ron Fratto, who died Monday, April 7, 1986.²³⁹ The October 1989 *Independence* carries a poem by John D'Amato titled "In Memory of Ron Jekot", with a note at the bottom that Jekot was a Dignity member who "gave presentations on AIDS and wholistic [sic] therapies."²⁴⁰ For more public figures, however, more public, specific remembrances occur, often in the service of making larger theological points. The February 1988 issue of the *Bellringer* commemorates the month on its front page as Black History Month and (the somewhat less famous) World Church

year survivor of AIDS".

²³⁶ "Fully Alive with AIDS' – Steve Pieters Returns Feb 3-5." *Metropolitan Community Church Philadelphia Bellringer*, December/January 1988-9, 14.

²³⁷ "Fully Alive with AIDS." *Metropolitan Community Church Philadelphia Bellringer*, February 1989, 1-2.

²³⁸ McEllroy, Dick. "Rev. Steve Pieters Talks about 'Good Grief'" *Metropolitan Community Church Philadelphia Bellringer*, March/April 1989, 5.

²³⁹ "In Loving Memory." *The Independence* 13 (May 1986): 5. While no cause of death is given in the *Independence* memorial itself, Fratto's name can be found on a panel of the NAMES Project Quilt Block #1455 (<http://aidsquilttouch.org/blocks/1455>).

²⁴⁰ D'Amato, John. "In Memory of Ron Jekot." *The Independence* 16 (October 1989): 5.

Extension Month,²⁴¹ but the pastor's corner knows its place in Ordinary Time: the weeks nearing the start of the Lenten Season. Joseph Gilbert remarks, "We have often repeated Archbishop Tutu's statement that you cannot get to Easter except through Good Friday. I once heard someone say that that sounded like spiritual S&M. But as the conversation went on it became obvious that we all know, at one level or another, that we cannot possibly go on to glory unless we are ready for the scut work here and now."²⁴² However, Lent and Easter, Pastor Joseph Gilbert notes, happen metaphorically in human lives all the time, and at times not so neatly lined up with the liturgical calendar; he writes of having been made aware, over the previous months, of "two Lents" in the lives of people he knows, one another MCC pastor in Richmond, and the other Bill Way, well-known Philadelphian AIDS activist.²⁴³ (The February 1988 *Independence* strikes a middle tone between public and personal, noting without further comment in the front-page Officer's Message that "We will add the names of Bill Way and Tom Collins to those we loved and miss."²⁴⁴)

Lent, for Christians, serves as the (approximately) forty-day leadup to Easter, the moveable feast toward which all of Christianity's resurrection metaphors are pointed. Way's death in early January 1988 is to Gilbert an off-season Easter, a reminder in a time of death of the eventual Christian hope for believers: "the Resurrection future which is ours—not because we earned it, but because Christ paid the price and told us that it is ours, and

²⁴¹ Truly, I do not know what this is.

²⁴² Gilbert, Joseph. "Pastor's Corner." *Metropolitan Community Church Philadelphia Bellringer*, February 1988, 3.

²⁴³ Given that the William Way Community Center has been such an invaluable resource to me during the research for this project, I am pleased that Mr. Way himself has found a place in the final work.

²⁴⁴ Calnan, Jimmy. "Officer's Message: Dignity - Five, Ten, and Fifteen." *The Independence* 15 (February 1988): 1.

because it is now in us that Jesus Christ is risen."²⁴⁵ The gay community and Way are the same, then, in terms of being infected and walking into death, in the middle of the "scut work" of the world – and one might indeed be forgiven for interpreting this sadomasochistically, as a glorification of the process of suffering. Indeed, finding the initial joy in celebrating a single life is one thing, and sustaining it throughout a much longer, seemingly interminable crisis is quite another. In March 1989, Gilbert writes:

Here in Philadelphia perfectly well meaning people have been saying, far to [sic] often, "AIDS is always fatal. If you get AIDS you die." One of the messages of the Resurrection is that we must battle that mentality. Nevertheless, there are still too many funerals. Too many for comfort. And almost too many to be comforted.²⁴⁶

What comfort there is, then, comes still from that Resurrection language. The atemporality of the Resurrection is key, as Gilbert references a funeral he attended, held in UniLu's chapel, where all the readings given "point forward [...] to a Resurrection that happened in the past, is happening today, and will happen in times yet to come."²⁴⁷ Gilbert paraphrases later lines in Romans 8 to conclude this same column, recounting Paul's list of the things that surely cannot separate believers from the love of God. Before he does, however, Gilbert references the less-quoted Romans 8:1: "There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus." (NRSV) This specific assurance may have meant one thing for Paul, but to twentieth-century gay Christians mourning their losses from AIDS, it promises a safety from the judgment so associated with louder, more mainstream strains of Christianity. To call the time of AIDS 'Lent', then, is to bless the time

²⁴⁵ Gilbert, "Pastor's Corner" (February 1988), 6.

²⁴⁶ Gilbert, Joseph. "Pastor's Corner." *Metropolitan Community Church Philadelphia Bellringer*, March 1989, 3.

²⁴⁷ *Ibid*, 3.

in the desert as part of the process that leads someone out of it again: "In the Resurrection of Jesus Christ," writes Gilbert, "we are promised that for each beloved one all sickness and sorrow are ended, and death itself is past and that they have entered the home where all God's people gather in peace."²⁴⁸ The very un-funereal celebration of Way's life at his funeral – complete with the brightly painted Ferko String Band and feathers filling the air – mirrors the joy of Easter for Way's friends and family, as Way presumably can finally experience firsthand for himself, in that Resurrection future, in the Sweet By and By.

Allies from the Mainstream

The period between 1986 and 1989 was one of significant change in public understandings of AIDS, especially in terms of just how far and to whom the epidemic might spread. As a result, during this period, significant materials relating to AIDS and the church's response to it begin to emerge not only from local congregations, but also from conferences, dioceses, and even national denominations in charge of large numbers of individual churches; these materials were often either reproduced by or incorporated into smaller gatherings and congregations. As early as 1986, many major denominations had issued official statements or produced fuller reports about AIDS, both declaring it cause for compassionate response and rejecting discriminatory statements about those with it; some made explicit reference to the church's mission to be a healing force in the world as a continuation of Jesus' healing ministry.²⁴⁹ Some, too, had begun to coordinate and

²⁴⁸ Ibid., 3-9.

²⁴⁹ "The Presiding Bishop's Message on AIDS." Letter from Edmond L. Browning. October 1987. The Episcopal Church Center, New York, NY.

distribute information for congregations, providing factual medical information to congregants in the way gay churches had been doing for years. Most dodged the topic of sexuality altogether, homo- or otherwise, choosing to focus on what could be done in the epidemic's present rather than condemning or justifying actions leading to its spread. Eisenstadt's 1988 report to the Philadelphia Commission on AIDS highlights significant responses and publications from significant national Christian groups during this period, particularly those most relevant to congregations in Philadelphia and the surrounding area. The groups mentioned in Eisenstadt's piece which are most represented in this work produced notable nationwide publications as follows: In 1987, the Administrative Board of the United States Catholic Conference, a conference which represents all active and retired members of the Catholic hierarchy in the United States, published a report titled *The Many Faces of AIDS*, which became known largely for a controversial paragraph which accepted the reality of a pluralistic context and thus advocated for teaching about condom use, but which also advocated compassion for and solidarity with PWAs, and condemned discrimination; this document, which the bishops voted to retain in 1988, called for educational programs for priests and congregants alike.²⁵⁰ That same year, the Coordinating Committee for Cooperative Projects in Congregational Life of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in the United States²⁵¹ published a packet of resources titled "Ministry and the Threat of AIDS", a collection of materials ranging from Red Cross pamphlets to Scholastic guides for teenagers to (overwhelmingly anti-gay) Bible studies,

²⁵⁰ Eisenstadt, 26-29.

²⁵¹ Resulting from a 1988 merger of three major Lutheran bodies, this denomination is more commonly known as the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA).

all for use by clergy and laity in Lutheran congregations.²⁵² The Episcopal Church's Office of AIDS Ministry declared its first Day of Prayer for Persons With AIDS in November 1986, announcing the occasion with a four-page booklet containing scientific facts, sample scriptures and sermon topics, and a responsive prayer.²⁵³ Other Protestant denominations covered in Eisenstadt's report had by 1988 created similar publications, addressing AIDS theologically and practically in a way while maintaining a general position of neutrality such that these works could be useful to congregations across the conservative-liberal spectrum; even those that reiterated a denominational position in opposition to same-sex identity and activity (such as the Lutherans) often downplayed that opposition in ways that members of the Christian Right did not seek to hide.

Like their gay and lesbian counterparts, these Christians were concerned with AIDS both as an occasion for immediate compassion and as a secular health crisis, and nearly all proposed education as a way to reduce both stigma and the spread of HIV itself. However, general distance from infection and infected alike led to approaches to AIDS not found in groups where the crisis was immediate and catastrophic. In both materials produced by these larger ecumenical bodies and in the archival material generated by Philadelphian churches, there are in essence three unique ways majority-straight Christians and their congregations discuss AIDS:

- *As a cause for global relief giving*: By 1986, the American public's concept of the scope of the AIDS epidemic included Africa, where the face of AIDS looked less like the

²⁵² Eisenstadt, 30-31.

²⁵³ Coggi, Lynne M. *A Time for Caring: November 9, 1986: A Day of Prayer for Persons with AIDS*. New York, NY: Episcopal Church, Office of Social Welfare, 1986. This Day of Prayer and its associated materials are discussed in greater detail in chapter 5,

gay, white New York libertine steaming up the bathhouse, and more like the same poor, black, emaciated child who stands for every campaign begging Western relief for African disasters. In no sense was "African AIDS" ever *good*, but it was certainly much less morally complicated from the perspective of the United States. African PWAs (at least, as they found their way before Western eyes) looked more like the West's "innocent victims" – women and children at the mercy of sexual immorality not their own.²⁵⁴ By focusing on overseas relief, denominations and various affiliated relief organizations could rally their congregants to compassionate generosity without wading into the moral quagmire of more local AIDS cases. An ocean away, AIDS could occupy the same general reason for giving as did large-scale famine and drought relief: a tragedy, yet not an immediately communicative one.²⁵⁵

- *As a flexible metaphor for the suffering and outcast*: Because of the historical distance of the biblical texts, contemporary Christians often insert more modern categories of individuals into exegeses, making the exhortations of the text more immediately relevant to the modern world. Often, these become a sort of shorthand for suffering, synecdoche much in the way Jesus employs it in Matthew 25; there, the Son of Man goes through a few general categories of the "least of these", not as an exclusive checklist, but as examples of the sort of people those who wish to sit at his right hand should help. In the same way 'Samaritan' and 'leper' instantly recognizable to first-century Judeans as an untouchable

²⁵⁴ For further discussions on the problem of "African AIDS" in the western imagination, see Patton, Cindy. "From Nation to Family: Containing African AIDS."

²⁵⁵ Lest a certain cynicism shine through here, I hurry to note that aid to Africa in dealing with its AIDS cases was (and remains) necessary, and that the most ravaged parts of the continent absolutely do not have the resources to keep up the fight independently. However, I believe it is telling that when major conservative Protestant evangelical organizations finally turned toward AIDS relief, they did so with a decidedly global outlook.

category for Jews, 'AIDS victim' functions as a category that encapsulates those most reviled and most in need. However, this kind of usage rarely encourages those who hear it *specifically* to go find PWAs and assist them; instead, it is a general call to compassion for the downtrodden, a group which includes as a subcategory those affected by AIDS. Most commonly, the individuals mentioned are not real people, but are instead hypothetical cases. This usage also assumes a worldview that thinks of PWAs as an Other, not part of the main group.

- *As an immediate community problem:* In this type of rhetoric, PWAs are neither foreign nor theoretical, but are individuals both inside and around the community. Because of the immediacy and particularity of these uses of AIDS-related rhetoric, it is difficult to generalize about their tone and content; however, they tend to be much more about direct, specific action toward individuals that congregants might know – and thus, are rarely found in denomination-wide or national materials. By the mid-1980s, Philadelphia's PWA population was significant enough that to say that AIDS-infected individuals might be living nearby was not a controversial claim. However, AIDS is often conflated in these appeals with other 'othering' factors – homelessness, drug addiction, hospitalization – making even this most immediate connection to the congregants functionally still remote and othered.

Though its position on sexuality was far more liberal and inclusive than that of the denomination to which it belonged, University Lutheran still produced sermons and weekly newsletters from this period containing examples of all of these rhetorical approaches to AIDS. While the overwhelming majority of UniLu's congregants did not identify as gay, the church's few gay members and location in the middle of downtown Philadelphia meant

that the epidemic was close enough to its doors that church leadership and laity alike felt called to take action. This does not mean that AIDS became the congregation's sole or even primary concern; for instance, of all the weekly sermons from 1986 to 1989 preserved in the church archives, only eight mention AIDS in a substantive manner.²⁵⁶ However, these mentions illuminate both how this urban Protestant church constructed its own identity in relation to AIDS and what the sufferings of the people around them meant to the relatively privileged congregation.

Pastor Jeffrey Merkel was the author of most of these sermons, many of which were typed (and sometimes given footnoted citations) and made into copies available to congregants. UniLu in the 1980s was like many white liberal Protestant churches in the modern age: open to diversity, but not itself particularly diverse. Merkel's August 21, 1988 sermon praises the practice of radical inclusivity at UniLu with a paragraph that still indicates that he is speaking not to the marginalized, but to the culturally privileged who function as the gatekeepers to that welcome:

Thinking about it, don't we have incredible opportunities in Philadelphia to accept the invitation, and to make our fellowship a meal which is a life-transforming love affair. Do the suburban churches have homeless people to sit at table with? Could a gay or lesbian man or woman venture into your home church²⁵⁷ and worship with the one they love? Would an aids [sic] victim expect to be visited, or prayed for in most American

²⁵⁶ For the most part, I've omitted from this count any of the frequent mentions that appear in these sermons and newsletters that are only brief references to the Feast Incarnate, which is UniLu's weekly meal hosted for homeless men with AIDS; most of the time, mentions of this ministry occur as part of longer lists of the congregation's various outreach programs or reminders of specific dates/times for those wishing to volunteer, not as part of larger discussions about issues surrounding AIDS. While these mentions show that the issue of AIDS never left the church's mind, they are uncontextualized enough as to be largely unhelpful here.

²⁵⁷ Use of the phrase "home church" might seem odd here, but UniLu's location and strong student outreach ministries mean that many congregants were and are university students who worship at UniLu while still maintaining membership with the congregations in the cities where their families live.

churches? Could singles talk about their different life and get a hearing in a typical "family" church? Shouldn't we expect our Church Council to challenge us to open our loving arms to our black neighbors in West Philadelphia, to refugee families from foreign wars, even to people who don't want to come to church at all, but who need to hear that God loves them into life, in their very "flesh".²⁵⁸

Merkel is of course correct that UniLu's location gives it immediate access to a number of people not traditionally considered 'desirable' by mainstream American churches. By the start of the 1988-89 school year, though, it does not seem as though this stated desire for unconditional welcome found itself reflected in the church's demographics. This is not to say that UniLu's goal of radical inclusivity is an insincere one – to the contrary, its concerns and outreach programs even to the present go far beyond providing lip service to the church's vision of Christian welcome. However, considering the othering language shown in the paragraph above, UniLu in the late 1980s seems representative of many liberal Protestant churches at the time: mindful of the larger cultural – and overwhelmingly religious – stigma against AIDS and non-heteronormativity, but still comprised of largely heteronormative individuals not belonging to any identifiable HIV risk group.

As is the case with most homilies given in mainline Protestant denominations, UniLu's sermons focus foremost on whatever biblical reading the lectionary for that day specifies, then proceed from there to address modern-day concerns as relevant to the larger message. The preacher for that day is not given a choice of scripture, but finds the relevant date in the liturgical calendar (which usually operates on a three-year cycle) and proceeds from there to the given Old Testament, Psalm, Gospel, and New Testament readings assigned to

²⁵⁸ Merkel, Jeffrey. "The Fight at the Feast." Address, University Lutheran Church, Philadelphia, August 21, 1988.

that Sunday.²⁵⁹ Thus, sermons are only on rare occasions given over to make points that do not stem directly from the readings on the days they are delivered; like the relevant UniLu sermons from this time period, most instead tend to focus on the scriptural lesson first, using contemporary examples in the service of making larger theological points.

Though scholar and guest preacher Karl Gerlach's sermon from April 5, 1987 (given the Sunday two weeks before Easter) does not mention sexuality, it does center around the figure of Lazarus, noting that the term 'Beloved' "is used three times in reference to Lazarus"²⁶⁰; this same term, Gerlach goes on to point out, both is still used in the opening address at wedding ceremonies and serves as evidence to some that Lazarus and the Gospel of John's Beloved Disciple were in fact the same person. Lazarus the brother of Mary and Martha is a figure with whom gay Christians often identify; as performance artist Peterson Toscano notes, that risen man has one of the most spectacular coming-out scenes in the whole Bible.²⁶¹ The larger sermon focuses on the issue of suffering as portrayed in the death and subsequent resuscitation of Lazarus; the second half focuses more on the use of Lazarus by ancient and contemporary Christians as a symbol of the future resurrection of all Christian believers, but the first half is more concerned about the way Lazarus' suffering illustrates a larger Christian theology of suffering, especially as that theology addresses the question of theodicy. For this discussion, Gerlach references Jesus' healing of the Man Born Blind (John 9), a story where one significant potential moral appears to be that God causes

²⁵⁹ In fact, as discussed in more detail in Chapter 5, Merkel laments in his August 13, 1989 sermon that he wrote said sermon after a long relaxing retreat; he returned, hoping to compose something to reflect on the beauty he encountered there, but instead he opened the lectionary and got Jeremiah's prophecies of woe and Jesus' foretelling his own crucifixion. Thus, he made do.

²⁶⁰ Gerlach, Karl. Sermon, University Lutheran Church, Philadelphia, April 5, 1987.

²⁶¹ Toscano, Peterson, and Morgan Jon Fox. 2008. *Doin' time in the homo no mo' halfway house: How I survived the ex-gay movement*. [S.l.]: Peterson Toscano.

suffering so that God can later allow miraculous divine power to be shown through the redemption of that same suffering.

Gerlach writes, "There is an incredible freedom in this view of suffering, but it does not sit well with many. Whether it is the Holocaust of the Jews or the Holocaust of AIDS, suffering, they say, comes ultimately from God, and it is always deserved." Though Gerlach does not name names here, no one operating as part of culture in 1987 America would have had much difficulty calling to mind voices assigning blame for AIDS to PWAs themselves. To pair AIDS with the Shoah – to use the word 'Holocaust' for both – adds another layer of moral blamelessness to the infected; while immediately post-WWII Christian understandings of Jewish culpability regarding the Holocaust were varied, UniLu's Philadelphia location and record of interfaith work strongly suggest that this comparison is meant to be a favorable one. Gerlach then points out that not even the biblical writer is willing to accept that one-to-one ratio of getting what one deserves.

The implied innocence of both Jews and PWAs, though, is not the focus of the sermon; this is, in fact, the only mention of either group. Used this way, they become, like Lazarus, remote examples of extreme suffering that dwarf and yet illuminate the more immediate struggles in the lives of the congregants. Similarly, neither is the "Another Job down the hall, dying of AIDS" in Merkel's February 7, 1988 sermon²⁶² meant to represent the particular struggles of the listener. It is instead a small reference in a larger discussion of suffering, this time centering around the figure of Job, who serves here as a model for endurance and the embodiment of the promise of God's compassion toward the needy.

²⁶² Merkel, Jeffrey. "The Bible Hospital Ward." Sermon, University Lutheran Church, Philadelphia, February 7, 1988.

Again, PWAs rhetorically become the modern lepers, this time alongside other ailments more likely than either of those to plague UniLu's congregants: "We are all dying of something, if it isn't Job's leprosy then it's Job's AIDS. Or her old age, or her cancer, or sadness." Inside that agony, Merkel argues, is the beginnings of true understanding of the Divine – though whether or not that would be worth contracting AIDS for goes unspoken. As much of a spiritual hero as Job is often made out to be, recommending his path to enlightenment is a different matter entirely.

The degree to which AIDS is presented as an immediate concern varies from context to context; it is an oddly flexible disease of signification in these sermons, able to stand with the extraordinary catastrophes as well as with the more common tragedies. Merkel's August 14, 1988 sermon focuses on temptations (using *The Last Temptation of Christ* as a particular, timely example), arguing that "sins" ranging from gluttony to murder "are not strangers even to the most 'Christian' of hearts and households. Divorce, AIDS, abuse, poverty, depression, and death and all our difficult and disarming afflictions, are all stories we find ourselves playing various roles in, not infrequently as the unsuspecting villain."²⁶³ By contrast, his October 23, 1988 sermon talks about AIDS as afflicting "kind and thoughtful people, very much like you and me, and as young as we are"²⁶⁴, but as part of a list of unexpected catastrophes, placing those kind and thoughtful people alongside individuals growing up in WWII-era Europe, children who die in routine traffic accidents, and college students who drink themselves to alcohol poisoning – tragedies far more

²⁶³ Merkel, Jeffrey. "Last Temptation." Sermon, University Lutheran Church, Philadelphia, August 14, 1988.

²⁶⁴ Merkel, Jeffrey. "To Live the Unexpected." Sermon, University Lutheran Church, Philadelphia, October 23, 1988.

specific and infrequent than divorce and death. Though it is to a much different end, these rhetorical uses of AIDS are very similar to the twofold characterization of AIDS by the Christian Right, as a disease equal parts impossibly alien and constantly threatening.

Because the truth was that the UniLu congregants at the time *were* overwhelmingly 'safe' from AIDS, considering the congregation's largely white, straight, university-educated constituency. The pastoral encouragement, then, was not for congregants to keep themselves safe, but for them to give of their time and efforts to those who had been unable to. "To be baptized," Merkel writes, following a brief mention of the Feast Incarnate in a larger sermon about money, "means to give proportionally, to others now and to others later by seeking to insure the future."²⁶⁵ By the middle of 1989, the ministry had grown such that the Tuesday evening meal was serving sixty homeless people (mostly men) with AIDS.²⁶⁶ While his encouragement toward giving focused on a goal much closer than Africa, UniLu's attitudes toward AIDS and PWAs meant that the congregants' money did not have as far to go before it found morally uncomplicated (at least, to its givers) AIDS relief.

Merkel's version of Isaiah's Peaceable Kingdom is as impossible of a goal as Isaiah's own, one that puts forth a vision of God's 'correct' order of the universe as one where AIDS does not exist: "People with Aids [sic] will have their bodies ransomed,"²⁶⁷ he writes as part of his Christmastime poetic vision of this ideal future, using terminology to describe

²⁶⁵ Merkel, Jeffrey. "A Sermon On Money." Sermon, University Lutheran Church, Philadelphia, September 24, 1989. September is often the time churches have their stewardship drives, so a sermon on money – one literally titled 'A Sermon on Money' – is not an unexpected event.

²⁶⁶ Merkel, Jeffrey. "Depression, Grief, Resurrection." Sermon, University Lutheran Church, Philadelphia, June 4, 1989.

²⁶⁷ Merkel, Jeffrey. "Stranded in a Blizzard of Grace." Sermon, University Lutheran Church, Philadelphia, December 17, 1989.

physical redemption that, in Christian discourse, refers often to Jesus. As is the case with Isaiah's original text, many aspects of Merkel's vision are simply not achievable by human intervention (vegetarian lions and cocaine turned into confectioner's sugar, as examples). While there is no evidence that this radical dream of divine restoration indicates a lack of faith in eventual biomedical solutions to the epidemic, by the December 1989, science's inability to find a cure despite nearing the end of the disease's first decade no doubt made the idea of God's immediate, supernatural healing sound even more appealing.

One of the interesting approaches to note in the UniLu sermons is that gay people are unfailingly cast in the 'just like us' light of heteronormativity, assumed to want lives that are the same loving, monogamous pairings enjoyed by mainstream heterosexuals, only with incidental matching genitalia. As such, this rhetoric recapitulates the idea that faithfulness in stable, approved relationships is not only the ideal to which everyone someday aspires, but also the opposite of AIDS. Merkel's August 13, 1989 sermon specifically states, "At least some of what I think the AIDS crisis among gays is about is the refusal of the American mainstream to accept and support Christian men in the struggle to give and receive love in a faithful manner."²⁶⁸ While the intended blame here falls squarely on the refusal of straight Christian churches to embrace their gay male brothers in Christ, it buys into a larger idea that gay people deserve the same rights as straight people because gay people are essentially the same as straight people. The model of respectability is one embraced by mainstream (and often conservative) gay rights groups whose advocacy involves presenting a picture of the gay community that is wholesome and totally

²⁶⁸ Merkel, Jeffrey. "Agitated: The Church Against Gays." Sermon, University Lutheran Church, Philadelphia, August 13, 1989.

normative – an approach that often necessitates throwing the under the rhetorical bus anyone who does not so neatly get in line. Sociologist Suzanna Danuta Walters identifies how this troubling split further marginalizes the gay community by pitting it against itself, warning that this

normalizing discourse can easily slip into a kind of fracturing of the gay community into good gays (those who feel they are "born with it," those who are in a "committed couple," those who go to church, those who have kids, those who have weddings, those who want acceptance) and bad gays (those who celebrate their preference as a *choice*, those who prefer multiple partners, those who criticize the nuclear family, those who are atheists, those who want radical social change).²⁶⁹

That Merkel himself would likely not have wanted to contribute to the fracturing Walters describes here does not make his rhetoric any less functionally divisive. Though it makes sense that someone speaking from the pulpit of a Lutheran church would support church membership and not advocate for atheism, there is little room in these hypothetical visions of committed gay male couples' arriving on church doorsteps for less familiar, more radical interpretations of gender, identity, and relationships. Valorizing monogamy also has the added effect of reassuring the congregants of their own relative safety from AIDS, adding one more benefit to the model of intimate physical expression already prescribed by mainline Protestant sexual ethics.

After stressing that culture is "totally comfortable with heterosexual sexual expression"²⁷⁰ up to and including casual jokes about sexual activity, Merkel pins a significant part of the AIDS epidemic on the corresponding cultural *discomfort* with

²⁶⁹ Walters, Suzanna Danuta. *All the Rage: The Story of Gay Visibility in America*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001. 76

²⁷⁰ Merkel, "Agitated: The Church Against Gays."

faithful homosexual expression. In that same sermon, Merkel encourages congregants to "listen closely to the people who are around you", because that will lead them to "discover who of your friends and family are the 10% who are gay or lesbian"²⁷¹. This would be a laughable instruction to gays and lesbians, who have historically constructed entire survival systems contingent upon the ability to identify the rest of that hypothetical ten percent of the population to which they already belong. But directed at an audience whose recognition skills might not be so honed by necessity, Merkel's pulpit-delivered instruction encourages them to take two categories with which they are familiar – the known normal and "the gays" – and consider the points where there might be previously unnoticed overlap. The "just like you" homosexual experience may be closer than this congregation thinks.

In fact, there was at least one gay man in UniLu's congregation during this time period, though, and he was a prominent enough member that he was called on to pen the Advent message in the November 1989 issue of UniLu's parish newsletter, the *Eyewitness*. Titled "Ubi Caritas Et Amor Deus Ibi Est", congregant Gary Byrne's piece is about his HIV-positive status and what that means to him, especially during the Christmas season.²⁷² In sharp contrast to the general jovial tone of Advent, the liturgical season of anticipation that covers the weeks leading up to Christmas, Byrne uses his piece to focus on what he calls the "last things": death, judgment, and Heaven and Hell. While he encourages readers toward hope about all of these, especially "in the light of the coming of the God who is

²⁷¹ Ibid.

²⁷² Byrne, Gary. "Ubi Caritas Et Amor Deus Ibi Est." *The Eyewitness*, November 1989, 4-5. The full queerness of this message is seen not only in Byrne's own identity, but in the liturgically anachronistic title of the piece itself; this is not a Christmas sentiment, but one historically heard on Maundy Thursday, the day before Good Friday. The title translates to 'Where charity and love are, God is there'. (The extent of Gary's visibility as a congregant becomes more apparent in issues of the *Eyewitness* appearing in Chater 4.)

where charity and love are found", this message isn't the 'home for the holidays' rhetoric that tends to characterize mainline Protestant campaigns promising warm, fuzzy feelings from the cuter of Christianity's two big festivals.

Though a layperson, Byrne mentions having studied at Harvard, meaning that while this particular theological reflection may be amateur, it is from a profoundly educated viewpoint; it is also personal, if light on the details, presumably on account of being directed toward an audience who already knows who he is. What it is *not*, however, is written for a gay audience, something reflected in how he mentions sexuality only once: "For anyone who grows up gay, becomes drug dependent and contracts HIV, renewal of honest self-esteem looks like the work of a lifetime."²⁷³ Even though the most specific examples in the piece center on Byrne and his own HIV-positive status, he universalizes his own struggle by placing it alongside other afflictions, ones likely more familiar to his heterosexual fellow congregants:

Brave and dramatic advances in medicine, combined with the human desire to deny death anyway allowed a flourishing of hedonism for a time, but the humbling scourge of AIDS has brought to the fore a deep awareness of the shortness and uncertainty of human life and a willingness to admit the realities of plague and the toll of sinful war and political slaughter. And those of us mentally preoccupied with AIDS must remember the other death-dealers: different diseases, depressions, natural disasters, addictions, mere horrible accidents and attacks on old and young. The scythe swishes fast and final.²⁷⁴

In contrast to Merkel's sermons, which go out of their way not to further heap coals on

²⁷³ I can only presume that this is an autobiographical statement, though the only part of it directly corroborated by the rest of the piece is his HIV-positive status. However, based on this assumption, I do not read this as his having presented three equivalent tragedies, equating being gay to being a drug addict.

²⁷⁴ Byrne, 5.

the victims of AIDS, Byrne's reflection is tempered by something approaching guilt; AIDS here becomes "humbling", coming on the heels of "hedonism" that, though not elaborated upon, has many of the hallmarks of the Christian Right's accusations about the hypersexuality of gay male culture. (Perhaps so as not to scandalize or horrify straight readers any further, gay bodies in this essay are almost entirely theoretical locations, absent a few sexless assessments of Byrne's own physical condition as a HIV-positive person.²⁷⁵) While never reaching the point of arguing that he or anyone else with AIDS deserves their conditions, Byrne's pleas for compassion from the Church at large read as though coming from a place of contrition. Later in the piece, he argues that the final assessment for Christians will be "based on one's relationship to 'the least,' 'the little ones,' the outcast, the lepers" – and PWAs, who occupy that same rhetorical outsider space with regards to the community. Byrne does not argue for acceptance, but compassion, using the words of Episcopal Bishop Lyman Ogilby to claim that "as long as anyone has AIDS the Church has AIDS." In that sermon (heard but uncited by Byrne), Ogilby discussed the AIDS epidemic in terms of its being "an opportunity to be counted, to be accountable, to be known as advocates of the outcast" – though not to *be* an outcast, nor to make the outcasts insiders. Here again, gays take the rhetorical place of biblical lepers, only without the added assurances of the Divine Physician that they will soon be made acceptably clean.

This piece reads, then, not only as a similar approach to the same good-gay acceptability, but as a call to compassion despite – and not regardless of – the appearance of sinfulness. Byrne defines *caritas* as "active willingness to care for the unfortunate, the unattractive,

²⁷⁵ Technically, Byrne's mention of Oliver Sacks and his tale of a broken leg brings the gay body count to two – though this is a technicality visible only through hindsight; in 1989, Byrne would have had no way of knowing that Sacks would later identify as a gay man.

even the undeserving", never specifying which of those he and others with AIDS might be. Again returning to John 9 and scriptural responses to theodicy, Byrne writes: "'Who sinned to cause this boy's blindness?' Jesus was asked, 'his parents or himself?' to which he replied that locating blame was just not the point; the thing to look for in illness is rather the power of God to hold and heal, for the glorification of the spirit of love." But to plead with others to stop assigning blame is not the same as to make a case for blamelessness, and asking someone for scraps from their table demands less of them than does asking for a seat at the same. When Byrne calls upon the church to rethink its compassion, not its boundaries, he does so from a standpoint of crisis management, not as a sustainable solution.²⁷⁶

I do not wish to criticize Byrne for his approach, which obviously comes from his heart as much as his head, or for the piece itself, which is not an academic work, but a theological reflection stemming from the experiences of a man living every day with a chronic, life-threatening illness. It is important to consider, however, the differences in arguments made – to the same congregation – from the straight pastor in the pulpit and a gay layperson in the home-delivered newsletter. While one might assume Byrne would be the more assertive one on account of his advocating for himself, his approach instead steers clear of material even liberal churchgoing Protestants at the time would have considered offensive or *too* radically inclusive. The growing awareness of AIDS as a critical social problem brought greater involvement by straight Christians in the lives of gay Christians, but did not eliminate the distinction between them any more than Paul's wishful thinking in Galatians saw the end of ethnic, class, and gender disparities in Christian communities.

²⁷⁶ Cvetkovich's discussion of approaches taken by ACT UP circles around a similar theme of unsustainable crisis action, useful only because the need for immediate intervention was so great.

Other mentions of AIDS in the *Eyewitness* from this time period either present AIDS as a part of international giving opportunities or deal exclusively with the Feast Incarnate (which began in November 1988), and most of those pieces focus on specific information that would be helpful to anyone who wanted to donate time and/or money to the ministry. "And When Did We See You Hungry?" asks the title of a piece by Purvis Bedenbaugh, the chair of the Social Ministry Committee, quoting for Matthew 25 to encourage UniLu members to address issues of food insecurity in Philadelphia by supporting ministries including the Feast Incarnate.²⁷⁷ But only in Byrne's Advent letter does AIDS speak both for itself and from inside the congregation.

Interfaith Activity

The years from 1986 to 1989 also saw a significant rise in the number of interfaith efforts martialed toward responding to AIDS, some brought together for a single service/event, some gathered for standing committees and organizations. Some of these efforts were successful in such an unprecedented way that the National Council of Churches employed these ecumenical AIDS ministries as models "for learning about how diverse Christian groups can work together in ministry"²⁷⁸. As crisis responses, these efforts were often quite effective in gathering together diverse traditions with divergent interests in the service of responding to immediate need, whether medical, political, or spiritual.

It should be noted, however, that the diversity of these efforts was frequently narrow,

²⁷⁷ Bedenbaugh, Purvis. "And When Did We See You Hungry?" *The Eyewitness*, September 1989, 7.

²⁷⁸ Gellert, 5.

resulting in a working definition of "interfaith" that could often just as easily have been substituted with "multi-denominational Protestant"; representatives from Catholic and Jewish organizations sometimes participated, but leadership from other religious affiliations beyond that can be found nowhere in these texts. Philadelphia is, of course, a city of great religious diversity, and has been so since its inception; William Penn's 1701 Charter of Privileges specifically ensured religious freedoms for anyone who acknowledged "One almighty God, the Creator, Upholder and Ruler of the World"²⁷⁹, establishing Philadelphia as a city where monotheists of all stripes could feel free to practice their religions of choice without fear of state persecution. Waves of immigration in the 1980s brought in Asian, African, and Middle Eastern cultures and religions, many of which have since established themselves as prominent figures in the Philadelphia landscape,²⁸⁰ broadening the city's scope of religious diversity beyond Penn's initial parameters, but nonetheless staying true to its spirit.

However, as reflected even from a secular perspective in the limited scope of Eisenstadt's report, 'religion' in the mind of the general American public often exists inside the boundaries drawn by the idea of 'Judeo-Christian'. "One way in which Judaic and Christian clergy could be helpful in confronting AIDS would be to come out in favor of civil and human rights of gay and lesbian people," said Rita Addessa, executive director of the Philadelphia Lesbian and Gay Task Force, in response to a reporter from the

²⁷⁹ Penn, William. "Charter of Privileges Granted by William Penn, Esq. to the Inhabitants of Pennsylvania and Territories, October 28, 1701." The Avalon Project: Documents in Law, History, and Diplomacy. December 18, 1998. http://avalon.law.yale.edu/18th_century/pa07.asp.

²⁸⁰ "America's New Religious Landscape: Philadelphia, PA." The Pluralism Project, Harvard University. February 5, 2014. <https://worldmap.harvard.edu/maps/442/info/>.

*Philadelphia Inquirer*²⁸¹ – a statement which is not untrue, but also does not take into account Philadelphians of different faiths or how their religious leaders might be able to help by doing the same. A weakness of interfaith organizations founded by members of the majority faith tends to be that these groups create spaces where, at least in theory, everyone is welcome, but not everyone is represented, not unlike William Penn's own narrow vision of acceptable religiosity. While it would be difficult to imagine, as an example, a practicing Buddhist's being turned away at the door of one of the interfaith prayer services at the time, it would also be difficult to imagine said Buddhist's being particularly comfortable with the overtly Christian liturgy.²⁸²

That being said, there was a particular value behind getting specifically Protestant (and sometimes Catholic and Jewish) voices together to create a unified voice speaking against AIDS discrimination: The loudest anti-gay, PWA-blaming voices in the country at that time were luminaries of the Christian Right, claiming authority by volume to speak for all of American Christianity – and, by proxy, God. Thus, creating a coalition of individuals that lay claim to that same tradition, a group diverse at least enough that it could not be dismissed as the mad rantings of one misguided denomination, presents an effective, visible critique of this dominant narrative about sexuality and AIDS.

What was also notable about these interfaith efforts – and which perhaps explains

²⁸¹ Schaffer, Michael D. "Churches Are Beginning To Confront Aids." *Philadelphia Inquirer*, September 7, 1986.

²⁸² This is, of course, to say nothing of full-on adoptions of one religious tradition's elements by another. One particularly amusing note is found in the August 1988 *Independence*, announcing a "Yom Kippur Day of Prayer" to its predominantly Catholic audience; the short blurb also informs readers that "Beth Ahavah will be invited to join us," as though the progressive Philadelphian Jewish community might not have its own plans for the day. (Karstetter, Ron. "From the Spiritual Life Committee..." *The Independence* 15 (Aug. 1988): 2.)

something of their demographics – is that they were explicitly supportive of sexual diversity and full inclusivity of gays and lesbians in religious life. There were at the time other AIDS organizations active in the Philadelphia area, most notably BEBASHI (Blacks Educating Blacks About Sexual Health Issues), which was founded in 1985 by Muslim nurse Rashidah Hassan "to provide meaningful information on sexual health especially sexually transmitted diseases and HIV/AIDS in particular to the African American community and other communities of color."²⁸³ In Philadelphia, by 1988, while AIDS in the black community still affected predominantly gay and bisexual men (69% of the total), cases of transmission via IV drug use and heterosexual contact were on the rise, particularly among women and children. (For contrast, in November 1988, there were thirty-seven cases of black women and five of black children with AIDS, as opposed to eleven white women and no white pediatric cases, a disproportionate infection rate even in a city with a black community as large as Philadelphia's.²⁸⁴) Though the public's perception of AIDS as a gay disease was hardly budging, reality was moving along multiple vectors, meaning that responses focused on gay communities did not always match the responses needed by communities of color, many of which have been historically resistant to LGBT inclusion, religiously and otherwise.²⁸⁵ Thus, while there were several active Philadelphian

²⁸³ BEBASHI, "Blacks Educating Blacks About Sexual Health Issues (BEBASHI) Agency Background," *African American AIDS History Project*, <http://www.afamaidshist.org/items/show/35>.

²⁸⁴ *Acquired Immunodeficiency Syndrome (AIDS) Surveillance Report - 11/01/88*. Report. Philadelphia: Philadelphia Department of Public Health, AIDS Activities Coordinating Office, 1988.

²⁸⁵ Though the issues surrounding the intersections of race and AIDS in Philadelphia are fascinating, they are incredibly complex and worthy of separate, detailed consideration I cannot give them here. For the tip of the iceberg, I recommend Jeff Maskovsky's dissertation work, "'Fighting for our lives': Poverty and AIDS activism in neoliberal Philadelphia' (Temple, 2000). In Philadelphia, 'gay' and 'black' are terms no more mutually exclusive than 'gay' and 'Christian' are, as evidenced in no small part by how MCC Philadelphia's leadership and membership have both historically been largely persons of color; neither, however, are they necessarily mutually *inclusive*, and during a time when the stigma against AIDS was predominantly connected to male-male sexual behavior, the absence of representation in these overtly gay-friendly interfaith groups from Muslims, Philadelphia's largest non-Judeo-Christian

organizations at the time whose membership would have been interested in both interfaith work and AIDS activism, affiliation with these specific interfaith groups came largely from traditions with established, vocal pro-LGBT movements: mainline liberal Protestantism, Catholic-identified groups unaffiliated with the larger Catholic Church²⁸⁶, and Reform Judaism.²⁸⁷

One of the more formal entities, the Metropolitan AIDS Inter-faith Network (MAIN), began to hold monthly meetings in 1986, styling itself as "the mainstream church's program to educate and sensitize the general population to the entire AIDS crisis."²⁸⁸ That those meetings were not well enough attended was a point of concern raised by the December 1986 *Independence*, which encouraged readers to show up at that month's meeting especially, because of its being the "first service in a predominately person of color parish," Calvary United Methodist Church (whose pastoral staff at the time was at least partly white). During that same year, MAIN held two interfaith services 'of Prayer and Healing', one on June 22nd, and the second on September 5th. According to the *Independence* the month following the latter gathering, there were representatives from both "the lesbian/gay community and traditional non-gay congregations" totaling approximately 150 people in attendance,²⁸⁹ a respectable showing for any mid-afternoon Sunday service.

religious group, is not wholly unsurprising.

²⁸⁶ The March 1987 issue of the *Independence* tactfully notes: "In an attempt to provide the Christian support of M.A.I.N. that the Archdiocese refuses to provide, Dignity/Philadelphia will assume the church's responsibility to M.A.I.N." ("M.A.I.N. Monthly Prayer Service..." *The Independence* 14 (March 1987): 2.)

²⁸⁷ By the end of 1989, other church groups and denominations had started to become more active in AIDS activism and ministries. I leave the discussion of these groups for Chapter 4, however, because their more significant involvement happened from 1990 onward.

²⁸⁸ "Main Worship Service Announced." *The Independence* 13 (December 1986): 4.

²⁸⁹ Mayes, William C. "From the President..." *The Independence* 13 (July 1986): 2. Though Mayes is not credited specifically as the author of this piece, this was during his term as Dignity's president.

Some others formed for regular meetings. In 1989, UniLu began partnering with members from other interested congregations and We the People, a secular Delaware Valley coalition of and for PWAs, to coordinate and expand the Feast Incarnate.²⁹⁰ This partnership was no doubt made more natural by how the Feast Incarnate was structured as an opportunity for stewardship, not proselytizing; longtime Philadelphian gay activist and We the People president Kiyoshi Kirumiya noted that there were "no sermons or presentations, only brief announcements."²⁹¹ On a more specifically religious note, St. Luke's opened its doors every Friday evening for an hour of "prayer, meditation, solace, comfort, thought, and caring together for all those who have dealt with and are dealing with AIDS and ARC," intended to be a "non-denominational gathering of any and all people ... religious and non-religious"²⁹²; this announcement appeared in the November 1987 *Independence* and was a convenient gathering offer for its readers, as Dignity was by then meeting on St. Luke's property.

Yet other gatherings were not orchestrated for the long term, but were designed around specific series of events. The October 1987 of the *Bellringer* describes an upcoming "incredible bout of Ecumenical activity"²⁹³ to happen in the following months: a Quaker-hosted AIDS service, an Episcopalian-hosted AIDS service, and an MCC-sponsored fifty-

²⁹⁰ University Lutheran. *Report on Feast Incarnate, Submitted to the Lutheran AIDS Network (LANET) Gathering in April 2003 in San Diego, CA*. Report. Philadelphia: University Lutheran, 2003. In the years since, though their partnership with We the People has ended, UniLu keeps the Feast going on several nights and in several locations, with the combined ecumenical help of "nine Lutheran Congregations, one Disciples of Christ congregation, one African Methodist Episcopal congregation, a local restaurant, the SEPA Synod's AIDS Awareness Network, and service organizations from two Universities."

²⁹¹ Maskovsky, 111.

²⁹² "News from St. Luke's Church..." *The Independence* 14 (November 1987): 5.

²⁹³ Gilbert, Joseph. "Pastor's Corner." *Metropolitan Community Church Philadelphia Bellringer*, October 1987, 3, 9.

hour prayer vigil concluding with a Friday-night service²⁹⁴ with possible participation from Dignity and Integrity. The Episcopal churches that comprise the Southwark Deanery collectively sponsored an AIDS Ecumenical Prayer Service on the night of November 9, 1987, announcing it in a press release that encouraged photographers and journalists to attend. Members of the Delaware Valley Quilt Project, a collective of AIDS groups and various churches, stitched for months in preparation for their panels to become part of the NAMES Project.²⁹⁵ Short-term goals allowed for addressing the immediate needs of the community without demanding an ongoing commitment from busy participants.

Without rosters and data from the events themselves (which would most likely not have been collected anyway), the degree to which the *inter* part of these interfaith happenings was successful remains unclear; there are no sign-in sheets or headcounts indicating who in attendance came from what faith community. What is present in these texts, however, is the desire for marginalized Christians to reach across denominations (and, at times, outside of Christianity altogether) to build solidarity in a time of crisis. As far as the United States goes, a certain amount of Protestant fungibility is almost always assumed: For instance, prior to offering the Eucharist, a celebrant might note that the table in question belongs not to a specific denomination, but to God, indicating that all baptized believers are welcome to partake regardless of the tradition in which they were baptized; likewise, most denominations honor (at least adult) baptisms from other denominations and do not insist that individuals be re-baptized if they move from one church to another. The more notable reaches, then, come from efforts to build coalitions across deeper religious divides.

²⁹⁴ Designed by the tantalizingly named "Experimental Liturgy Committee".

²⁹⁵ "The Names Project." *Metropolitan Community Church Philadelphia Bellringer*, May/June 1988, 4.

Gay Christian movements, however, have often been pluralist in their approaches, on account of their general status as refuge points – those who come to them from other traditions seek solidarity on matters of sexuality, with more particular doctrinal concerns a distant second. Some of the earliest members of Troy Perry's MCC fellowship were in fact Jewish, drawn to the gathering not because it filled their particular religious needs, but because it filled *any* spiritual need without demanding they reject their sexualities.²⁹⁶ Dignity's reach beyond the Catholic communities of Philadelphia, despite its steadfastly Catholic identity, reflects a willingness on the part of gay men and lesbians at the time to prioritize community over denominationalism. One should have little difficulty imagining why the abstractions of theological and polity differences might take a back seat to the practicalities of acceptance and belonging.

Praying Across Denominations

As mentioned in the previous section, on Sunday, September 5th, 1986, Philadelphia held its "Inter-Faith Service of Prayer and Healing," sponsored by MAIN, noting that it was the city's "Second Such Service".²⁹⁷ Several religious groups are listed as having "asked that their concerns be communicated", such as the Episcopal Diocese of

²⁹⁶ In 1972, four of these members formed a smaller, MCC-supported group for gay Jews in Los Angeles, which became the still-extant Beth Chayim Chadashim. (Eger, Denise L. "Embracing Lesbians and Gay Men: A Reform Jewish Innovation." In *Contemporary Debates in American Reform Judaism: Conflicting Visions*, edited by Dana Evan Kaplan, 180-92. New York, NY: Routledge, 2001.)

²⁹⁷ "AIDS...An Inter-Faith Service of Prayer and Healing." Religious service, First Unitarian Church of Philadelphia, September 6, 1987. While the cover of the bulletin itself gives the date as Sunday, June 22nd, at the first such interfaith service, the interior text sets the event in September; though I do not have a full, final extant bulletin of the June service, the fact that such a prominent date would (surely accidentally) not have been changed from the first service to the second suggests that a great deal of the text was probably preserved from one event to the other.

Pennsylvania, Old First Reformed Church, and University Lutheran; the presiding pastor of the service, Rev. James Dick, is identified as affiliated with Second Baptist Church of Germantown; the service was held at First Unitarian. Though these congregations were surely progressive enough at the time, as they would have had to have been in 1986 to join an AIDS interfaith service, they were not majority-gay congregations; absent from the lists of sponsors are Dignity, MCC Philadelphia, and St. Mary's.

Notably absent, too, are "gay", "lesbian", and any other words about sexuality, save a brief mention of "venereal disease" during one of the readings; the only reference to risk groups happens in a different reading, a letter from the Philadelphia AIDS Task Force's Organizing Committee, which claims that "fifty-six percent of all reported AIDS cases in Philadelphia occur in people of color"²⁹⁸ (a statistic which, by 1986, was starting to reflect significant heterosexual and pediatric transmission, but still represented predominantly gay and bisexual men). References to "prejudice" and "judgment" occur without specific context. The "WHAT CAN I DO?" section on the second page of the bulletin encourages readers to become advocates for people with AIDS, but does not assume they themselves are infected. The first item on the list – "Get informed. (The more you know about AIDS, the calmer you will be.)"²⁹⁹ – is a kind of reassurance that only works by assuming that the "you" in question is already relatively safe from risk, and that knowledge will reaffirm that safety. Given the rise in both frequency and pitch of secular gay AIDS activism at the time, 'calm' was not the general order of the day from communities with the largest infection rates.

²⁹⁸ Ibid., 4.

²⁹⁹ Ibid., 2.

Though MAIN's two co-chairs were Kathy Jones, a registered nurse, and Roger Broadley, rector of St. Luke and the Epiphany, MAIN itself was founded in conversation with the gay community; Jim Littrell's archives preserve a letter dated March 11, 1986, to him from Rev. Broadley about how he, Littrell, and MCC pastor Joseph Gilbert might be collectively interested in forming an AIDS interfaith network, giving an example of a Baltimore group that formed with similar goals in mind:

In Baltimore, the effort led to an actual network with a four-fold purpose...to insure pastoral care for persons with AIDS and their families, to educate the community by dispelling myths and fears about AIDS, to advocate for justice in health care, housing and job security for persons with AIDS and those in high risk groups, and to promote the development of a hospice for persons with AIDS.³⁰⁰

Among the members Broadley lists of the Baltimore interfaith network are two gay groups, though religious groups make the much larger part of the coalition. The MAIN prayer services list only individuals and groups with particular religious affiliations – understandable, considering the overtly religious nature of the services themselves.

Here again, AIDS as the "gay disease" concern of straight congregations produces a rhetorical treatment of the disease that glosses over the specific theological needs of the population most likely to contract or have contracted the virus. Surely no one at this service had any uncertainties about the primary at-risk community being discussed, despite the lack of overt mention, and no doubt few would have joined the Sunday-afternoon service without some specific, personal reason to do so. Likewise, the inclusion of this bulletin in Jim Littrell's archives and the subsequent tally of attendance in the following month's

³⁰⁰ Rodger C. Broadley to James H. Littrell. March 11, 1986. The Church of St. Luke and the Epiphany, Philadelphia, PA.

Independence indicate that no small percentage of those at the service would have been gay men and lesbians; advertisements of the June service on official letters from MCC pastor Joseph Gilbert suggest the same was true for previous ecumenical gatherings.³⁰¹ So why talk only around their presence?

As in many other contexts, AIDS's association with gay men in particular creates a problem for congregations and denominations whose official stances on sexuality do not always make easy their congregants' desires to engage in compassionate outreach to sexual minorities. One of the service's readings paraphrases from a statement from the Board of Global Ministries of the United Methodist Church, which "notes the use of the AIDS crisis by some religious persons as an opportunity to preach the belief that God inflicts illness as a sign of divine judgment and punishment."³⁰² This is not so, claims the Board, but its reasoning is that a "recent resolution says that AIDS is a medical condition requiring a compassionate response by the church"³⁰³ – and not that the people most likely to be infected are in need of no divine judgment or punishment. To enter into that particular conversation would likely lead the discussion away from support in the campaign against AIDS, to the alienation of not only less-accepting lay individuals but clergy representatives of denominations who would risk their careers by openly contradicting their organizations' official stances. Leaving gay men as an unspoken presence in the liturgical text, therefore, neatly bypasses unsettled (and often deeply divisive) issues of sexual diversity in an attempt to foster unity in a time of crisis. However, it is also reflective of a kind of inclusivity that can only happen if the "deviant" parties are willing to be quiet – not unlike

³⁰¹ Ibid.

³⁰² "AIDS...An Inter-Faith Service" (1987), 5-6.

³⁰³ Ibid., 6.

the way in which the Philadelphia Archdiocese's ministry toward gay congregants focused on celibacy as a first step toward reconciliation with the larger church. Here again, gay and lesbian Christians ran up against the limits of compassion as an approach to inclusivity.

One of the readings for this particular service, in the midst of others discussing specific approaches to volunteer work and poetic prayers for compassion in the midst of hardship, is a reading from "a local tract" titled "Plague Hits Philly' Is there a cure? What will it cost? Does Anyone care?...":

A plague has hit Philly. The plague is sin. It is an all-consuming plague that leaves nothing but devastation in its path. Sometimes the plague shows up as AIDS or venereal disease. Other times it rears its ugly head in the breakup of a family or in the arrest of a prominent citizen. But whether out in the open or shut up in the closet of one's own mind, the plague works its terrible destruction.³⁰⁴

It is difficult to imagine, by 1986, an openly gay-run prayer service including a reading such as this, one which, absent its larger context, seems to connect AIDS and sin. Here again is the one-ailment-among-many formulation found in predominantly straight Christian discussions of AIDS, a way of condemning-without-condemning that lets (gay) PWAs off the hook for contracting the virus because they are, by juxtaposition, no worse than a high-profile Philadelphian put in jail for unspecified reasons. Such praise is enough to make a homosexual long for the days of merely being a leper.

Another ecumenical prayer service took place on November 9, 1987, at Trinity Memorial Church, an Episcopal congregation.³⁰⁵ Mentions of sex and sexuality here are few and far between, but their presence comes mostly in the form of readings designated

³⁰⁴ Ibid., 5.

³⁰⁵ "AIDS Ecumenical Prayer Service." Religious service, Trinity Memorial Church, Philadelphia, November 9, 1987.

"reflections," which were delivered aloud by various service participants. A reading from an August 1987 issue of *Newsweek* mourns "the death of a generation of gay men"; an anonymous account from February of that year gives a Roman Catholic priest's thoughts as he sits by the bedside of a dying gay man, the kind he'd learned to deal with as "nonpersons"; a brief first-person view, dated that July, from a HIV-positive gay Philadelphian man mentions the death of his lover, then gives thanks for his AIDS buddy. (The first was read by a member of Integrity/Philadelphia, the second two sequentially by a BEBASHI representative.)

Segments like these are frequent in more mainstream religious books on AIDS at the time, such as Michael Christensen's *The Samaritan's Imperative* (1991) or William E. Amos, Jr.'s *When AIDS Comes to Church* (1988), both of which were written by straight clergymen to (predominantly) straight congregations in denominations that regarded homosexuality as not the divine ideal for humanity.³⁰⁶ These kinds of stories humanize and evoke compassion for gay men without necessarily voicing approval for their sexualities or the choices they made that led to their contracting AIDS. These approaches do not absolve the sufferers from God's judgment, but rather move it farther down the priority list: "Before the church can moralize and confront sin in a person's life," Christensen writes as he explains his reasons for his work, "it must first become a healing agency of God's grace

³⁰⁶ I have picked these two books as representative of writings about moral, religious responses to AIDS from these years, though they are certainly neither the beginning nor the end of this genre. Several shorter pieces on the same theme ran in Christian publications, including *Commonweal* ("The Meaning of AIDS", June 1988), *Christian Century* ("We are the Church Alive, the Church with AIDS", January 1988), *U.S. Catholic* ("Aids for AIDS", August 1988), *Christianity and Crisis* ("Incarnate Suffering and Faith" and "Silence in the Sanctuaries", July 1988), *Christianity Today* ("AIDS: Evangelical Attitudes", November 1988), and *America* ("Slaves for God", January 1988; "Maybe Too Little But Not Too Late" and "AIDS: The Shape of the Ethical Challenge", February 1988).

and forgiveness to those who are struggling. Judgment and condemnation are never called for in the church's mission; understanding and support are in keeping with the call."³⁰⁷ Tear-jerking accounts of loss skirt the question of judgment handily by forefronting the need for compassion from the fortunate/uninfected. They also reduce the terrifying to the pathetic, telling stories of gay men brought low by malady, pleading for Christian help and understanding instead of cross-dressing and trying to pass antidiscrimination legislation. The dying gay men in these stories are not "nonpersons", but neither are they allowed to be wholly themselves.

All these are negotiations familiar to gay Christians, as they are no doubt to all modern lepers. Distilling a person into a story or a metaphor evokes a compassion intended to respond more to need than to any potential distaste for that person while maintaining a space in which honest disagreements are permissible. In *Love the Sin*, Jakobsen and Pelligrini note that "the distinction between sin and sinner, act and person seems to provide a middle ground, a compromise in which all are welcomed to the table, no one has to change deeply felt moral convictions, and, better still, no one gets hurt."³⁰⁸ But as they go on to explore, that middle ground is more a useful fiction than a helpful reality. It is an unsustainable condition, where the dominant group agrees to accommodate the deviant so long as the latter do not insist on recognition of themselves as anything but deviant. It is not hard to understand why many gays and lesbians at the time did not feel particularly welcomed by a tolerant ideology that only accepts an individual so long as that individual can distance themselves from the distasteful parts of the group to which they belong.

³⁰⁷ Christensen, 14.

³⁰⁸ Jakobsen, 1.

Those who wonder why LGBT Christians might choose to join LGBT religious groups and denominations instead of staying inside even outwardly welcoming churches should consider the degree to which even outwardly supportive majority-straight congregations and denominations often did not address AIDS in a way that addressed most of the people with it. The list of names in the June 1986 prayer service bulletin includes representatives identified with mainline Protestant traditions such as the United Methodist Church which have put on trial and even defrocked ministers whose pro-LGBT actions were seen as contrary to the church's teachings on sexuality.³⁰⁹ While there is absolutely no exclusionary language in these services, neither is there anything that might be considered dangerously inclusive. On the one hand, not only is this good for those wishing to participate in compassionate rhetoric while still keeping in line with their denomination's respective stances on sexuality, it allows for closeted members of those congregations to participate in gatherings like this without necessarily outing themselves by association – not unlike the way the newsletter disclaimers cautioned readers not to make inferences about the sexualities of anyone connected with the material contained therein. On the other hand, gay men and lesbians wanting specific reassurance about their collective status as children of God, despite horrendous, prevalent rhetoric to the contrary, would have left the church without.

However, one should not dismiss the significance of ecumenical communal prayer, especially for those in need of solidarity, understanding, and healing. At times,

³⁰⁹ Nor is this a thing of the past; nine UMC pastors are currently facing various investigations and punishments for participating in a July 2015 wedding of another UMC pastor forced to resign because of being in a relationship with another man. (Hahn, Heather. "Pastor Expects Trial for Same-sex Wedding." *United Methodist News Service*, September 28, 2015. <http://www.umc.org/news-and-media/pastor-expects-trial-for-same-sex-wedding>.)

interdenominational events did not silence gay men and lesbians, but led to their being the largest parts of gatherings. May 26-28 (Memorial Day Weekend), 1989 saw a fifty-hour AIDS prayer vigil held at First Unitarian Church.³¹⁰ The weekend concluded with a candlelight procession from MCC's evening service to the Liberty Bell, hosted by We the People, at which, the *Bellringer* reported, nearly a third of the MCC's total congregants gathered, forming a majority of the people in attendance. The uncredited author of the newsletter item on the vigil (likely Rev. Gilbert) recalls the name of Rev. George Freeman, a Lutheran pastor with AIDS who had passed away, then describes the conclusion of the weekend as a poignant reminder of those lost: "This act of remembrance on Memorial day [sic] Weekend, not for people who had died in military battle, but in a battle for their own lives and well being seemed a gentle bittersweet moment that those present will not soon forget."³¹¹ This same column characterizes vigils like these as important work in the middle of crisis, a necessary part of the congregation's response to AIDS – but a companion to, and certainly not a substitute for, outreach and activism being done elsewhere

Church-Coordinated Solutions and Education

Despite efforts to disassociate AIDS and sexuality, AIDS never entirely stopped being rhetorically a "gay disease" – especially considering the degree to which Philadelphia's gay and gay-friendly Christian communities spearhead practical solutions beyond their parish doors. The Fourth Bi-Annual Leadership Conference of the Department of People of Color

³¹⁰ "Memorial Day Weekend 50-Hour AIDS Vigil of Prayer." *Metropolitan Community Church Philadelphia Bellringer*, June/July 1989, 5.

³¹¹ "AIDS Vigil." *Metropolitan Community Church Philadelphia Bellringer*, July/August 1989, 4, 12.

in UFMCC (Universal Fellowship of Metropolitan Community Churches), which took place in November 1988, contained a poignant lesson about the Church's imperative in a time of AIDS, recounted in the *Bellringer*:

Ms. Dee Simpson, coordinator of the MCC Los Angeles AIDS Ministry, made the biggest impression with her simple demonstration of the way AIDS can devastate any of our lives, and the role of the spiritual and the physical in AIDS ministry. She gave Rev. Delores Berry a bite of hot pepper and then asked her if she needed anything. When Rev. Berry said she needed a drink of water, Ms. Simpson took Rev. Berry's hand and said "Let's pray about it."³¹²

Such thinking did *not* characterize the responses of the Philadelphia-area churches during the late 1980s, where the pastoral and the pragmatic often went hand-in-hand. "Community outreach and social action are two of the goals and/or purposes of any Dignity chapter," proclaims the August 1988 issue of the *Independence*, as it reminds its readers of the food basket for donations at its Masses. "The number of persons with AIDS in the metropolitan area continues to increase and to stretch all agencies to the limits,"³¹³ says that issue's call to action; a follow-up message in the next issue specifies that there are "about 1,400 PWAs in the metropolitan area", most of whom "(75%) are gay and bisexual men," though "there are about 350 who include children, hemophiliacs, drug addicts and those who contracted the disease through blood transfusions."³¹⁴ A number of other announcements about food drives and offerings appear throughout these bulletins and newsletters, with the collected items designated for various AIDS charities and hospices; some, such as the August 1988 newsletter item, specify donatable items most useful to

³¹² Peter, Sheila. "4th Bi-annual Leadership Conferene of UFMCC Dept. of People of Color Held in Loveland, Ohio." *Metropolitan Community Church Philadelphia Bellringer*, December/January 1988-9, 2, 12.

³¹³ "Food Basket at Mass..." *The Independence* 15 (August 1988): 1.

³¹⁴ "Food Basket at Mass..." *The Independence* 15 (September 1988): 5.

PWAs, whose particular medical conditions necessitated items not commonly associated with basic food pantry donations: Ensure, "portable toilets and walkers", "single bed linens", and "cranberry and apple juice only".³¹⁵

Dignity frames this outreach opportunity in specifically religious terms: "Can we as a Christian community allow them to end their days without the same food that we take for granted? Can we turn our backs on our friends, brothers, and sisters the way society has turned their backs on our lifestyle for so many years?"³¹⁶ The answer that Harvey C. Grider, Executive Secretary and author of this officer's message, is no doubt hoping for is *no* – and indeed, responses to these calls from members were so positive that Dignity became "the major source of food for PWAs" in Philadelphia.³¹⁷ Grider encourages Dignity members, who "all go to or past a food store during the week" to increase their grocery purchases by just a few donatable items "as part of our religious mission in life". "We have a moral obligation," he writes, "to help those who are in need in any way that we can."³¹⁸ This moral obligation, however, is not only a Christian one, but one for specifically gay Christians, whose duty it is not to reproduce the injustices they themselves have suffered; the fact that the donation organization remains under the auspices of the Spiritual Life Committee shows an understanding between faith and action. Whether or not the PWAs in question are from the gay community is irrelevant – indeed, Grider mentions watching infected children suffer, and the earlier statistics on hemophiliacs and drug addicts show an awareness of the general spread. The greater mission remains unchanged.

³¹⁵ "Food Basket " (1988), 1.

³¹⁶ Grider, Harvey C. "Officer's Message..." *The Independence* 15 (October 1988): 1.

³¹⁷ Ibid.

³¹⁸ Ibid.

Practical health education became a paramount concern, as churches continued not only to provide opportunities for learning to their own congregants, but openly invited members of the public to attend, sometimes teaming up with secular organizations. The Unitarian Society of Germantown's *Communicator* announced in its March 1986 issue that its regular Sunday 'Coffee and Conversation' on April 6 would feature Beth H. Shindell, M.S.S., as a representative of the Philadelphia AIDS Task Force. "She will talk about the medical and psycho-social aspects of AIDS,"³¹⁹ the brief note promises in characteristically pragmatic Unitarian fashion. In 1986, as one of its "Education Nights," Dignity hosted an "AIDS information & discussion night" following its May 18th Mass³²⁰; in that same newsletter that announced this, the 'Community Bulletin Board' section includes a prominent call for participants in a study, headed by Purdue University, focusing on "elements of perceived risk, factors affecting stress, support networks, coping, and risk-related behavior."³²¹ The July-August 1989 *Bellringer* announces on its first page a call from the National Institutes of Health for HIV-positive participants in drug trials,³²² and Germantown Mennonite supported the Penn Affiliates Clinical Consortium's grant application to become an NIH-sponsored Community Program for Clinical Research in AIDS.³²³ Dignity's Emmaus Outreach and Samaritan Projects combined in September 1989 to give a training and support program to individuals ministering to homebound and hospitalized persons,

³¹⁹ "Coffee & Conversation." *The Communicator* 21 (March 21, 1986): 1.

³²⁰ Education Committee. "Education Committee." *The Independence* 13 (April 1986): 4.

³²¹ "Community Bulletin Board: Participation Sought in Nationwide Survey." *The Independence* 13 (April 1986): 2.

³²² "HIV Positive?" *Metropolitan Community Church Philadelphia Bellringer*, July/August 1989, 1.

³²³ The Consortium's application was turned down, but one of its members, Rob Roy MacGregor, M.D., wrote Germantown Mennonite's chairman, Robert Good, a letter afterward that thanked the congregation for its interest and support. (Rob Roy MacGregor to Robert Good. October 12, 1989. The Penn Affiliates Clinical Consortium, Philadelphia, PA.)

especially those with AIDS.³²⁴ A letter, dated May 13, 1988, from Anna Forbes of ActionAIDS thanks Dignity/Philadelphia for presenting her with the group's Community Service Award at its fifteenth anniversary dinner celebration.³²⁵ Dignity advertised and hosted several PFLAG (Parents and Friends of Lesbians and Gays) meetings during this period, many of which had AIDS-related discussion topics, such "An AIDS Love Story: Parents Caring for Their Sons," an evening hosted by three parents of gay men who had died of AIDS.³²⁶ Churches continued to offer the use of space for secular AIDS organizations; a mailer designed to look like a festive birthday party invitation announcing the one-year celebration of ActionAIDS gives the location as St. Luke and the Epiphany.³²⁷

While general pleas for support in the public sphere were present in many bulletins and newsletters, some groups organized for specific community action. When the general manager of a local CBS affiliate, WCAU-FM, called for the closure of "gay bookstores, bathes [sic] and bars ... the recriminalization of sodomy and, the renaming of AIDS to GRID (Gay Related Immune Deficiency)," the *Independence* encouraged a campaign of letter-writing to the station, its sponsors, and the FCC.³²⁸ In fact, the issue of terminology is something to which Dignity in general was attuned; at the November 1988 conference for Region III (the region to which Dignity/Philadelphia belongs), delegates not only "approved development of a Regional HIV Ministry Committee," but suggested a language shift as they "recommended chapters in region [sic] begin using HIV infected instead of

³²⁴ "Emmaus Outreach - Samaritan Project." *The Independence* 16 (October 1989): 3.

³²⁵ Anna Forbes to Michael. May 13, 1988. In *The Independence* 15 (July 1988): 4.

³²⁶ "From PFLAG..." *The Independence* 15 (May 1988): 2.

³²⁷ This card, found in Littrell's archival material, gives the date of the celebration as Thursday, October 22, 1987.

³²⁸ *The Independence* 13 (July 1986): 4.

AIDS/ARC."³²⁹ In 1986, the Philadelphia AIDS Hotline, a project of the Philadelphia AIDS Task Force, acquired a new telephone number (bringing its total number of lines to two) and expanded its hours of operation, leading to a half-page ad and column in the May *Independence* issue of that year asking for volunteers to staff shifts.³³⁰ Minutes from meetings of the Episcopal Diocesan Committee on AIDS include such concerns as responding to the Helms Amendment and protesting law enforcement's use of a list of PWAs in policing Philadelphia's 12th Police District.

The October 1988 *Independence* announced From All Walks of Life, "the annual pledge walk to raise funds for AIDS direct care services and education", noting that primary recipients of the money raised would be ActionAIDS, BEBASHI, and the Philadelphia AIDS Task Force, while the secondary recipients would be the AIDS Library of Philadelphia, the Children's Hospital of Philadelphia, Congress de Latinos Unidos, Inc., and We the People with AIDS/ARC.³³¹ Notable here, too, are the listed corporate sponsors: Dell, Independence Blue Cross, and the Graduate Health System³³². As a fundraising event, From All Walks of Life (now the Annual AIDS Walk Philly, sponsored by AIDS Fund Philly) was a fairly prominent and successful venture – the *Independence* notes that the 1987 walk raised \$250,000 – and the inclusion of corporate sponsors as prominent (and un-health-related) as Dell signifies a shift about AIDS in the larger culture. The ordeal of the 1980s had not burned all the stigma away from AIDS, but by the end of AIDS' first

³²⁹ "Region III Convention Held..." *The Independence* 15 (December 1988): 2.

³³⁰ "AIDS Hotline Needs You." *The Independence* 13 (May 1986): 3.

³³¹ "From All Walks of Life." *The Independence* 15 (October 1988): 6.

³³² Since 2007, part of the University of Pennsylvania's medical system. (Goldstein, Josh. "Penn Health System to Buy Graduate." *Philadelphia Inquirer*, January 24, 2007. <http://www.philly.com/philly/sports/colleges/penn/5334246.html>.)

decade, the disease was no longer an untouchable monster, nor were the people infected with it.

Even as he calls his congregants to join the Memorial Day fifty-hour AIDS prayer vigil, MCC's Rev. Gilbert notes that it is "appropriate" that Christians and congregations "mark different facets on this crisis in different ways," especially given threats by the Philadelphia City Council to solve its budget crisis by halving AIDS funds. Though Gilbert approves enough of prayer as a solution to support the vigil in question, he condemns the idea that such a vigil should be enough to form the entirety of one's good Christian response to AIDS, referencing Jesus' charitable formulations from Matthew 25:

So let us, of course, do those things that are foundational for us – to be at prayer, to claim healing for ourselves and others, to celebrate communion, and to remember those who have gone before. But let us not, when people are hungry, debate that hunger. When people are virtually imprisoned by fear, let us not simply pray for their release. When people, people with AIDS have inadequate clothing, let us not discuss their appearance. When people are sick, let us not just thank God for our health. When there are those who are homeless—right here in Philadelphia, some with AIDS, so [sic] not—let us not just proclaim the spiritual shelter of the love of God. When people are lonely let us not leave them alone to pray for them. If people are hungry, and lonely and cold and we are feeling so holy because of our rich prayer life we will not really have gotten it right. And, Jesus won't really recognize our activity but will ask us, "Where were you?"³³³

Where were Philadelphia's Christians during the end of AIDS's first decade? For many, the answer was: front and center. As hubs for action, gathering places for ecumenical and even secular events, sources of information for members of their communities, organizers of social programs for those in need, visible leaders of larger public events³³⁴, and centers

³³³ Gilbert, Joseph. "Pastor's Corner." *Metropolitan Community Church Philadelphia Bellringer*, June/July 1989, 3.

³³⁴ Philadelphia's "Parade 90", one of the largest parts of the city's whole 1990 Pride celebration, gained

of support for the frightened and the dying, these churches and other organizations helped form the backbone of Philadelphia's early responses to AIDS.

These responses and organizations were not completely unproblematic, as many were forced because of denominational affiliation to toe certain theological lines. Others created their responses while still visualizing AIDS as a malady of 'them', not 'us', prescribing fiscal and social action without ever addressing larger problems of church inclusivity. Still others worked to abstract AIDS from the bodies of gay men, not only expanding the vision of the epidemic's reach to address new risk groups but choosing not to address the specific community still most at risk. Efforts to voice positive Christian responses had not served to drown out anti-gay sentiment against AIDS, which was still prominent among rhetoric from the Christian Right. And by the end of the 1980s, the relationship of gay Christians to most mainstream denominations was still cautiously fraught at best and downright hostile at worst.

However, in the latter half of the decade, there began to be more – and more visible – positive, proactive Christian responses to AIDS in Philadelphia. These responses came both at the direction of larger denominations and from individual congregations themselves, but they began to show evidence of engagement with the epidemic both from within and from without gay and lesbian populations. Some focused on the theological, while some focused more on the practical, yet most all of these responses sought and end to two facets of the epidemic: the medical and the social.

tax-exempt status by affiliating itself with MCC Philadelphia – something which made REASON, a Philadelphian gay and lesbian atheist group, none too happy. ("MCC Favoritism by Philadelphia Parade Officials Alleged by Reason." *GALA Realist*, June 1990, 1.)

The longer AIDS went on, the longer it became clear that it would go on. The clearer its status as a long-term issue became, however, the less mysterious and terrifying it became, both to the gay community and to the larger population. While science had not found a cure for AIDS by the close of 1989, it had learned a great deal, and had in turned shared much of that knowledge with the public. When it reached the public through the filter of these gay and gay-friendly churches, it often came with theological reassurances that while AIDS was not a condition to be trifled with, neither was it worthy of condemnation. Instead, working both with and against their affiliated denominations (depending on said denomination's official stance), these groups took steps to end the stigma against AIDS quite literally in Jesus' name.

CHAPTER 4: "AIDS IS NOT THE FLAIL OF GOD, NOR IS THE WORLD HIS THRESHING-FLOOR": 1990-1992

The last decade of the twentieth century brought more than a small amount of apocalyptic fears and hopes into the public consciousness as the world began its final ten-year tick into Y2K. This itself was another event of entirely human signification, of course; as astrophysicist Neil deGrasse Tyson delights in pointing out, measurements of time and designations of things like new years (much less new millennia) have little relevance on a cosmic scale.³³⁵ But the end of days loomed large in the imagination, from those anticipating the return of Jesus to those worrying about what would happen the moment when all the computers would suddenly jump back to the start of the old century instead of plowing ahead into the new one.

AIDS played a part in this eschatological fervor, especially from the Christian Right. Sontag characterizes *plague* as "the principal metaphor by which the AIDS epidemic is understood", a catastrophic, widespread phenomenon to be "understood as inflicted, not just endured."³³⁶ The perceived intentionality behind the presence of AIDS, like that of epidemics before it, made it a useful reality for those for whom the world's general, inexorable decline is in fact good news. The very existence of this lethal, widespread, and ostensibly targeted plague fell neatly into visions of the end times as an event heralded by divine signs and portents; the way in which even the medical language about AIDS described it as a disease of "stages", an inevitable trajectory from contraction to

³³⁵ Tyson, Neil deGrasse. Twitter Post. December 31, 2015, 8:21 PM.
<https://twitter.com/neiltyson/status/682748531543797760>

³³⁶ Sontag, 132-3.

conclusion³³⁷, mirrors the way in which many Christians and denominations understand God's unshakable control over history from Eden to Armageddon. This desire goes beyond what Sontag identifies as the perceived Western desire for a *tabula rasa* – an ostensibly secular "chance to begin again"³³⁸ – to a longing that *nothing* begin again, but that everything be transformed through its completion into the static state of unchanging perfection curated directly by the Almighty. Thus, a full decade into the epidemic, prominent voices among the Christian Right were citing the presence and spread of both homosexuality and its associated consequence, AIDS, as sure signs of the impending eschaton, leading theorist Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick to declare "Christian fundamentalism [...] not only antievolutionist but recklessly oriented toward universal apocalypse."³³⁹

And yet, already by 1990, the eschatological terror that had gripped the rhetoric of gay Christians during the early 1980s is almost absent from the texts produced by those communities, and nowhere to be found in the rhetoric of gay-friendly straight Christians. A decade of research, activism, and growing familiarity with the reality AIDS had not eliminated concerns, but had mitigated them severely. Whatever HIV might have looked like, and whatever toll it might have taken on individual lives, it no longer looked like the end of the world at large. Instead, hopeful, enduring rhetoric begins to emerge most prominently during the texts produced during this period, giving encouragement to survivors and their loved ones.

This chapter, the last of the three divisions of time, deals with the final definitive

³³⁷ Gumpert, Matthew. *The End of Meaning: Studies in Catastrophe*. Cambridge Scholars Publishing: Newcastle upon Tyne, UK, 2012. p.319

³³⁸ Sontag, 175.

³³⁹ Sedgwick, Eve Kosofsky. *Epistemology of the Closet*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1990. 129.

settling of AIDS beyond the conceptual borders of the gay community, as changing infection patterns meant that it would never be a 'gay disease' again. Science and medicine had not found all the answers to the epidemic, but many of the disease's most crucial questions had at least provisional responses. Here, I look at how this corresponded to a greater awareness in the American public at large of the AIDS epidemic as matter of social reality as much as biological reality. The changing public perception had consequences across the board, particularly for the prevailing religious discourse; as the "blame the victim" rhetoric of the Christian Right began to wane in frequency and volume, language from the gay Christians represented here became less reactive and apocalyptic. Though members of the gay community were still sick and dying, the tone of the texts changes sharply. Looking at representations of sex and sexuality, I identify ways that these groups began to articulate sexual ethics that treated homosexuality not as a value-neutral prospect, equivalent to heterosexuality, but as a condition of particular divine favor.

Finally, I examine how the last major change during this period was the growth of allies; secular causes, celebrities, and other Christian groups began turning their attention and efforts toward the epidemic. In large part, this can also be attributed to how the change in infection patterns and risk groups significantly divorced AIDS from homosexuality, making negative attitudes toward gays and lesbians no longer a barrier to activism. Changes in both culture and public policy increased funding to AIDS-related causes and research, and began to secure protection from discrimination based on seropositive status. With so much of the work of AIDS now being done outside the church walls, these gay and gay-friendly Christian groups could concentrate more on other concerns.

Changing Perspectives, Shifting Responses

While an openness to gay-relevant causes did not necessarily mean an increase in gay membership, many majority-straight congregations in Philadelphia, by the end of the 1980s, were engaging in activism and outreach that benefitted members of the gay community and individuals with AIDS (who by the end of the epidemic's first decade were becoming more and more clearly not necessarily of the same group). Despite not being a church with a majority-gay congregation, the Episcopal Church of St. Luke and the Epiphany's opening of its facilities to gay community groups established it as a place of welcome both in life and in death. During the 1980s, while many medical professionals across the country still refused to give proper care to PWAs, many churches similarly refused to bury them after they died, or did so only reluctantly and with no mention of the deceased's friends, lifestyle, or illness. The churches that were willing to perform this last sacrament, then, often found themselves handling requests to conduct funerals for PWAs who might have been friends or family members of a congregant, or might have had no connection at all to the church beyond their next of kin's nowhere else that would let the service be done.

St. Luke has in its main office a hardbound, handwritten register of all the funerals conducted in or by the church, listing information for each deceased including name, birth and death dates, and cause of death, all signed by the current rector – by the 1980s, Rodger C. Broadley.³⁴⁰ As one would expect from what was at the time a small, aging congregation, there are only a handful of deaths listed for each year 1982-1987, and most causes of death

³⁴⁰ Register of interments, St. Luke and the Epiphany. I should note that this is not the only volume; as befits a church of St. Luke's age and stature, there are several volumes of church birth, marriage, and death records that stretch back centuries. I was not permitted to see the names in this most recent volume, only the side listing cause of death, place of interment, date of death, and presiding minister.

are those associated with the elderly. Then two entries appear on that page – one for 1988, one for 1989 – list the cause of death as AIDS; both records indicate the deceased was cremated, and the former indicates that 1988 was not necessarily the year that person died, but was when the disposition of their ashes occurred.

This willingness to conduct funerals for PWAs changes the entire shape of the register. In 1990, twenty names on the register have 'AIDS' listed as the cause of death, more than the number of recorded deaths for *any* cause from 1983 to 1987 combined. 1991 has ten, 1992 has twelve, 1993 has three, 1994 has nine, 1995 has fifteen, 1996 has five, 1997 has eight, and only by 1998 is AIDS no longer overwhelmingly the cause of death cited by this register – one which by then reflects a much larger congregation than was present ten years previous.

In many ways, this register reflects the path of the AIDS epidemic through the United States' LGBT communities. By 1990, the stigma around the disease had certainly not disappeared, but it had abated – and more to the point, public health and media efforts had done much to divorce the automatic connections between 'gay' and 'AIDS'. HIV+ figures such as Ryan White had come into the public eye during the late 1980s, presenting narratives that expanded public understanding of the disease, one which included sympathetic "innocent" victims who suffered from the stigma and lack of support for research initiatives; shortly after White's death in April 1990, Congress passed the Ryan White Comprehensive AIDS Resources Emergency Act, designed to provide public funding to low-income individuals and "localities that are disproportionately affected" by

the epidemic.³⁴¹ Celebrities such as Elton John began to hold large and visible fundraisers for AIDS research, such as April 1992's Freddie Mercury Tribute Concert for AIDS Awareness. Both the approval of AZT as a treatment drug in 1990 and the growing use of drug cocktails thereafter began to make HIV for many a dangerous, communicable, and yet manageable condition. And in 1992, the CDC rewrote its diagnostic criteria to include female-specific symptoms, a practical concession to how AIDS could no longer be realistically thought of as simply a gay male disease with the occasional outlier case.³⁴² This upward trajectory would continue through 1995, when the fine-tuning of drug cocktails affected a sudden and staggering change in the life expectancy of many PWAs.³⁴³ Though AIDS still did not (and does not, as of this writing) have either a cure or vaccine, enough had changed that by the end of 1992 – despite the fact that the number of reported cases was that year at a record high³⁴⁴ – the disease was on its way to no longer being the same apocalyptic threat it had been before.³⁴⁵

³⁴¹ U.S. Congress. *Information about the Ryan White Comprehensive AIDS Resources Emergency Act of 1990: Title I and Title II, the Care Act, Public Law 101-381, August 18, 1990.* 101st Cong. Cong. Bill. Rockville, MD: U.S. Dept. of Health & Human Services, Public Health Service, Health Resources and Services Administration, Bureau of Health Resources Development, 1991.

³⁴² Castro, K. G., J. W. Ward, L. Slutsker, et.al. "1993 Revised Classification System for HIV Infection and Expanded Surveillance Case Definition for AIDS Among Adolescents and Adults." *Clinical Infectious Diseases* 17, no. 4 (January 1993): 802-10.

³⁴³ France, David, T. Woody Richman, Derek Wieseahn, Tyler H. Walk, Stuart Bogie, Luke O'Malley, Peter Staley, and Larry Kramer. 2013. *How to survive a plague.* New York, NY: Sundance Selects.

³⁴⁴ Stewart, Patricia A. "Social Work in HIV Care: A Labor of Love in Philadelphia." In *A History of AIDS Social Work in Hospitals: A Daring Response to an Epidemic*, edited by Barbara I. Willinger and Alan Rice, 51. Chicago: Haworth Press, 2003.

³⁴⁵ Which is not by any means to say that AIDS is no longer a danger in this country or in any other, nor is it to claim that all people everywhere now have access to the correct prevention information, treatment options, and long-term care necessary to bring the epidemic to an end for good. Indeed, there are many valid criticisms to be made of the way that AIDS's no longer being a disease with wealthy, white gay men in its crosshairs has drawn attention away from it, especially in terms of activism and money that would have benefitted low-income communities, persons of color, and trans* and other gender-nonconforming individuals. Those criticisms, however, are not within the immediate scope of this inquiry, and shall have to be left unaddressed for the time being.

To understand what AIDS looked like by the 1990s to Christians who were not themselves in or in significant proximity to high-risk groups, one need only turn to the September 1991 issue of the University Lutheran *Eyewitness*, which contains a full-page piece by congregant Max Johns entitled "AIDS and University Lutheran Church".³⁴⁶ The bulk of the piece, however, is not so much about connections to the specific congregation as it is about practical information about AIDS itself – not much from a medical standpoint, beyond a few grim mentions of its prognosis, but from Johns' perception of its place of cultural significance:

AIDS means different things to different people. To quote a gay rights activist, AIDS is "a condemnation to celibacy or death." To the Haitian Revolutionary International Group, AIDS is "an imperialist plot to destroy the Third World." To a writer for the National Enquirer, AIDS is "a Soviet plot to destroy Capitalists." To Senator Jesse Helms, a major formulator of ethical principles for millions of Americans, AIDS is "a creation of the media, which has sensationalized a minor health problem for its own profit and pleasure."³⁴⁷

The variety of the (uncited) quotes reflects, rightly or wrongly, an expanded public understanding of the social significance of AIDS. No longer is the discussion bookended neatly by pitting gay activists against the anti-gay Moral Majority; by this point in the epidemic, the spectrum of impact and accusation has broadened such that a more complete picture by necessity must also address the complex and often interrelated issues of

³⁴⁶ Johns, Max. "AIDS and University Lutheran Church." *The Eyewitness*, September 1991, 4.

³⁴⁷ Ibid. Many Russian responses toward AIDS during the first decades of the epidemic accused the capitalist West of creating the virus as a tool of weakening Soviet powers; as an epidemic of signification, AIDS has often been used as international political rhetoric, employed to demonize opposing countries by accusing them either of being infested with it or having started it. For a full accounting of how intelligence agencies in the Soviet Union used disinformation to accuse the United States of creating AIDS and using it as a weapon, see: Boghardt, Thomas. "Operation INFEKTION: Soviet Bloc Intelligence and Its AIDS Disinformation Campaign." *Studies in Intelligence* 53, no. 4 (December 2009).

globalization, economics, political systems, news media, and public health policy, to name a few. A few paragraphs later, Johns claims that the infection rate for gay men has slowed, but is spiking among IV drug users, women infected by men through heterosexual contact, and pediatric AIDS cases; while this is a very rough epidemiological sketch, it is in line with statistics from the Philadelphia Department of Health (discussed in the next section). This is a layperson's understanding of the complexity and trajectory of the epidemic, but it is miles away from the helpless confusion that abounded ten years before it. Information in the public discourse had broadened from raw practical concerns about safe sex, transmission, and isolated risk groups, and had grown to encompass concerns about AIDS's diversity of signification. Whether or not Johns' characterization of these viewpoints is correct is beside the point; that he can cite a variety of perspectives from recognizable sources means that a decade of AIDS had changed everything, including AIDS itself.

However, the whole report is still contextualized religiously by a question at the bottom of the page, one enclosed inside a bold black rectangular outline: "How do you feel called to address situations in the areas of your life which conflict with your faith?"³⁴⁸ Alone, this is an interesting yet unremarkable question, one which has no doubt been posed to Christian communities since there were Christian communities for it to arise within. Set in the context of this informative page, however, it draws a direct line from AIDS to the discomfort felt by many straight Christians at the time about gay and lesbian issues – without either justifying or condemning that discomfort. The whole article is a call to both awareness of the epidemic and compassion for PWAs, ending with several paragraphs of

³⁴⁸ Ibid.

praise for the Feast Incarnate and the "some two dozen" congregants who volunteered regularly. Said question tips UniLu's hand with regards to its church's demographic attitudes; if the supplied answer to the question is to take UniLu's ready-made opportunities for discipleship, then a second question arises: How might doing so be in conflict with one's faith? Only if the perception remains that AIDS is somehow a deserved condition would it thus disqualify an individual with it from compassionate relief.

Despite the encouragement to congregants to examine their discomfort, the call to action at the end of Johns' piece – especially in light of regular newsletter calendar reminders with Feast Incarnate volunteer information – reflects a model of compassion that declares that conflict of secondary concern. The most defining characteristic of the homeless men served by the weekly meal is that they are in need, and this need trumps other personal characteristics some congregants might find distasteful. Description of the volunteer opportunity as 'discipleship' connects with no further effort the act of serving these men with the idea that it is what Jesus and his most immediate followers would have done, without ever having to engage with the theologically much thornier question of what might have been in conflict with Jesus' own faith. While it is hard to quite slot this way of thinking in with Kowalewski's taxonomy, as the concept of exile here is being avoided far more than embraced, it still contributes to an attitude of non-judgment sufficient to getting good works done.

Though its significant involvement with the Feast Incarnate served as a means of extending Christian compassion to PWAs, UniLu's most direct engagement with the human cost of the epidemic was more personal for many of the congregants and can be seen most clearly in these texts on the front of the November 1991 *Eyewitness*, where a front-page

piece by Pastor Merkel entitled 'Black Stars in the Carpet' eulogizes parishioner Gary Byrne. Byrne, whose smiling photograph features prominently just above the title, wrote the newsletter's 1989 Advent message, reflecting on matters of death and life from the perspective of a gay man living with AIDS, as presented in chapter 3. In these pages, Merkel tells two stories: first, of the previous year's Easter service, when Byrne's careless jubilation while swinging the thurible spilled hot ash, burning black marks like stars into the sanctuary carpet; and second, of Byrne's joyful funeral, which came only a month before the start of the liturgical season leading up to Christmas:

Blessed Gary. We didn't do a three-sixty for your memorial service, though we should have, for it was just like Easter, singing "The Strife is O'er, the Battle Done." We sang our hearts out, we wept and laughed; we missed you like crazy.

And now, again, we journey into Advent. Death. Judgment. Heaven and Hell. Caritas, amor. Watching, waiting. You gave us an early Advent this year, with you we watched and waited, helplessly, hopefully, lovingly, tenderly.

Well, Gary, nobody at this church will ever get a memorial plaque better than yours, black stars in our more-orange-than-red carpet, like the Milky Way spilled across the wintry sky. Signs of your presence.³⁴⁹

No other congregant during this period is remembered in the *Eyewitness* so prominently, at such length, or with such deep, genuine affection – and from the collective language throughout Merkel's memorial, it is clear that the pastor was not the only one mourning the loss. Yet for all the piece tells of Gary's person and character, including a reminder of his HIV-positive status, absent is any mention of his sexuality – the sinner deeply loved, the sin (if it is indeed such a thing) left only hinted at.³⁵⁰ The coded language describing

³⁴⁹ Merkel, Jeffrey. "Black Stars in the Carpet." *The Eyewitness*, November 1991. 11.

³⁵⁰ Byrne is also memorialized by St. Mary's, which in April 1992 ran a small note in its church newsletter remembering him and Grant Davis, "both former parishioners of St. Mary's [who had] died recently of

Byrne's flamboyance and theatrical nature needs little work to decipher, but at the same time use of these euphemisms skirts the potential difficulties of putting overt references to homosexuality in the newsletter of a church with a significant family population.

The presence of this loving remembrance, however, seems notable in large part for its existence at all. To eulogize someone so prominently – on the front page of the newsletter sent to all members' homes – is to claim them as a vital part of the church, one which will be missed. Both the central placement of Byrne's Advent piece in the November 1989 *Eyewitness* and Merkel's touching column after his passing not only show how a majority-straight church might be open to gay members, but address a less obvious issue: how a gay man might choose to be a member of such a congregation over joining the MCC, Dignity, or other organizations with larger LGBT participation.

Next to Godliness

By the 1990s, the AIDS crisis was far from over, but its face was starting to change. For the first decade of statistical reporting, cases in Philadelphia and the surrounding area were overwhelmingly among gay and bisexual men. By 1991, however, activism and information in the gay community had begun to have an impact on the number of new infections; the annual number of new AIDS cases among men who have sex with men (MSMs) plummeted from just under 700 in 1991, to 523 in 1992, to 394 in 1993, and has not risen above 300 in a single year since. In 1992, however, the number of cases attributed to IV drug use spiked to 731, falling in years thereafter, but only coming close to the

complications of AIDS." Ironically, this little blurb credits Gary, with no further explanation, as having saved St. Mary's from burning down. *St. Mary's Parish Newsletter*, March/April 1992, 2.

infection rates of MSMs again in 2003. Similarly, during that same time period, new infections involving heterosexual transmission began to rise, in 1996 passing cases linked to male-male sexual contact, and in 1999 overtaking the new infection rates among IV drug users.³⁵¹ In Philadelphia, AIDS's practical status as a gay plague was all but disappearing, replaced by other vectors of concern.

In many ways, AIDS put the previous progressive trajectories of gay rights in the United States on hold, as supporters found their rhetorical struggles for acceptance turned into actual life-or-death battles for health care, drug trials, funding, and recognition. John-Manuel Andriote's *Victory Deferred* tracks many of these changes, arguing from its very title that the AIDS epidemic gave rise to a series of setbacks in gay civil rights activism, causing proponents to change their tactics to respond to allegations of contamination and danger. This visibility and (often media-managed) terror of AIDS brought questions of sexuality into homes and churches into which an openly gay person might never have set foot. And after "AIDS brought the gay community *as* a community out of the closet,"³⁵² the shift in infection patterns in the early 1990s did not push gay Americans back in, but left them in a place where greater exposure meant a platform for arguing not only against exclusion, but for inclusivity. While, as the title of his work suggests, Andriote is not of the opinion that all the changes resulting from responses to the AIDS epidemic were positive for the gay community, he ultimately identifies significant benefits to queer Americans from having such visibility forced upon them. Being in the limelight not only began to

³⁵¹ Schwarz, Donald F., Nan Feyler, and John Cella, et. al. Report. Philadelphia: AIDS Activities Coordinating Office, Philadelphia Department of Public Health, 2008. www.phila.gov/health/pdfs/HIVAIDS_Report.pdf. Notably, "Injection Drug Users" and "Men Who Have Sex with Men" are tracked as separate, non-overlapping categories.

³⁵² Andriote, 2.

normalize gay culture to the rest of America, it forced many queer perspectives to re-articulate themselves as a part of the mainstream discourse.

Thus, it is not surprising that what emerges from texts in the materials from predominantly gay churches during this third division of time, then, are several justifications for same-sex sexual activity as a morally correct Christian activity. It should be noted, however, is that these arguments are not so much emerging as they are *re-emerging*, if they had even entirely vanished in the first place; queer Christian rhetoric of homosexual orientation as God-ordained goodness predates the AIDS epidemic by decades, and it, not worries of disease, is what dominates much of the political rhetoric from the publications of gay Christian groups dated prior to 1982. Following the onset of AIDS epidemic, however, that goodness comes conditional with a morality clause – *safe* gay sex is godly sex. One of the prominent differences between the gay Christian texts and those produced by predominantly straight congregations/groups is how explicit the texts are willing to be to this end. Part of this is no doubt due to the difference in demographics; more traditional congregations included families, many with small children, the parents of whom might not have appreciated detailed instructions about sexual behavior or advertisements for gay clubs interspersed with other church-related information. To be open and affirming about the idea of sexual diversity is one thing, but to be confronted with the particulars of it is often another.

But an established culture of sexual explicitness pervasive in the male-dominated Dignity³⁵³ increasingly is reflected in its texts. The January 1990 issue of the *Independence*

³⁵³ Primiano.

includes a small informative box of asterisk-studded text on the same page as the officer's message: "SAFER SEX MEANS USE A CONDOM * only use latex condoms * put condom on after penis is erect * use only water-based lubricants * leave about one-half-inch space at the tip"³⁵⁴ – advice that notably runs counter to the Catholic Church's positions on both male-male sex acts (implicit, given the publication) and prophylactic use. The message with which is it paired, written by Diane Williams, the Senior Regional Representative, calls Dignity to lead the way as the Church and other religious groups define "ethical human sexuality"; while this may seem a curious juxtaposition at first, the practical instruction and the ethical directive are indeed interlinked. A few pages later in the same issue, the report from Dignity's Education Committee announces both plans to work on a new information brochure about AIDS and an upcoming "Hot and Healthy Safe Sex Workshop"³⁵⁵. Groups such as these had been providing their members for years with risqué (and dubiously church-appropriate) information produced by secular sources³⁵⁶; more and more now, they were publishing and publicizing their own.

As presented by these texts from Dignity, safe sex is not only a smart choice or a practical choice – it is an *ethical* choice. Moreover, it is an extension of the capacity for ethical behavior demonstrated among gays and lesbians in response to the AIDS epidemic. Scholar E. Michael Gorman refers to this capacity as *diakonia*, deliberately using this New Testament term for service in order to connect the early Christian community with the "message of liberation and the experience of community" Gorman identifies as experienced

³⁵⁴ "SAFER SEX MEANS: USE A CONDOM." *The Independence* 17 (January 1990): 2. As any school-aged attendee of a church-sponsored dance knows, you must always leave space for Jesus.

³⁵⁵ Education Committee. "From the Education Committee." *The Independence* 17 (January 1990): 7.

³⁵⁶ Primiano, 92.

through the caregiving demanded by AIDS.³⁵⁷ In writing about "The Bible and Homosexuality" for the *Bellringer*, MCC congregant Dan Lee addresses the 'clobber verses' in general, chalking up Old Testament prohibitions to God's condemnation of male prostitution and inhospitality, and laying the blame for New Testament negativity at the feet of a poorly translated Paul. Instead, Lee writes, while the Bible has nothing to say in support of continued discrimination against gay men and lesbians, it has much to say on the subject of the righteousness reflected in same-sex ways of loving and caregiving:

Sacrificial and energetic responses of lesbians and gays to those with AIDS vividly indicates God's presence in love among God's homosexual creation. [...] It is clear to whoever wishes to take an honest look that we, the sexual minority children of God, live in the realms of God's Presence and enjoy the Almighty's love and grace.³⁵⁸

While the Catholic Church with which Dignity aligned itself might not have found great difficulty agreeing with the core theology behind that statement, the sticking point remained sexual expression, seen vividly in how previous demands for celibacy from gay Catholics were met with scorn from Dignity. Instead of making the question of judgment a moot point, as seen in earlier responses, language like this insists that God not only is not punishing gays and lesbians, but dwells among them, guiding them in positive human relationships. Therefore, the "ethical human sexuality" Williams calls for defining would by necessity include not only sexual orientation and identity, but sexual activity itself. The less immediately rhetorically contaminative that sexuality could be made – via the realities of shifting infection patterns and modifying gay male behavior – the more that argument

³⁵⁷ Gorman, E. Michael. "A Special Window: An Anthropological Perspective on Spirituality in Contemporary U.S. Gay Male Culture." In *Que(e)rying Religion: A Critical Anthology*, Gary David Comstock and Susan E. Henking: 337. New York: Continuum, 1997.

³⁵⁸ Lee, Dan. "The Bible and Homosexuality." *Metropolitan Community Church Philadelphia Bellringer*, December/January 1990-1, 3.

could be made not only through crude punning among the Dignity's attendees, but through public entreaties through the discourse of Christian sexual ethics.

Safe sex as it is presented here is also, however, a very male choice, as was the case with much of the sexuality discussed in the context of Dignity. While sex tips for how to properly ensheath an erection in latex would theoretically be helpful to anyone likely to come into sexual contact with a penis, the majority of women associated with Dignity at the time were not in that category. "The whole meaning and purpose of Dignity's existence," according to one of the lesbians to whom Primiano spoke, "was a masculine interest in having gay sexuality blessed by the Church."³⁵⁹ And as with earlier conflicted feelings about shutting down the bathhouses, promotion of strict single-partner lifelong exclusivity does not appear where one might imagine it to slot into the rhetoric, either as one safe sex tip among others or as further proof of the divine correctness of male-male sexual relationships. The gay sexuality ostensibly looking for blessing here does not seem to include a more standard heteronormative Christian demand for mutual monogamy. Thus, it isn't difficult to imagine why lesbians, stereotypically the most enthusiastically coupling-focused of all thinking sexual beings, would voice complaints about the type of sexual practices Dignity was advocating, instead of cheering on the idea of securing ecclesiastical approval for non-heteronormative practices of *any* stripe.³⁶⁰ Articulating a comprehensive Christian (homo)sexual ethic is not possible if only half (or thereabouts) of the gay community is represented by it.

³⁵⁹ Primiano, 98.

³⁶⁰ Historical rifts between gay men and lesbians have often formed specifically over issues of sex and promiscuity, leading some lesbians to respond to AIDS by declaring it not their problem. Some of the MCC's pushback against this mindset can be seen in Chapter 2.

Considering the stigma surrounding AIDS and its association with sexual transmission, it might seem more reasonable to avoid mention of the epidemic altogether in trying to make a Christian argument for the acceptability of same-sex sexual expression. However, texts such as Williams' message in the *Independence* not only engage with the history of the epidemic, but use that history as proof that the gay and lesbian community is part of God's blessed family. Such is often an approach made by proponents of liberation theology, who preach what Goss terms a "preferential option for the oppressed" that claims God is most concerned with the well-being of marginalized and impoverished people, as they are the ones most in need of said concern.³⁶¹ With many Christians beyond the gay community working to diminish the stigma against AIDS, arguments like Williams' could turn from fending off accusations of God's judgment to claiming evidence of God's direct blessings. This argument for greater inclusivity rests on the idea that not only should gays and lesbians be allowed a place at the Lord's table for their own sakes, congregations and denominations should expect that the presence of queer individuals can improve the lives of all Christians.

Williams writes: "I believe that we are more than just lesbians and gays trying to find acceptance in the Church. Rather, that we are Church and we are its leaders of tomorrow."³⁶² To be sure, this mirrors similar rhetoric from Dignity ten years previous; the fifth biennial international convention of Dignity International, held September 4-7, 1981 in Philadelphia, included workshops with titles such as "The Gay Catholic's Gift to the Church of the '80s" and "Gay Ministry: Broader Than Gay", both of which have descriptions indicating that discussion would focus not just on how to better the lives of

³⁶¹ Goss, 121.

³⁶² Williams, Diane. "Officer's Message." *The Independence* 17 (January 1990): 2.

gay and lesbian Catholics, but how the continued presence of gays and lesbians betters the Church at large.³⁶³ Ten years of the AIDS epidemic, however, had made the gay community inescapably visible, providing a picture of homosexual life in America that did not stop with the freewheeling, hedonistic depictions found in the *Moral Majority Report*. While not all depictions of gay men and lesbians during this period had been particularly positive, they had been diverse and unavoidable at once.

No complete articulation of these concepts appears in these pages, but these texts contain the beginnings of pro-gay sexual ethics – not just 'good as you' formulations treating all sexualities as equally valid, but ones convinced of a particular divine goodness to same-sex sexual behavior, as shown through responses to AIDS. While I believe that while this would of course have been possible without the catalyst of AIDS, having to deal with an epidemic so tied to traditionally 'immoral' sexual practices forced gay (and, to a lesser degree, lesbian) Christians to examine not only the logistics of their sexual arrangements and encounters, but what they meant. Accusations that churches contributed to the spread of AIDS by refusing to sanctify healthy, monogamous same-sex partnerships cannot be proven or disproven. However, vast numbers of gay men during the 1970s and '80s were presented with heteronormative sexual ethics that demanded they deny their same-sex desires; that gay male communities would up valorizing gay promiscuity to a near-militant degree indicates a wholesale rejection not only of heteronormative demands, but the idea of any sexual order beyond the hedonistic. While calls to develop a Christian ethic that is as much *homo* as it is *sexual* predate AIDS by a fair margin, they take on new

³⁶³ *Fifth Biennial International Convention*. Proceedings of 1981 Dignity International Convention, Philadelphia. Washington, D.C.: Dignity, 1981. 1-4.

poignancy after a decade of a sexually transmitted virus that carried an even more virulent strain of blame. Now that the Christian Right's rhetoric was no longer directing the public discourse on AIDS, there was room to stop the adamant denial of AIDS as God's judgment, and thus begin to examine the ways in which while relentless sexual promiscuity did not call down the plague, it certainly exacerbated its spread. Within that honest self-reflection, there is room to begin constructing a true gay Christian sexual ethic – not the denial of all same-sex desires demanded by the Christian Right, nor the ostentatious rejection thereof demanded by late-1970s gay male culture, but one informed by the lessons of compassion individuals of *all* genders and queer sexualities learned through the sufferings of AIDS.³⁶⁴ If Fortunato's exilic construction is correct and the margins are sometimes the only sane place to be, then it stands to reason that the margins have something to teach the center, turning rejected blocks into cornerstones. Thus, if there is no theology of AIDS, as Perry boldly states, then there is still opportunity to do theology *around* AIDS, foregoing the questions of why the epidemic struck in order to focus on how to move righteously forward.

Services of Healing and Wholeness

Of course, not all considerations of bodies during this period were necessarily erotic. During the same Eastertide that Byrne's enthusiastic disregard of the dangers of combining gravity and burning incense memorably scarred UniLu's flooring, members of MCC Philadelphia gathered to walk the way of the cross in downtown Philadelphia on Good

³⁶⁴ For several examples of how this sexual ethic played out among Christian laity in the years following this dissertation's focus, see Andrew Yip's 1997 sociological work, *Gay Male Christian Couples: Life Stories*.

Friday, "reflecting on the passion of Jesus and the AIDS crisis."³⁶⁵ At noon on that day, April 13, 1990, parishioners were to gather near the Independence Hall visitor's center and walk a path marked with the Stations of the Cross "In the Life of Persons Living with AIDS".³⁶⁶ Connecting the traditional memorial of the suffering and death of Jesus with the day-to-day life of PWAs elevates the hardships of the latter by putting them on par with Jesus' own trials, suggesting by juxtaposition that the suffering of those with AIDS is not, as the Christian Right contends, deserved divine retribution, but has more in common with Jesus' unjust torture and execution at the hands of ungodly authorities. Such an approach rings of liberation theology's preferential option for those on the margins, seeking to align Jesus with the oppressed not only in sympathy, but also in identity. Likewise, remembering Jesus' sufferings by walking through areas of Philadelphia with high infection rates calls upon an embodied theology uncommon nowadays to most staid, respectable mainline Protestant denominations in the United States – and not only to an awareness of bodies in general, but to pained, despised, dying bodies. While a walk through downtown Philadelphia is not so radical by historical standards of Christian body mortification, the act of becoming visible in the face of twinned stigma reflects both divine empowerment and communal support.

The healing of those bodies, both physically and spiritually, continued to form the theological core of many churchwide and interfaith services. As in the Gilbert's early mentions of healing in the MCC text, the focus is not on miraculous physical restoration

³⁶⁵ "Lent and Easter Activities." *Metropolitan Community Church Philadelphia Bellringer*, March/April 1990, 1.

³⁶⁶ "Holy Week Services." *Metropolitan Community Church Philadelphia Bellringer*, March/April 1990, insert.

(though that possibility is not discounted), but on the healing of the spirit that makes both the infected and those who love them able to endure. At St. Mary's Episcopal, Sunday, October 14, 1990, saw a "service of healing and the celebration of the Holy Eucharist" commemorating "The Presiding Bishop's fifth national day of prayer for persons living with hiv/aids [sic] and those who minister to them".³⁶⁷ Missing, however, are this service's predecessors' meditations on death; instead, as with the funerals of Gary Byrne and William Way before him, elements of the service focus more significantly on optimism and resurrection than on grief.

The three scripture readings listed in the bulletin are for Psalm 23, Philippians 4:4-13, and Matthew 22:1-14. The first is familiar to most Jews and Christians (and probably many others) as a short psalm of comfort during crisis; it is often used as a reading in times of bereavement, particularly funerals. The New Testament readings, however, are texts of a different tone. In the Philippians reading, Paul tells his early Christian readers not to be troubled, but to focus on positive matters and rejoice in the Lord; this excerpt's last verse is the line oft quoted by Christian athletes, "I can do all things through him who strengthens me." The Matthew passage contains Jesus' Parable of the Wedding Banquet, where a king holds a banquet for his son, but when the invited guests do not arrive, the king sends servants out into the streets to find people to fill their seats. Said parable's oddly grim little twist at the end³⁶⁸ keeps it from being appropriate to actual weddings, but neither is it a

³⁶⁷ A Service of Healing and the Celebration of the Holy Eucharist: The Presiding Bishop's Day of Prayer for Persons Living with HIV/AIDS and Those Who Minister to Them (religious service, The Church of the Savior, Philadelphia, October 14, 1990).

³⁶⁸ "But when the king came in to see the guests, he noticed a man there who was not wearing a wedding robe, and he said to him, "Friend, how did you get in here without a wedding robe?" And he was speechless. Then the king said to the attendants, "Bind him hand and foot, and throw him into the outer darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth." For many are called, but few are

traditionally funereal text; instead, its message is one of how when the "proper" people reject God's invitations to Christian fellowship, they will be punished and their places in that fellowship will go to those, "both good and bad" (v.10), whom the message reaches instead. In the context of speaking to Christians affected by AIDS, the message could not be clearer: The "proper" members of the Christian Right have rejected God's invitation, which those in attendance are now present and available to receive. This is the preferential option for the poorly behaved, as it were, who do not measure up to worldly standards but who are nevertheless beloved by God.

Hymns during the service also take a different textual tone from more traditional choices in times of grief. The processional, 'Thine arm, O Lord, in days of old' (567³⁶⁹), is a hymn of healing that speaks of God's continued triumph over sickness and death, referencing many of Jesus' gospel healing stories. The Gradual hymn, 'There's a wideness in God's mercy' (469), promises welcome and healing with God through Jesus; the first two verses are positioned as a response to both the psalm and epistle readings, and the third comes after the gospel reading. The Communion hymn is the ever-popular "Amazing grace, how sweet the sound" (671), which, like Psalm 23, is heard often at Christian funerals, but in other contexts as well.³⁷⁰ And the service's final hymn, "Lord, you give the great commission" (528) mentions healing only briefly, and there not as a promise to the believer, but as one of many things Jesus commanded his followers to go and do as part of his

chosen." (22:11-14, NRSV)

³⁶⁹ Hymns in the bulletin are not listed by name, but by number according to *The Hymnal 1982*, which was the official hymnal of the Episcopal Church U.S.A. at the time.

³⁷⁰ The differences in hymnals and musical heritage across Christian traditions can often make finding music for multi-denominational services difficult, but it is difficult to find a Christian who can't muddle through at least the first verse of "Amazing Grace".

teachings. The twist in the rhetoric as the hymns go along is notable – as this is a service of healing, hymns about Divine restoration of bodies and souls are to be expected, yet to take those promises and commission the participants to take them out into the world not only honors the caretakers mentioned in the title of the service, but encourages even the sick to join their ranks. Like the idea of a gay- and lesbian-influenced ethic of sexuality, this too suggests the possibility of divine social inversion, where the perverts become the models of good behavior and the sick become the doctors.

The sermon, given by James Littrell, encapsulates some of the changing attitude among gay Christians as to the experience of having lived so long in the shadow of AIDS that the theological rhetoric of surviving the immediate crisis has become no longer as necessary, and has begun to be replaced with expressions of long-term endurance. Though all three Bible readings precede the sermon, Littrell's copy quotes an excerpt from the Philippians reading at the top, drawing a direction connection from its discussions of sustaining grace to the rest of his message: "Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice! ...And the peace of God, which passes understanding, will keep your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus." (4:4,7) After describing a visionary dream in which he is reunited in joy with many deceased friends, Littrell continues:

Yesterday at a memorial service for yet another friend, I said one of the strangest experiences of the last ten years – the AIDS years, I think of them as – was an increasingly common experience I have that I am watched over and guided by angels. Mostly they are, like the people in my dream, people I know. Sometimes, though, they are absolute strangers whom I nevertheless have grown to trust. Sometimes their presence is quite benign, and other times they buffet me, preceding me and following me like grace. They often are concrete and individual. One is my friend Frederick, whose Indiana twang comes zinging into my consciousness

several times a week, often with admonition, occasionally with warning or praise. All my angels are part of the dance I dream. All are real. All are instruments of peace. All invite me into that peace.³⁷¹

After nearly a decade of infection and death, metaphors of grief and comfort give way to images of sustaining hope, peace, and wholeness. Though the loss is present throughout Littrell's sermon, it is not equated with absence, nor is it colored by fear, whether for himself or for others. Such is not presented in the sense of *at least the worst is behind us*; Littrell acknowledges that "AIDS is inevitably going to cut much wider and more horrible swathes [sic] in our human communities,"³⁷² an assessment which, even to the present moment, few would dispute.

Instead, the message becomes *we will survive this*. Calling the previous decade "the AIDS years" not only characterizes that time through the lens of the epidemic, but indicates that Littrell has already begun to regard said time period as a past event. The apocalyptic language that characterized many of those "AIDS years" has waned, at least as much as it ever does in Christian discourse; eschatological themes are always present in Christian contexts, even as the intensity of the rhetoric varies. When compared to Christian rhetoric from the first part of the ten-year span, however, Littrell's sermon seems peaceful and calm.

Between the sermon and the Eucharist in this service comes a responsive Litany of Healing, the full text of which is printed in the bulletin. The congregational response, "O God of love, heal your people," is the same after every statement except the last one, when it becomes, "O God of mercy, bless us and heal us; make us whole." The litany

³⁷¹ Littrell, James H. "Sermon Delivered by the Rev. James H. Littrell at the Diocesan Service of Healing on the Presiding Bishop's Day of Prayer for Those Living With and Affected By AIDS, the Cathedral Church of Our Savior, Philadelphia, Sunday, October 14, 1990." Address, The Church of the Savior, Philadelphia, October 14, 1990.

³⁷² Ibid.

characterizes "those suffering from AIDS" as "men, women, children, straight and gay, believers and non-believers – all your children."³⁷³ Beyond that inclusivity, there are no discussions of statistics or real-world cases, no warnings of how bad the epidemic might get if left unchecked – while UniLu's predominantly heterosexual congregants may have responded more urgently to statistics about AIDS's spread beyond the initial identified risk groups, no one affiliated with a church like St. Mary's, with several gay congregants and clergy alike, would have needed a reminder at the close of "the AIDS years" of just how devastating it could be.

Following the Litany of Healing came The Laying on of Hands³⁷⁴, a collective and communal act of visible, physical support – though as the bulletin explains in italics beneath the section heading, this should not be understood as a guarantee of physical restoration:

All are invited to come forward to the healing stations to join in prayer and the laying on of hands; not only the sick but also those who care for them, to pray for their healing, and those who minister to them. We express our desire to be healed by God's power – healed of fear, anxiety, prejudice, and, if it be God's will, of physical and mental anguish and disease. Those who come forward may pray in silence or share concerns with the ministers. Family members and friends may join the ministers in the laying on of hands. Those participating as healers are bound to absolute confidentiality. Whatever communication, prayer or counsel that may be exchanged is between God and the person seeking healing.

In his sermon, Littrell makes mention of this, preparing the congregation for what is not common practice in many Episcopal traditions. In doing so, he also notes that what is

³⁷³ Ibid.

³⁷⁴ The back of the bulletin credits three Ministers of Laying on of Hands: Rev. Rodger C. Broadley, of St. Luke and the Epiphany; Rev. David M. Gracie, Episcopal priest and then-chaplain at Temple University; and Sr. Kathleen Schneider, of the Catholic Religious Sisters of Mercy.

being shared here is not the promise of miraculous bodily cures, but the opportunity "to share with one another the healing power of God's peace, to extend to one another the urgent call of God toward wholeness and well-being."³⁷⁵ In one sense, this is a bit of moving the theological goalposts, standing in the middle of a tradition with several scriptural stories of physical restoration while telling individuals not to get their bodies' hopes up. And yet, this falls in line with understandings of Jesus' miracles as being that of restoring individuals not only to health, but to their communities. This language also represents an approach to the epidemic that understands the fallout of AIDS does not stop with the bodies that have it. Healing is for the sick, but sickness can be more than a virus; persons with AIDS are here no more in need of being made whole than are those who are afraid of them.

The power and importance of this communal worship structure can be seen in its replication in contexts that are not explicitly religious. On June 21, 1992, Philadelphia's gay community celebrated Gay Pride Day, which kicked off with an event sponsored by the Pride organizers, We the People, and UNITY, Inc. (a grassroots Philadelphian organization consisting of and focusing on the needs of black men). Though all three of these groups are had secular identities and missions, the language the *Griot Press* uses to describe the service is anything but: The "emotional program" involved musical selections from performers who "gave praises to the creator in song" and "brought those in attendance to their feet in giving praise in song"; the service also made time for some participants to read aloud the names of loved ones lost to AIDS.³⁷⁶ This, combined with the degree of

³⁷⁵ Littrell, "Sermon Delivered".

³⁷⁶ "In Joyful Memory." *The Griot Press: Minority Owned And Published Lesbian and Gay Magazine* [Philadelphia, PA] July 1992: 15. *Archives of Human Sexuality and Identity*.

visibility the MCC had undertaken as a part of the 1990 Pride events, reflects the degree to which, by the 1990s, the gay Christian experience in Philadelphia was inseparable from the gay Christian experience as a whole.

Practical Activism

Gay and gay-friendly Christian groups throughout this period continued participating in practical responses, in large part because there became more and more opportunities in which to participate. By 1990, these congregations were involved frequently in AIDS awareness and fundraising activities, and that work did not diminish as the decade progressed. However, quite significantly, many of these efforts expanded beyond congregational and even religious boundaries. Growing awareness of AIDS as a cause with an impact beyond gay communities had by the early 1990s brought a considerable amount of corporate and celebrity attention, especially to fundraising opportunities. Notable among these was the event that went through a number of names before becoming AIDS Walk Philly, a walk-a-thon founded in 1987 by members of Penguin Place, a Philadelphia gay and lesbian community center.³⁷⁷ The first walk raised \$33,000; by October 1992, the walk, in its sixth year, raised \$450,000 and drew nearly 10,000 marchers³⁷⁸, including Jonathan Demme and much of the crew working on the movie *Philadelphia*.³⁷⁹ The major shift in public understanding of the disease is summed up by one of the 1992 walk's participants:

³⁷⁷ Woestendiek, John. "Walk Brings In \$100,000 For Aids." *Philadelphia Inquirer*, October 19, 1987.

³⁷⁸ McLarin, Kimberly J. "Marching So That Others May Live 10,000 Took Part In The Sixth Annual Philadelphia Aids Walk." *Philadelphia Inquirer*, October 26, 1992.

³⁷⁹ Hollman, Laurie. "Racking Up The Miles To Fight Aids The Walkers Will Be Entertained And Well-fed." *Philadelphia Inquirer*, October 23, 1992.

"It's essential that everyday people become involved,' said [social worker Arwyn] Elden, 27. 'When I tell people what I'm doing, it used to be "What?" or "Who cares?" or "That's the gay disease." Now people say, "I'm glad you're doing that.'"³⁸⁰ St. Mary's not only contributed to the event by coordinating participation from its congregants and other Episcopalians in the diocese, it benefited from the walk, receiving 1% of the event's total take – which the vestry notes anticipated would be "some thousands of dollars, which is more than we can raise by walking up the West River Drive by ourselves."³⁸¹

Even so, past the act of fundraising, congregations were sometimes given charge of how that money was spent. The \$4,500 raised from the AIDS Walk, for instance, was to be given to St. Mary's Family Respite Center, a daycare for children with or affected by AIDS, incorporated as a nonprofit in 1992 and held in the basement of the church's Parish Hall. When first proposed to the congregation as part of the July/August 1991 *St. Mary's Parish Newsletter*, the item specifically speaks of the endeavor as an "AIDS ministry", despite the fact that the first goal listed was "proceeding to incorporate as an independent tax-exempt organization".³⁸² By that point, the needs of the AIDS-affected population had outstripped the ability of churches to respond sufficiently on their own, yet by no means had these Christian groups turned over control of activism to secular institutions. Instead, by pairing with local service organizations and wide-reaching fundraising activities, these church communities were able to accomplish far more than they would have in isolation. Growing governmental and nonprofit infrastructures for responding to AIDS provided ways for

³⁸⁰ McLarin.

³⁸¹ *PLC Meeting Minutes: October 13, 1992*. Report. Philadelphia: St. Mary's Episcopal Church, 1992.

³⁸² Faith, H., ed. "New AIDS Ministry at St. Mary's." *St. Mary's Parish Newsletter*, July/August 1991, 4.

these communities to add their resources to extant coalitions.

Similarly, these groups sometimes found themselves in positions to provide support for AIDS-related organizations whose overall goals regarding AIDS were the same, but whose approaches and scopes differed. In addition to conducting funerals for PWAs, St Luke and the Epiphany continued to open its doors to gay and AIDS-cause groups who lacked space for regular meetings and/or special events, whether these groups were religious or not; by the early '90s, those groups included ActionAIDS, Dignity, ACT UP, and the AIDS Law Project of Pennsylvania.³⁸³ An undated flyer from this period announces the church's desire to start a hospitality center that would offer programs for PWAs; the flyer asks any PWAs and/or their caregivers to arrange a time to be interviewed about their "needs, insights, talents, and ideas for a day program".³⁸⁴ St. Mary's also advocated for the AIDS Law Project, listing contact information in its newsletter and noting that one of its own congregants, Peter Gulia, was an attorney volunteering with the project,³⁸⁵ and coordinated with ActionAIDS regarding day-facility options in its church building.³⁸⁶

Participating in and helping facilitate AIDS-related causes became important points of identity for some of these congregations, especially University Lutheran, whose continued and enthusiastic support for the Feast Incarnate not only kept the weekly meal for homeless men with AIDS going strong during this period, but provided a model for other congregations and organizations to start hosting their own nights as well; We the People

³⁸³ Giordano, 12. Despite the overtly secular nature of some of these groups, it should not be surprising that both ActionAIDS and the AIDS Law Project wound up finding meeting space in a church; Jim Littrell was a founder and prominent member of both organizations.

³⁸⁴ From Jim Littrell's archives, uncategorized.

³⁸⁵ Faith, H., ed. "The AIDS Law Project - and St. Mary's." *St. Mary's Parish Newsletter*, September/October 1991.

³⁸⁶ "AIDS Ministry." *St. Mary's Parish Newsletter*, 1991, 2.

began offering its meal on Wednesday nights, to which St. Mary's issued an invitation in its newsletter for "volunteers and visitors" to participate³⁸⁷, in addition to individual efforts from some of its congregants to bring drive meals to PWAs³⁸⁸. In one of Jeffrey Merkel's Sunday sermons, given in September 1992, he encourages his congregants not to get caught up in the externals of their or anyone else's identities, giving "smoker or runner or AIDS volunteer" as examples of individual labels less important than the wider open invitation to participate in the Eucharist³⁸⁹ – not as a way of dismissing the value of these particular bits of self-identification, but as part of casting a generically wide net, indicating that congregants at the time might have been as likely to volunteer their time to help with AIDS causes as they might have been to go for a jog or light up a cigarette. On a more personal note, the following week, his sermon mentions his feeling "a wave of helplessness as [he] prayed silently for a close friend with AIDS, whose diagnosis brought instantaneous divorce proceedings,"³⁹⁰ one of the many concerns forming what Merkel characterizes as a growing sense that the sorrows of the world might overwhelm him. He ties this sensation, however, to Luke 19's image of Jesus weeping over Jerusalem, promising "enough joy to transform the world"³⁹¹ while warning that such transformations only come on the other side of hardship, frustration, and even death.

The continued focus on activism did not overshadow the continued need for awareness, and many congregations continued to be sources of information for their congregants. In

³⁸⁷ "Integrity Conference and AIDS Dinner." *St. Mary's Parish Newsletter*, November 1990, 2.

³⁸⁸ "AIDS Ministry." *St. Mary's Parish Newsletter*, Summer 1990, 2.

³⁸⁹ Merkel, Jeffrey. "Pops at the Vet, and Angels, Unawares." Sermon, University Lutheran Church, Philadelphia, September 20, 1992.

³⁹⁰ Merkel, Jeffrey. "A Day at Jesus' Feast, Luke's, and Ours." Address, University Lutheran Church, Philadelphia, September 27, 1992.

³⁹¹ *Ibid.*

September 1989, as part of realizing the goals of the church's larger AIDS Ministry, St. Mary's held a conference with three speakers, all medical doctors, who were present to answer the questions of the forty or so congregants in attendance.³⁹² "It will be very important to address concerns/fears of our own parishioners openly, as legitimate," warns the proposal for that ministry, "in order to prevent this effort from becoming divisive."³⁹³ Whatever concerns or fears might have been addressed, they did not stop the church's AIDS ministries from going forward. Similarly, the Peace and Social Concerns Committee (PSCC) of Germantown Mennonite mentions in its 1990 year-end report the steps it had taken to connect issues surrounding AIDS and the congregation:

Due to increased worldwide concern for the AIDS issue, we have been providing educational information on AIDS for the congregation both thru [sic] the PSCC newsletter and the bulletin. We invited the congregation to participate in National AIDS Day by wearing a green ribbon symbolizing AIDS awareness.³⁹⁴

An insert from the December 2, 1990 weekly bulletin contains an announcement about World AIDS Day; text on its reverse, entitled "WOMEN AND AIDS" (the theme for that year), provides 'Did you know?'-style statistics about AIDS and women worldwide.³⁹⁵ The PSCC's 1991 year-end report is much the same as the previous year's, though with an added note that two Sunday School Classes had been held to address concerns; the larger church's 1992 report also mentions congregational involvement with a residential facility for PWAs

³⁹² "News at St. Mary's." *St. Mary's Parish Newsletter*, October 1989, 2. Despite the fact that this event technically occurred in the span of time covered in the previous chapter, I have included it here for two reasons: first, it only misses the cutoff by three months, and second, it fits better with the rest of the St. Mary's activism than it does in isolation.

³⁹³ *AIDS Ministry - Proposal*. Report. Philadelphia: St. Mary's Episcopal Church, 1989.

³⁹⁴ *Peace and Social Concerns Year End Report - 1990*. Report. Philadelphia: Germantown Mennonite, 1990. The now-familiar red ribbon symbol was not designed until 1991; for the full story from the collective which created it, see: <https://www.visualaids.org/projects/detail/the-red-ribbon-project> .

³⁹⁵ Culp-Ressler, Sharon, chair. *Peace and Social Concerns Year End Report - 1991*. Report. Philadelphia: Germantown Mennonite, 1991.

and PSCC sponsorship of the Philadelphia AIDS Walk.³⁹⁶ Though that involvement is relatively sparse, even for such a small congregation – only seven members of the congregation are listed as having volunteered at Betak, said residential facility – the fact of its existence and of its proud inclusion in the "Pastoral Report" section of the annual report indicate a willingness of the church as a whole to lend visible support to these causes.

Documents from the same time period, especially personal correspondence and notes recorded during Sunday School discussions, show that these efforts from the PSCC were taking place at the same time the congregation was undergoing a large change in its approaches to sexuality. Though Germantown Mennonite had had a number of active, visible gay congregants prior to this point, congregants held a variety of opinions on the matter.³⁹⁷ Churches are rarely wholly of one mind on any subject, and this is a clear example of how opinions of a church hierarchy may not necessarily be shared by members of that congregation; similarly, though the attitude of the Mennonite Church USA was (and remains) that homosexuality is a sin, Mennonite Mutual Aid, an insurance group which has often spoken (not uncontroversially) for the Church at large on health care issues³⁹⁸, distributed a booklet in 1992 titled "Responding to HIV and AIDS", which presented information and Bible-based encouragement about understanding and removing the stigma

³⁹⁶ Culp-Ressler, Ren, chair. *Peace and Social Concerns Committee*. Report. Philadelphia: Germantown Mennonite, 1992.

³⁹⁷ One personal, handwritten letter (undated but with the rest of the 1992 archival materials) addresses the pastor, saying that while its author voted to accept gay and lesbian members into the congregation, "it is also important for the heterosexual family - mother, father, and children to be respected." Thus, while the gay and lesbian members of the community might have felt fully welcomed, not everyone did so unconditionally.

³⁹⁸ Meyer, Jonny Gerig. "Sending Mixed Messages to Congress: Mennonite Involvement in Proposed National Health Care Reform, 1992-1994." *The Mennonite Quarterly Review*, no. 83 (April 2009): 181-220.

of AIDS that left the issue of homosexuality all but unmentioned.³⁹⁹ The lack of controversy shown in the documents around AIDS-related materials, however, reflects the same changes in the discourse that led to the widespread success of 1992's AIDS Walk Philly: What had happened was not a greater acceptance of non-heteronormative sexual identities, but an effective divorcing of AIDS from its initial identity as a gay disease. This, along with greater cooperation with secular organizations, changed significantly the US Christian landscape as it related to the epidemic, bringing new groups and resources to the fight.

New Risk Groups and New Allies

As the epidemic moved into its second decade, efforts from these churches were joined more and more by groups that had changed their opinions on and approaches to AIDS completely. One of growing coalitions working to fight AIDS came from the black church in Philadelphia. Christians of color had of course been involved in activism and awareness since the beginning of the epidemic; in particular, MCC Philadelphia was then, as it remains, a congregation with a significant minority presence among both clergy and laity.⁴⁰⁰ However, for much of the 1980s, rhetoric from historically black Protestant churches tended toward what Horace Griffin describes as "typical responses to AIDS by

³⁹⁹ *Responding to HIV and AIDS: A Resource Guide for Congregations*. Goshen, IN: Mennonite Mutual Aid, 1992.

⁴⁰⁰ While Gilbert himself was white, in May 1993, MCC Philadelphia installed Rev. Herbert E. Evans, who was identified by the *Griot Press* as "the only black male pastor of any MCC on the Northern Continent." ("New Pastor Installed." *The Griot Press: Minority Owned And Published Lesbian and Gay Magazine*, June/July 1993, 9. Archives of Human Sexuality and Identity.) In addition, the church ordained in 1988 Darlene Garner, a black lesbian. (Garner, Darlene. "Oral History Interview: Darlene Garner." Interview by Monique Moultrie. October 27, 2010.)

black church leaders: either silence or the proclamation of God's punishment on homosexuals."⁴⁰¹ Griffin characterizes the black church's identity as significantly tied to ideas of gender, sexuality, and family that often lead to dismissing homosexuals not only as an affront to God, but as an affront to blackness itself – a viewpoint that had already significantly complicated the progress of gay rights in Philadelphia in the post-Stonewall era.⁴⁰² C. Everett Koop, in a 1988 interview with *Ebony*, mentions black clergy in Philadelphia in particular with regards to how helpful they had been, during his time practicing in the city, in disseminating information about health issues in the black community; he contrasts this, however, with an unfortunate reluctance on the part of the same clergy to get involved with AIDS, because, as he puts it, "you get AIDS by doing things that most people don't do and don't approve of other people doing."⁴⁰³ BEBASHI (Blacks Educating Blacks About Sexual Health Issues) had been active in Philadelphia since 1985, but from a secular perspective that often ran into conflict with the goals of black Christian organizations; for instance, in the early 1990s, BEBASHI supported distribution of condoms in Philadelphia public schools, while The Black Clergy of Philadelphia and Vicinity, an organization of clergy with representatives from 400 churches, staunchly opposed the program.⁴⁰⁴

As the epidemic progressed, however, and especially as Philadelphia's infection demographics shifted such that the black community was significantly overrepresented

⁴⁰¹ Griffin, Horace L. *Their Own Receive Them Not: African American Lesbians and Gays in Black Churches*. Cleveland, OH: Pilgrim Press, 2006. 166

⁴⁰² See Mumford for a more detailed rendering of this history.

⁴⁰³ Randolph, L.B. "Interview with US Surgeon General.." *Ebony* 43, no. 11 (September 1988): 155.

⁴⁰⁴ Collins, Huntly. "Black Clergy Finally Confronts Aids Crisis : The View From The Pulpit Has Been Changing." *Philadelphia Inquirer*, August 10, 1992.

among new diagnoses, pastors such as Rev. J. Jerome Cooper of Berean Presbyterian Church found themselves confronted with cases in their own congregations. Cooper's own public change of heart came at the funeral of a young man whom he had known for fifteen years:

When the Rev. J. Jerome Cooper came down from the pulpit to deliver a eulogy beside the casket of a 21-year-old parishioner, he had a confession to make.

The church, he said, had failed. Its deacons had refused to give communion to a dying man, and Mr. Cooper himself had washed his hands after every visit to the man's hospital bed.

From that day on, the pastor vowed, he would never again let the church discriminate against anyone suffering from AIDS.

"We do not have the privilege to decide who is part of the Kingdom and who is not part of the Kingdom," said Mr. Cooper, pastor of the predominantly black Berean Presbyterian Church at Broad and Diamond Streets in North Philadelphia. "That's God's area of judgment."⁴⁰⁵

Cooper went on to found the Ecumenical Information AIDS Resource Center⁴⁰⁶ in 1989, a coalition that by 1992 consisted of fifteen black churches in the North Philadelphia area. As the name might suggest, a large part of the organization's goal was to help educate members of black churches beyond individual fears. With support from black congregations, ActionAIDS, and BEBASHI, the group conducted education workshops, becoming again what had once been for Koop such a helpful network of black Christian Philadelphian resources.⁴⁰⁷

Language such as Cooper's encouraging Christians to leave judgment to God echoes

⁴⁰⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁰⁶ Incorrectly identified in the Collins article as the "Ecumenical Information AIDS Center".

⁴⁰⁷ In fact, the proposal for St. Mary's own AIDS Ministry notes, in its section titled 'Cooperation with other parish AIDS ministries,' that "Berean Church ... has a very active AIDS ministry', dating its coordinated activism even before the organization of St. Mary's efforts.

that found in other straight Christian volumes and essays at the time, such as Michael Christensen's *The Samaritan's Imperative* and Anthony Lovegrove's "AIDS: Some Theological Reflections"⁴⁰⁸. Christensen, at the time an elder in the Church of the Nazarene, writes his book for clergy and laity less as a work of inclusion, and more as a work against exclusion. In his acknowledgments, Christensen thanks his District Superintendent, Clarence Kinzler, who reminded Christensen that "the church is 'neither pro-gay nor anti-gay, but anti-sin and pro-people'" and who "challenged [Christensen] to 'find a way to walk the line between acceptance of persons and endorsement of life-style' in ministry to gay persons with AIDS."⁴⁰⁹ Such an approach is not about loving the sinner and hating the sin, but loving the sinner and ignoring the sin – and in the process dodging the question of whether or not the sin in question is sinful at all. Though written from the perspective of a Catholic priest in the UK, Lovegrove's essay, published as the only religious perspective contained in a 1990 collection entitled *AIDS - A Moral Issue*, urges very similar calls to compassion without judgment, taking at one point the character of Father Paneloux from Camus' *The Plague* and imagining a different sermon for him:

If today AIDS is in your midst then the hour has struck for a genuine Christian response. AIDS is not the flail of God, nor is the world His threshing-floor. We must not be judgmental of those who suffer from AIDS, but must try to help them. They are men and women like you and like me, who need our love and care and the help of our society.⁴¹⁰

Notably, the sufferers of AIDS in this re-imagined sermon are women and men *like* Lovegrove's audience, but they are not presumed themselves to *be* Lovegrove's audience,

⁴⁰⁸ Lovegrove, Anthony. "AIDS: Some Theological Reflections." Edited by Brenda Almond. In *AIDS, a Moral Issue: The Ethical, Legal, and Social Aspects*, 139-44. New York: St. Martin's Press, 1996. 159.

⁴⁰⁹ Christensen, p.5-6.

⁴¹⁰ Lovegrove, 159.

despite how he insists that AIDS is in their midst. The existence of AIDS at all is understood here to be sufficiently close to incur general Christian responsibility. Global ministry initiatives responding to AIDS encounter far less often the question of judging behavior, trading instead on pictures of orphans and tales of "innocent" families⁴¹¹; however, local ministry options, especially during the early 1990s, were far more likely to put volunteers face-to-face with those whose sexual identities had been targets of conservative Christian rhetoric. Even more, considerations involving compassionate response run straight into the faith-conflicting situations that give rise to questions like the one Johns posed to the UniLu congregation. Lovegrove's response is like that of Christensen's mentor, in that it avoids the question of sexuality and morality entirely, making instead a point about the nature of God. Whether or not the afflicted deserve AIDS becomes irrelevant in light of a declaration that the Divine does not deal out punishments like that – a statement diametrically opposed to theology such as that in Pat Robertson's claim that "AIDS is God's way of weeding his garden."⁴¹²

The relationship of the black church in the United States to gay men and lesbians has often been fraught; Griffin's work, published in 2006, twenty-five years after the onset of the AIDS epidemic, paints a picture of a community unwilling and thus unable to address the needs of its queer members. However, in the midst of crisis, theological negotiations such as Cooper's can sideline questions of morality and disapproval in favor of responding

⁴¹¹ The relative moral ease of this global conservative activism is perhaps best illustrated by a moment from a 2002 "international Christian conference on HIV/AIDS" convened by evangelical dynast Franklin Graham, when Senator Jesse Helms, no friend of any gay community anywhere, confessed to being ashamed that he had done so little to help the victims of AIDS – in Africa, at least. (Burkhalter, Holly. 2004. "The Politics of AIDS: Engaging Conservative Activists". *Foreign Affairs* 83 (1). Council on Foreign Relations: 10.)

⁴¹² Sedgwick, 129.

to immediate need. In part, the transmission patterns of AIDS in Philadelphia's black community inform this response. By 1989, there were 697 reported cases of AIDS among black individuals in the Philadelphia area: 682 of these were among adults and adolescents, 629 of whom were male. Of these, 72% (453 cases) were part of the patient group of only "homosexual or bisexual Men"; 23% were part of groups engaged in IV drug use. (By contrast, of the 534 adult/adolescent cases among white males, 89% were a part of the same patient group.) In addition, while there were 11 reported cases among white women by then, there were 53 among black women, most of whom were sorted in transmission groups based on IV drug use or heterosexual contact.⁴¹³ One could not address the AIDS crisis without addressing homosexual transmission, but at the same time, especially among Christian communities of color, one could not sidestep the issue without abandoning large numbers of people from other demographics to the same devastating stigma that had led Rev. Cooper to show insufficient compassion to the young parishioner (whose name, sexuality, and means of contracting HIV are never given in the *Inquirer* pieces). Furthermore, Griffin writes, "as African American gays assumed leadership in black churches and communities, some breakthrough occurred in the early to mid-1990s"⁴¹⁴ in terms of black ministers' changing their rhetoric about AIDS and working, like Cooper, toward serving and supporting minority PWAs.

From this comes a new category of sorts, in terms of theology and activism: the churches which, like the Christian Right, had a history of openly condemning non-heteronormative gender identities and sexualities, but were willing to adopt a rhetoric of

⁴¹³ Philadelphia Department of Public Health, April 1989.

⁴¹⁴ Griffin, 177.

functional non-judgment once it became clear that condemnations were only exacerbating the spread of the virus and the sufferings of those infected. Surely, as many have noted, the public diagnosis of the avowedly heterosexual Magic Johnson forever changed the views of Americans in general, and black Americans in particular, on HIV/AIDS. But shifts in thinking also came as a result of majority-straight black congregations' having to deal with what the majority-gay congregations of all races had been struggling with for nearly a decade: the epidemic's hitting home. As both heroes and neighbors became infected – and increasing numbers did so through non-homosexual transmission – churches such as Cooper's Berean Presbyterian became, like the gay Christian communities had been in the '80s, sources of activism and information.

More than that, some ministers were convinced that the black church would be the *only* way that the black community would ever create a successful response to AIDS. Speaking to political scientist Cathy Cohen on the subject, one minister dismissed the tactics of groups such as ACT UP, specifically citing the Stop the Church action at St. Patrick's as something that would have gotten the participants removed physically from his church: "He seemed to believe," Cohen observes, "that in the end it would be the work of the church and black AIDS service organizations working with the church that would make the difference."⁴¹⁵ Obviously, sentiments such as these did not match the whole of effective activism in Philadelphia, where BEBASHI had been operating secularly to considerable effect long before many black churches got on board. But they represent a considerable change from churches unwilling even to address the epidemic.

⁴¹⁵ Cohen, Cathy J. *The Boundaries of Blackness: AIDS and the Breakdown of Black Politics*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999. 6.

Significant realignments like these among Christian communities are a major part of why the religious landscape of AIDS in the United States looked completely different by 1992 from how it did ten years previous. In contrast to the apocalyptic fears early unknowns gave rise to among gay communities, by the early '90s it was clear that if the sky *was* falling, it was doing so slowly enough that panic could wait. However, it became just as clear around the same time that said falling sky was not going to land where people first thought it would. The spread to "women, children, and hemophiliacs – those who have no control over this disease"⁴¹⁶ shifted the responsibility of dealing with AIDS far beyond the imagined boundaries of a 'gay plague'. Patricia Stewart, who in 1992 began as coordinator of a HIV/AIDS-focused family program out of a Philadelphian children's hospital, describes said program's services as being taxed to the limit, despite how only a tiny minority of the patients served had same-sex partners; instead, "poor and African-American and Latino women and children and the men who were the women's partners and the fathers of their children" were now the new faces of AIDS.⁴¹⁷ While this did not lead all (or even most) Christian denominations to acceptance and full inclusion of gays and lesbians, it did help all but settle the debate on AIDS as God's punishment for sinners; despite some holdouts among the Christian Right (and some even further right than that), the attitude among Christians in the United States that PWAs deserved what they had gotten was already well on the decline. With less ink needing to be spilled to refute that claim, then, gay and gay-friendly Christian responses on the whole began to move significantly

⁴¹⁶ Cohen, 5.

⁴¹⁷ Stewart, 52. Stewart also describes the extant models of care as "designed for a very different population – primarily white gay men, many of whom were accustomed to societal privilege"; while certainly said gay men were still at several social disadvantages, this is an important reminder of the complexities of privilege as played out in the real world.

from the theological to the practical.

It is difficult to speak of anything connected to Christianity as being strictly *un-*theological, considering how the example of Jesus is supposed to guide all activity, spiritual *and* quotidian. However, toward the close of the scope of this inquiry, calls to action and reflection take the place of interfaith workshops and long spiritual meditations on the meaning of the epidemic. With whole denominations creating and championing national and international offices of AIDS ministry, the Christian Right's language of sin and punishment no longer stood unchallenged in the discourse. This is not to say that all Christians throughout the United States were suddenly Raptured into a new era of attitudes on AIDS, nor that the (often religiously motivated) stigma against PWAs disappeared overnight; seropositive individuals experience discrimination based on their status even today, and a number of prominent Christian voices do well for themselves by conflating AIDS and homosexuality, to the denigration of both. However, the rhetoric of AIDS as God's judgment was one that could no longer be supported by many major denominations and congregations, regardless of their doctrinal stances on or feelings toward sexual diversity. Combined with changing secular attitudes toward and awareness of the epidemic, especially involving celebrity fundraisers and notable individuals willing to be open about their diagnoses, these movements from churches and denominations helped begin to change the way the United States thought about AIDS.

Thus, in a strange, circular way, what is most notable about the texts from the very end of the "AIDS years" – as measured by the scope of this inquiry, at least – is the same thing that is most notable about the texts from the beginning: namely, that AIDS is not the only, nor even the predominant, concern evidenced in these texts. The *Independence* remains

consistently concerned with both Catholic sexual politics and the Church's refusal to ordain women. The *Bellringer* is filled with announcements for and reports from churchwide activities, ranging from holistic church growth seminars to multi-congregation picnics to district-wide and national MCC gatherings. Both publications offer messages of spiritual encouragement and reflection focusing on sexual orientation and identity absent any discussion of disease. Bulletins and newsletters from St. Mary's have calendars announcing AA meetings, concerts, potluck dinners, square dances, and American Chocolate Week⁴¹⁸. The ongoing impact of AIDS on gay religious communities cannot be dismissed, but at the same time, AIDS is not and never was the whole of gay Christian life in Philadelphia. Even at the peak of new infections and uncertainty, the epidemic never became such a focal point for these groups that it overwhelmed everything else. And by the end of 1992, with so many other organizations, religious and secular, government and corporate, committing resources and raising awareness about the epidemic, there was no need for these groups to bear the burdens of AIDS, theological or otherwise, alone.

"This disease will be the end of many of us," says protagonist Prior Walter at the end of Tony Kushner's landmark two-part play about AIDS, *Angels in America*, "but not nearly all, and the dead will be commemorated and will struggle on with the living, and we are not going away. We won't die secret deaths anymore. The world only spins forward. We will be citizens. The time has come."⁴¹⁹ First performed in part in 1990, Kushner's "gay fantasia on national themes" ends with many of the same sentiments expressed in Littrell's

⁴¹⁸ According to the St. Mary's calendar, the week beginning March 16, 1992.

⁴¹⁹ Kushner, Tony. *Angels in America*. New York: Theatre Communications Group, 1993.

sermon: the memory of the departed, the perseverance of the infected, the optimism that one can live through the end of the world and come out the other side.

CHAPTER 5: "BURNING IN THE BONES AND KINDLING FIRE": THE USES OF SCRIPTURE

I knew that the people who would want to use Scripture against me would only understand our defense if Scripture was used.

–Troy Perry⁴²⁰

Postcolonial theologian Kwok Pui-lan argues that engaging with the Bible is a necessary part of the colonial discourse, in large part because the Bible was the basis by which colonialism was justified; it became the signifier which articulated the binary of benevolent Western superiority and savage subaltern depravity.⁴²¹ By that same token, the Bible must also be considered an integral part of LGBT discourse, especially in the United States, as it has been historically used time and again to prop up heteronormative ideals at the expense of all else. Attempts at even secular LGBT activism that discount the Bible's importance or reject it altogether as a point of consideration are by necessity incomplete, as they refuse to engage with the foundation on which so much anti-gay sentiment has been based. But queer Christians *must* engage with scripture, not only because it is the basis for discrimination against them, but because it is the basis for their very identity as Christians. I believe, therefore, that the various usage of the Bible in these texts deserves special consideration, especially since the patterns to its use are not confined to the divisions made by earlier chapters.

⁴²⁰ Perry, Troy D., and Thomas L. P. Swicegood. *Don't Be Afraid Anymore: The Story of Reverend Troy Perry and the Metropolitan Community Churches*. New York: St. Martin's Press, 1990. 41.

⁴²¹ Kwok, Pui-lan. *Postcolonial Imagination and Feminist Theology*. Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2005. 61.

Part of any approach to biblical texts from the margins works on the understanding that every sacred text has multiple layers of meaning and revelation, such that the oppressor's uses of scripture cannot be understood as representing the whole of God's meaning. Black liberation theologian James Cone identifies "a sharp distinction between the *words* of the text and the *Word* disclosed in the text"⁴²² – the idea that while there are certainly clear, familiar texts that underlie Christian thought and teaching, they are not the whole of the meaning behind those texts. The concept of this hidden yet identifiable *Word* is particularly poignant to marginalized and oppressed Christians of all stripes, many of whom have seen said ostracization supported by biblical interpretations. The idea that there is a correct reading beyond the oppressive claims of the powerful means that there might be hope for those who have been told they are hopeless.

In this last chapter, I examine the texts these communities produced to show the way biblical texts were used to talk about the AIDS epidemic. I look at how even though many Christians may read the same scriptures, their interpretations and responses differ wildly, leading to impasses where simply going to the Bible did not solve the argument(s) at hand. Particularly focusing on public worship and multi-denominational prayer services, I identify several similarities in which texts get chosen and which approaches taken by various Christian (and, less frequently, interfaith) groups. Finally, I consider some of the reasons why the biblical texts might not have seemed as obviously comforting to gay Christians as they did to their straight brothers and sisters in Christ.

⁴²² Cone, James H. *God of the Oppressed*. 2nd ed. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1997. 17-18.

Rereading the Bible

Gays, lesbians, and members of other gender and sexual minorities in the Church are familiar with what I have referred through throughout this work as the 'clobber verses': particular passages from the Bible used frequently (and frequently without proper, or indeed *any*, context) to prove with definitive, bruising force that "the Bible says" non-heteronormative sexual orientations, family structures, and gender identities are contrary to God's design for God's people. While there is no specific set of these verses, most common among them are the following: Genesis 19 (the Sodom story), Leviticus 18:22 and 20:13 (ostensible proscriptions against male-male sexual behavior), Romans 1:26-27 (condemnations against unspecified 'unnatural' acts; also the only passage among these which is not specifically and exclusively male), I Corinthians 6:9-10 and 1 Timothy 1:9-10 (where Paul's ambiguous *arsenokoitai* function as one negative category among many), and Jude 1:7 (a reference back to Genesis 19). Many of these appear in arguments from the Christian Right both at the time and to the present, presented as the authoritative condemnations that give unimpeachable support to the righteousness of their collective disapproval. Numerous scholars, theologians, activists, and Bible study leaders have sought to address these verses in order to read them in a more accepting light, as have many of the groups discussed in this work; while these re-readers do not always come to the same historical or modern conclusions, they are united in their understanding that these verses cannot and thus should not be deployed as condemnatory of contemporary same-sex sexual relationships.⁴²³

⁴²³ This is also an enterprise that predates the AIDS epidemic, and one which even at the time would have been available to a lay reader. As one notable example, McNeill's *The Church and the Homosexual*

Queer readers wishing to engage the Bible only on the merits of these verses would have their hands certainly full in doing so, and much ink has been spilt over more gay-positive readings, from perspectives ranging from the pastoral to the academic. However, these seven passages hardly represent the whole of Scripture, even for gay men and lesbians. Reading biblically during the first decade of the AIDS epidemic did not mean only engaging with and providing counterreadings to these specific verses. Instead, churches addressing AIDS from gay and gay-friendly perspectives turned to many other verses, stories, parables, and prayers to find canonical words of comfort to address their situation. Taking religious arguments back to authoritative sacred texts is not a specifically Christian rhetorical move; many religious traditions around the globe and throughout human history have venerated significant texts as sources of wisdom on issues both holy and mundane, leaving those who would challenge those traditions needing to do so largely by way of challenging traditional interpretations. Doing so here rhetorically presents these gay Christians and their supporters as connected to, and not diverging from, the original Gospel intent. After all, much of Christianity places high importance on the idea of apostolic succession: the understanding that authority over the church and its correct maintenance passed directly from Jesus to his most immediate followers, and then to their followers, and thus on down into modernity, creating an unbroken orthodoxic *and* orthopraxic line.⁴²⁴ Appealing to scripture makes the case that the most important figures in Christianity would also have been the biggest supporters of a cause, which not only characterizes said cause

spends one of its earliest sections addressing the problems of scripture; though McNeill's book was aimed specifically at addressing Catholic theology and tradition, its focus and accessible language gained it a wide audience among Christians from Protestant denominations as well.

⁴²⁴ That Christians are phenomenally heterodoxic *and* heteropraxic shows the limits of this approach.

in light of a divine endorsement, it rhetorically chastises everyone else who argues otherwise.

While not all would be so bold as to accuse others of 'picking and choosing', as Perry does, there is still an understanding among these Christians that what one puts into the Bible influences significantly what one gets out of it. The August 20, 1992 Final Report from the Listening Committee for Homosexual Concerns⁴²⁵ from Germantown Mennonite Church provides insight into some of the difficulties faced by local congregations trying to use the Bible for a clear answer on contemporary issues. In this report, the committee identifies different approaches taken in good faith by congregants to addressing the issue of the moral correctness of same-sex sexual relationships. The first approach the report identifies is to go to the places where the Bible seems to clearly mention homosexuality – in essence, the clobber verses – to read the passages, make observations, reach conclusions, and teach those conclusions as God's will. However, the committee notes, "a very perplexing thing happens at the end of this process": Namely, people of good faith, using the very same method and looking at the very same texts, realize they have come to two radically different conclusions about God's official opinion on same-sex sexual activity. The second way of reading scripture for such answers, according to the committee, is to take a broader approach, starting not with specific scripture but overarching Biblical themes, such as God's grace, judgment, salvation, forgiveness, covenant theology, and human relationships; then, with these themes in mind, one approaches the specific contemporary question: in this case, homosexuality. Unfortunately, the report notes,

⁴²⁵ Joint Listening Committee For Homosexual Concerns. *Final Report: Listening Committee for Homosexual Concerns*. Report. Philadelphia: Germantown Mennonite, 1992.

here again, **two opposite conclusions** [emphasis in original] concerning homosexuality are arrived at by equally honest and sincere persons using this broad themes approach. One group says, for example, that sexual relationships are based on the order of creation, that that order is heterosexuality and that fullness of life is to be found in heterosexuality. Any deviation from that order in homosexuality is sin. A second group says, for example, covenant and covenant relationships is the center of God's redemptive program and sin is the violation of relationships. Homosexuality, as such, is not a violation of relationships, though some homosexual actions which violate relationships are sin.⁴²⁶

It is, to be sure, a dilemma. It is also, however, evidence of the importance of both exegesis and isegesis to the communities at hand. While one must take an extraordinarily cynical view to claim that a clever reader can make the Bible say anything, it is true that worldview makes a significant difference to what one sees when one approaches scripture. The Bible is hardly a monolithic document, with unified views on nearly nothing; the complicated process of compilation, redaction, and translation by which it has reached modernity has sometimes seen efforts to pave over more obvious disagreements, but such actions have never resulted in a unified theological treatise. Thus, Christian conflicts over issues arising around AIDS were (and are) never so much a case of pitting a "wrong" reading of the Bible against a "right" one, as they exemplify the dilemma faced by Germantown Mennonite over the question of the Bible's stance on homosexuality. Giving both sides the benefit of the doubt concerning their being honest and sincere, the Christian Right and gay Christians both come to the same text and walk away from it with two separate conclusions.

In the texts from gay Christian communities during the first decade of the AIDS epidemic in Philadelphia, little ink is spilled on refuting the "clobber verses" or any other

⁴²⁶ Ibid.

texts used in support of characterizing AIDS as God's punishment.⁴²⁷ Such refutations are not only possible, they characterize much of contemporary academic approaches to biblical literature, focusing not only on reading the texts in their original historical contexts, but on reminding modern readers that these *are* ancient texts, formed around situations and worldviews that have no modern analogues. When taking a more pastoral approach, however, the focus is not on deconstructing opposing rhetoric, but with moving on through the Bible to other familiar stories and verses which provide more comforting visions of the Divine. That the most frequent texts used here are not only from the New Testament, but from the Gospels themselves, is hardly surprising; the scripture-fulfilling, fully God yet fully human figure of Jesus often serves as a "trump card" to what Christians sometimes perceive as the excessive legalism of both the Hebrew scriptures and the New-Testament epistolarians. Thus, stories abound of Jesus' actions and lessons that come with a more contrarian bent.

While there are several places where AIDS appears alongside a specific scripture as one concern among many, I tried to gather scriptural references here that appeared in one of two contexts: either they were specifically named as a scripture to use in when discussing AIDS, or they were used as parts of texts dealing significantly or exclusively with AIDS. The choices of some of these passages come not from local churches, but from suggestions made by national denominational committees, which were then either made available to parishioners or incorporated into worship.

⁴²⁷ In fact, one of the few engagements with Leviticus and its interpreters comes from the *Bellringer's* February 1982 issue, and there it is to contradict those who claim that Lev. 17:10-11 is a prohibition against blood donation.

AIDS is not an easy topic to discuss from a pastoral perspective, as should be evident from the number of these denomination-wide publications intended to help local churches frame how they talked about the epidemic. Much of this difficulty comes from the way significant portions of contemporary Christianity in the United States have come to view church as a place to be rested, not to be unsettled. To a Christian tradition prone to view evil as a sign of the coming Kingdom of God and cheer on God's righteous punishment of the wicked, the reality of AIDS formed a certain kind of inspirational rhetoric.⁴²⁸ To those more inclined toward viewing the epidemic in sorrow rather than in joy, however, AIDS provided a challenge to those preferring to give or receive a message of pure reassuring consolation. University Lutheran's Jeffrey Merkel expresses the difficulty of this particular challenge as part of a 1989 sermon on the church's negative treatment of gays and lesbians, during which he not only engages with the topic of AIDS, but blames no small part of its spread on the way Christians have refused to solemnify same-sex relationships. Delivering this homily on a Sunday in mid-August, after returning from both taking some restful time off and officiating at a joyful wedding, Merkel describes his realization that no matter how he (and the rest of his congregation) might want to linger on the good feelings, the scripture the lectionary has presented him cannot be ignored:

I was hoping I could get away with telling a story or two about a nice relaxing vacation, and say some things about God's bounty and grace, and sit down after the sermon with a fond smile of peaceful recollection. But then I looked at the readings. There was Jeremiah losing his wits and wailing at God how God his ripped his life to shreds. And there was Jesus predicting his death by crucifixion, not with a whimper but a bang.[...]

⁴²⁸ The words of prominent religious leaders of the Christian Right at this time have a noted bloodthirsty triumphalism to them; Pat Robertson and Jerry Falwell are two of the most notable voices, but certainly not the only ones. Some firsthand examples of how these sentiments trickled down to their adherents can be found in the "AIDS: 1981..." chapter of Perry's *Don't Be Afraid Anymore*.

It's hard to want to get distressed and agitated, especially when you're fresh from vacation, especially when you work as long and hard as some of us do. Give us some peace at church.

But when you work with people, as did Jeremiah and Jesus, as do many of you, and as do I, it doesn't take long to make connections. You look at people struggling and suffering, and you listen to their stories, you listen to their confusion, you hear their unwarranted guilt, their deep down shame, which you long to take away and you cannot, and you come to God in prayer, over and over and over, and finally, something breaks, and you howl. [...]

Since burning in the bones and kindling fire is the theme, I decided to get with the program: one thing that makes me want to kindle fire is how the Church and families treat people who are gays and lesbians.⁴²⁹

Bones and fire are what bring Merkel to this point, and in this case they come specifically from Jeremiah 20:7-13 and Luke 12:49-56, which he summarizes, respectively, in the first paragraph excerpted above. Working from a place of relative comfort, he wants to spend his time at the pulpit giving himself and his congregants "some peace". However, the reality of the lectionary cycle leaves not much room for gentle niceness, and as such, Merkel feels compelled to speak out against what he perceives as injustices – even though he perceives this as an injustice his audience does not suffer, but perhaps perpetuates, as he encourages congregants to "listen closely to the people around" them, so that they can discover who among those "friends and family are the 10% who are gay or lesbian."⁴³⁰ That this message might upset the listener is of secondary concern; it is difficult, after all, to preach from Jeremiah without confronting the idea that a prophet speaking the true Word of God will not always find a receptive audience.

AIDS is a similar catalyst for bringing to the forefront of majority-straight

⁴²⁹ Merkel, Jeffrey. "Agitated: The Church Against Gays." Sermon, University Lutheran Church, Philadelphia, April 13, 1989.

⁴³⁰ Ibid.

congregations concerns about the Church and its relationship to marginalized individuals and communities, especially (but not exclusively) gays and lesbians. It not only forced persons, churches, and entire denominations to re-evaluate their theological understandings of issues such as sexuality, sin, and illness, but made it necessary to make visible public statements based on these understandings. After all, it was difficult to avoid national rhetoric from the Christian Right at the time claiming full theological understanding of events; to be silent would have amounted to tacit approval. Some of the scriptures used in these contexts, like those that ignited Merkel's sermon above, are not specifically chosen to address AIDS in general, but come as part of the lectionary cycle. A four-page booklet entitled "A TIME FOR CARING", by Episcopal priest Lynne M. Coggi, addresses Presiding Bishop Edmond Lee Browning's designation that November 9, 1986 be set aside as a National Day of Prayer for Persons With AIDS and Those Who Minister to Them.⁴³¹ This booklet contains then-current medical information about AIDS, suggested prayers and hymns, and guidance for how to incorporate the scheduled Old Testament, Psalm, Epistle, and Gospel passages (what the text calls the "proper readings") into a sermon on "*God's Family: The tie that binds is love, not flesh*" [emphasis in original]. In that sense, as any good pastor knows, *any* scripture can be used to launch a Christian message about compassion in the face of adversities specific or general, if only through broader themes of acceptance, unity, service, love, and triumph over death. What became necessary, then, was to construct specific AIDS-relevant liturgies around the given material. The following year, Bishop Browning's office not only announced November 8, 1987 as The Second National Day of Prayer for Persons With AIDS, but sent out a list of suggested themes for each of

⁴³¹ Coggi, Lynne M. (1986).

the Sundays in the entire subsequent Advent season. "Special AIDS masses and services must continue," the announcement sheet pleads, "supported by the inclusion of our concern for the afflicted in every area of our spiritual life."⁴³² To help churches realize this goal, the Bishop's office suggests five questions to be used, each in conjunction with the weekly proper readings, as the basis for discussion groups or sermon topics. Of interest, however, is how much of an othering tone the suggestions still have; questions such as "Is compassionate prayer enough? In what ways can we be more involved?" assume that engagement with AIDS is an option to the anticipated audience, instead of an inescapable reality.

An outline for a 1988 workshop entitled "The Healing Touch: Pastoral Care for Persons with AIDS"⁴³³ also operates off that particular assumption, though in this case more directly, as it is addressing a smaller group of caregivers. Appeals in Jim Littrell's version of the outline for this service call on John 15:9-12 and 17:20-26 as models of compassion for pastors engaged in spiritual and hospice care to HIV+ individuals; both of these include Jesus' commandments to his disciples to by the way through which is own love is expressed throughout the world, both among themselves and to others. Two items appear under the first heading, "To Love As Jesus Loved": "Jesus never asked how a person became afflicted" and "Jesus never 'judged'". Both of these characterizations of Jesus' attitude toward the infirm and unclean serve not only to create a pastoral mindset where compassion for the individual is more important than recriminations for how the individual contracted

⁴³² Coggi, Lynne M. *Continued Commitment: The Second National Day of Prayer for Persons with AIDS*. New York, NY: Episcopal Church, Office of Social Welfare, 1987.

⁴³³ "'AIDS AND PASTORAL MINISTRY: THE HEALING TOUCH': An Interfaith Clergy Training Workshop" (workshop, Graduate Hospital, Philadelphia, November 15, 1988).

AIDS in the first place, but also to bypass questions of fault and deservedness altogether. As with the other pastoral care works from this period, discussed earlier, this model of pastoral care creates a way to move past the (potentially irreconcilable) questions of "proper" sexual orientation and behavior, into an understanding of spiritual outreach that does not equate sympathy with approval.

Thus is the flexibility of scripture, that it can compel some pastors to ask certain questions while insulating others from having to do so. Ultimately, it is less a blind guide and more a tool for answering extant questions – though one that certainly, as was shown by Germantown Mennonite's discussions, can return radically different answers based on one's preconceptions brought to the text. The key interpretive component comes through the experience of the reader(s), especially as individuals who have found love and acceptance in proscribed behaviors and identities are unlikely to give authority to those prohibitions over larger messages of grace. This is true for Christians confronting AIDS who rejected theologies that understood the epidemic as punishment; it is similarly true for gay and lesbian Christians whose experiences of healing and wholeness in queer-friendly communities led them and their straight allies to conclude that their sexualities and gender identities were not flaws, but part of God's intentional design. Lived experience, then, becomes the lens through which scripture is read and employed here, creating interpretive paradigms that challenge those in the mainstream to radical compassion while offering that radical compassion to those on the margins.

Gathering Together

Looking at scripture used as part of public worship is key to understanding the way these communities understood AIDS theologically, because through the act of communal worship, those sacred texts become not only the lens through which the epidemic is understood, but the way in which it is interpreted communally. "Worship lies close to the heart,"⁴³⁴ writes pastor and homiletician Thomas G. Long, going on to explain why even minor changes in the liturgy can have far-reaching and sometimes bitter reprisals from congregants – even the very sequence is vital to the spiritual experience of the participants:

A classically shaped Christian worship service is formed by the biblical story; it is in essence a recapitulation of the sacred narrative of God's interactions with human beings. . . . To go through the order of worship is symbolically to walk through the whole narrative of faith. The service is a metaphor constantly pointing to its referent.⁴³⁵

To work AIDS into this sacred narrative, then, is to understand it in terms of more normative Divine-human interaction, not as some unique catastrophe, but still as a reconcilable part of the human experience. If AIDS is a part of the narrative of faith, then it can begin to be understood, at least ontologically if not scientifically. The ways in which these gay and gay-friendly Christian groups attempted to tackle the *why* of AIDS show prominently in the sacred texts that they chose. While these quoted verses and passages were far from the only content of these services, they are of particular note largely because of the authoritativeness they bring to a ritual already fraught with sacred meaning.

Scripture also provides a contained set of potential texts to examine, making similarities and trends easier to find. While all of the prayer services and many of the sermons and

⁴³⁴ Long, Thomas G. *Beyond the Worship Wars: Building Vital and Faithful Worship*. Bethesda, MD: Alban Institute, 2001. 2

⁴³⁵ *Ibid*, 10.

other texts made mention of certain hymns, the body of Christian hymnody is not only enormous, it is inconsistent across even individual churches, to say nothing of denominations; a standard selection from one hymnal may not even appear in another. While there are some enduring favorites that cross English-speaking Christian traditions – 'Amazing Grace' is perhaps the most obvious of these, but the lesser-known 'There's a Wideness in God's Mercy' appears more than once across these services⁴³⁶ – for the most part, music does not provide as common a language to Christians as scripture does.

Important, too, is that these "special occasion" texts are texts of choice, not determined by liturgical cycles or church seasons. Texts chosen by lectionaries can reveal which texts make the people using those cycles think of AIDS, especially to the point where it becomes such a common malady in the public imagination that it can be used not only as itself, but as one example among many to get at the heart of larger questions of suffering, healing, and justice. Instead of starting with the text and brainstorming examples, however, individuals responsible for creating these specifically AIDS-focused prayer services did just the opposite: started with the issue and then looked back into a familiar set of texts for insight that could illuminate the present condition. To create an entire prayer service centered around a modern malady with no direct biblical equivalent involves first considering the more general issues raised by the epidemic, then drawing on a canon of particular texts for insight. In short, these are not so much the scriptures that make people think of AIDS, as they are the scriptures that AIDS makes people think of.

⁴³⁶ In some circumstances, it is even quite difficult to tell from the provided text what hymns were being sung; the bulletins provide only hymn numbers, without referencing what specific hymnal the congregation might be using. While it would be possible to make educated guesses based on the year and church in which the service was being held, these would still only be guesses.

Notably absent from the texts produced by these communities are the familiar foundational narrative stories from the Hebrew Bible, tales of patriarchs and kings that often form the spine of Sunday School teaching and other elementary faith instruction. To some degree, this is not uncommon, as these are not texts particularly associated in the Christian tradition with anxiety and grief. Interesting, however, is how in particular none of the biblical narratives that have been adopted by gay and lesbian communities to validate same-sex love appear in the context of these communities' discussions of AIDS. Christians and Jews alike looking to the Hebrew Bible for some sense of queer heritage have most often and most prominently fixed on Ruth and Naomi as a model of lesbian commitment, and David and Jonathan as an example of gay love stronger than heterosexual marriage. Rightly or wrongly, modern readers searching for a more compassionate view than the clobber verses hold on same-sex sexuality have read out of these verses a divine endorsement of non-heteronormative models of relationships and family. However, it is not difficult to imagine why such potential endorsements of homosexual love might have been left out of the context of prayer services in particular; the majority-gay communities most impacted by the epidemic would have had a different immediate focus, while evidence from later, even more ecumenical gatherings shows a general attempt to uncouple AIDS from its initial necessarily gay connotations, something the inclusion of these stories might have simply reinforced.

Indeed, unspoken questions of acceptable comparisons are present throughout all these texts, wherever the Bible comes to bear on being a model of contemporary suffering. Whose experience can be articulated through which metaphors? Which seem correctly analogous and which have unacceptable implications? As the art of interpreting modern-

day struggles through the lens of scripture several thousands of years old is obviously not a perfect one-to-one exercise, a certain degree of hermeneutic work becomes necessary before the connections become complete. This reality has become even clearer in light of more contemporary readings, especially from marginalized communities such as women and racial minorities, who do not reject the idea of biased readings but embrace the language of postmodernity and standpoint theory while providing interpretations that match their lived experiences. The connections made speak not only to what these readers see as particularly useful in scripture itself, but also to the moral judgments made on those individuals and groups who are brought forth to measure up. There is no clear theology of biblical metaphor articulated anywhere in these texts, but the comparisons that *are* made here shed light on what at the time would have seemed obvious parallels and what connections were perhaps still a bridge too far.

The 1986 "AIDS: An Inter-Faith Service Of Prayer and Healing" juxtaposes a reading from Genesis with a reading from *Newsweek*, though in a way that draws parallels between a biblical figure and PWAs, yet avoids making that connection homosexual:

We sit as we experience the Voice of JUDGMENT

READING: In Kokomo, Indiana, Ryan White, the 13-year-old hemophiliac who contracted AIDS while receiving injections of a clotting agent was barred from resuming seventh-grade classes by a school superintendent who said two dentist friends had helped him decide whether it would be safe to let classmates associate with the boy.

(*Newsweek*, August 12, 1985⁴³⁷)

READING: Genesis 37:

(The brothers saw Joseph) in the distance, and before he reached them they made a plot among themselves to put him to death. "Here comes the

⁴³⁷ This is paraphrase of information contained in this issue, not a direct quote.

man of dreams," they said to one another. "Come on, let us kill him and throw in into some well; we can say that a wild beast devoured him. Then we shall see what becomes of his dreams."⁴³⁸

Despite his clearly obnoxious adolescent phase, Joseph is one of the great biblical heroes, a patriarch with remarkable visionary connections to the Divine and skill at dream-interpretive economic planning. As he metaphorically is given AIDS by this juxtaposition, he is connected to one of the "innocent" victims of the epidemic, a boy nearly too young for sexuality, homo- or otherwise, done in by recessive genetics and a contaminated blood supply. The "Voice of JUDGMENT" here, then, is one that doles out punishment clearly unbefitting of the perceived crime; while White was indeed HIV-positive and Joseph had been insufferable in his brothers' general direction, Bible makes it clear that Joseph's brothers were in the wrong, implying by proxy that the judgments made by those who would keep Ryan White out of school were also wrong. This comparison does not, however, 'taint' Joseph, because his connection to the disease comes by way of a young man who did nothing to bring his condition upon himself.⁴³⁹

The other notable exception to what is otherwise a dearth of Hebrew Bible narratives is the figure of Job, who, as the Bible's most prominent victim of misfortune, appears as a frequent Christian model of bearing up under conditions of all stripes; he is a versatile enough figure that Merkel can seamlessly equate in a sermon "Job's leprosy [to] Job's AIDS. Or her old age, or her cancer, or sadness."⁴⁴⁰ However, the inclusion of Job in these public worship texts is itself complicated, because Job in these texts is a figure chosen from

⁴³⁸ "AIDS: An Inter-Faith Service Of Prayer and Healing"

⁴³⁹ If anything, the comparison is unkind to White, whose hemophilia was not a personality flaw.

⁴⁴⁰ Merkel, Jeffrey. "The Bible Hospital Ward." Sermon, University Lutheran Church, Philadelphia, February 7, 1988. These pronouns have no specific referent.

outside the communities affected by AIDS, looking in, set in the context of trying to curb onlookers' inclinations to judgment. The lessons of Job's story, after all, are multiple, and they include warnings to those who might see another person in a time of crisis and mistakenly attribute blame to the blameless.

More popular in these services is the Prophet Isaiah, whose narratives of catastrophic suffering followed by miraculous restoration do not promise immediate physical healing, but play instead into the larger eschatological narratives of AIDS – the promise of God's future, perfect kingdom, if not necessarily physical healing. The 1990 "service of healing and the celebration of the Holy Eucharist" at which Jim Littrell preached made specific use of Isaiah 25:1-9, a passage which in the NRSV is given the heading 'Praise for Deliverance from Oppression'. The 'AIDS: An Inter-Faith Service Of Prayer and Healing' gathering from the previous year calls on not one but two passages from Isaiah, 43:2-3⁴⁴¹ (which begins "When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; and through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you") and the whole of chapter 58, a passage which specifically calls out the difference between false worship, which is perfunctory and does not keep the worshippers from oppressing others when the worship is done, and true worship, which is about "loos[ing] the bonds of injustice" (v.6) instead of participating in empty ritual. Not only do all these passages promise this future divine restoration and invulnerability, the latter provides a direct challenge to Christian Right readings of scripture in a time of AIDS: here, by implication, conservative American Christianity is juxtaposed with hollow Israelite religion that brought on God's judgment, while those believers gathered with a

⁴⁴¹ Presented in the context of the service in a musical setting.

more compassionate eye toward those suffering from AIDS are promised that "then will [their] light shine like the dawn and [their] wound will be quickly healed over".

The Psalms make the most appearances from any single Hebrew Bible book, though. While predictably, Psalm 23 ("The Lord is my Shepherd") appears and is alluded to more than any other, other psalms of comfort appear in these worship services, delivered in a traditional call-and-response fashion between liturgist and congregation. The 1987 ecumenical prayer service held at Trinity Memorial Church does so with Psalm 22:1-11, putting at least half of the suffering speaker's voices in the mouths of those assembled, asking them to read along with the narrator's crying out to God for deliverance. The 1986 service includes and lists three different Psalms in the order of worship: 34, 69, and 107 (though the former and latter of these appear only as call-and-response excerpts, not in their entirety). Despite the way the text has come unmoored from musical accompaniment, the call-and-response style of their involvement preserves the communal, collective tone they originally carried, unifying the speakers in one shared experience.⁴⁴² The latter service's choice of these particular Psalms is not difficult to understand: Their respective titles, according to the NRSV, are "Praise for Deliverance from Trouble", "Prayer for Deliverance from Persecution", and "Thanksgiving for Deliverance from Many Troubles". The September 1987 prayer service begins with a call-and-response reading of Psalm 96 – entitled "Praise to God Who Comes in Judgement", its concept of 'judgment' is turned on

⁴⁴² Brian Wren's *Praying Twice: The Music and Words of Congregational Song* makes further points about the unifying and energizing power of joining vocally as a congregation, especially in terms of the particular message of Christianity: "In place of a temple procession, Christian tradition offers another journey with a compelling narrative, leading not to a temple, but to a table." (p.221) Though Wren's focus is on singing, the collective call-and-response reading of the psalms here serves much the same function he describes.

its head from more mainstream readings, as the joyful nature of the reading assumes that when said judgment comes, the speaker(s) will be weighed and found worthy. To align those praying for deliverance from AIDS with David himself⁴⁴³ rhetorically insists that just as David – ostensibly granted the above deliverance on account of his being sufficiently penitent – was brought up from suffering, so could those whose lives were impacted most by AIDS expect equivalent attention and forgiveness.

Yet it is perhaps to no one's surprise that most of the scriptures brought to bear on the AIDS epidemic in these communal settings are from the New Testament – and not only from the New Testament, but specifically from the Gospels. While the words of Paul and the author of I John make brief appearances, it is the four accounts of the life of Jesus that provide the main biblical referents for those in crisis in these services. Considering the centrality of Jesus to the Christian message, appealing to Jesus' example and teachings provides not only a model for the divinely appointed order of the world, but serves as a preemptive trump card of sorts to the passages more frequently quoted by anti-gay forces. The supercessionist attitude of Christianity toward Judaism understands the Christocentric New Testament's "newness" in relation to the "Old" of the Hebrew Bible, letting the more recent texts stand as sufficiently authoritative to overrule any laws or paradigms laid down prior to them. Thus, a handy response to the perceived intransigence of the "lobber verses" is the example of Jesus, whose new-and-improved version of Jewish tradition both understands said tradition in need of an update and provides a corrective paradigm. While appeals to his life would not be especially authoritative in more ecumenical contexts,

⁴⁴³ Regardless of attributed or actual authorship of the individual psalms, many Christian traditions associate the whole book with David.

within Christian discourses they are *the* final word – and Word – on issues of morality, judgment, and righteousness.

Unsurprisingly, the suggested texts from denomination-level organizations feature the Gospels prominently. The 1992 Mennonite Mutual Aid "Response to HIV and AIDS" booklet sent to Germantown Mennonite as a combination informative resource and service guide suggests several texts from the Gospels: Matthew 7:1-5, 8:1-4, and 12:1-13; Luke 10:25-37 and 15:11-31; and John 5:1-14, 8:1-11, and 9:1-3. These suggestions seek to contextualize the issue of AIDS inside the most familiar passages – for instance, the two passages from Luke are the Good Samaritan and the Prodigal Son, respectively. The core language here is nonjudgment, which fits not only with the tone of the rest of the booklet, but with the demographics of the Mennonite Church at that time; Germantown Mennonite's stance during the aforementioned period of acceptance and open questioning turning toward its eventual active LGBT inclusivity was not standard among Mennonite congregations. The majority of these parables and accounts focus not only on Jesus as the healer, but on criticism received from Jewish onlookers for what was perceived as inappropriate distribution of those healing miracles. Unlike the Hebrew Bible passages discussed above, used in contexts directed toward PWAs and their immediate loved ones, these Gospel stories in this denomination-wide publication focus less on the promise of divine healing in the midst of suffering, and more on showing Jesus as a model of radical justice and compassion, to be emulated by those viewing the AIDS epidemic from the outside. (The amount of still somewhat elementary information supplied by this particular Mennonite publication indicates its being directed toward an audience lacking the general familiarity already present among affected and high-risk communities.) To this end, the

importance of applying Gospel stories to the AIDS epidemic in these text is to convince the uninfected that the stigma of AIDS should not get in the way of Christian calls to acceptance, all the while reassuring said uninfected with statistics of their general likelihood to remain uninfected. This general approach is also what characterizes the Gospel stories used in later, ecumenical Philadelphian prayer services – the call to judge not lest ye be judged, with the unspoken assumption that judgment of others is the strongest reaction one in that particular audience might have to AIDS.

An interesting change in this paradigm comes from the AIDS Ecumenical Prayer Service held on November 9th, 1987. Unlike traditional orders of worship, which usually work up to the Gospel reading later in the service, this service puts Matthew 27:39-50 early enough that it is listed in its entirety on the first page of the order of worship. This account of Jesus' crucifixion – which includes Jesus' crying out *Eli, Eli, lema sabachthani?* – is then followed by three smaller reflections: a piece from Atlanta with statistics about racial minorities' not receiving adequate education about or funding for AIDS, leading to disproportionately high infection rates; a news item about the HIV-positive (here-unnamed) Ray brothers, victims of arson forced to withdraw from school; and a paraphrase from *Newsweek* claiming "male homosexuals or drug users, the groups at ground zero of the devastation [make] up 90 percent of the known casualties of AIDS... the death of a generation of gay men."⁴⁴⁴ The notable theological work here is done not by exegesis, but by juxtaposition. By contrast to earlier Gospel usages, here the suffering are not those to

⁴⁴⁴ "AIDS Ecumenical Prayer Service" (religious service, Trinity Memorial Church, Philadelphia, November 9, 1987). This seems to be a highly edited and largely uncredited (beyond 'NEWSWEEK: AUGUST 1987') version of Peter Goldman's introduction to "The Face of AIDS" on p.22 of the August 10, 1987 edition of the magazine.

whom Jesus is ministering; the suffering are themselves Jesus, invited to identify not only with the pain of his crucifixion, but the unjustness of it. Jesus' question left unanswered – My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?⁴⁴⁵ – becomes the questioning voice of those trying to make sense of their own experiences of AIDS.

If that reason can be found at all in scripture, it is offered up most frequently in the context of John 8-9 and the story of the man born blind. As complicated and lengthy of a story as it is in its original form, the part reproduced in these texts is Jesus' answer to the question of connection between sinfulness and suffering. The excerpted and de-gendered version read in the September 1987 service is given in its entirety in the bulletin as follows:

As Jesus passed by, he saw a person blind from birth. And the disciples asked Jesus, "Rabbi, who sinned, this person or the parents, that the child was born blind?" Jesus answered, "It was not that this person sinned, or the parents, but that the works of God might be made manifest."⁴⁴⁶

In his 1989 Advent message, however, Gary Byrne gives an interpretive spin to Jesus' response that leaves no room, as there is in the previous excerpt, for accusations that suffering comes because God has somehow willed it, explicitly rejecting such "everything happens for a reason" theology:

"Who sinned to cause this boy's blindness?" Jesus was asked, "his parents or himself?" to which he replied that locating blame was just not the point; the thing to look for in illness is rather the power of God to hold and heal, for the glorification of the spirit of love.⁴⁴⁷

Again, I note, this version of the message insulates itself against anti-gay blowback by refusing to use scripture to argue the correctness of non-heterosexual behavior, especially

⁴⁴⁵ Both quotes are from the New English Bible.

⁴⁴⁶ "AIDS...An Inter-Faith Service of Prayer and Healing" (religious service, First Unitarian Church of Philadelphia, September 6, 1987).

⁴⁴⁷ Byrne, 5.

in light of what appears a direct correlation between "wrong" behavior and physical malady. This is not to say that gay Christians were not willing or able to make biblical arguments for the acceptability of same-sex sexual love and commitment; these texts are in fact full of these arguments, engagements, and claims. However, the immediacy of AIDS's danger seems to demand time and again a different rhetorical approach when asking for compassion from the uninfected – if disagreements over sexuality are too much of a stumbling block, focus instead on the example of Jesus' acceptance and outreach. To see that reasoning come from a gay-identified source is curious, but understandable considering that Byrne's audience was far more heterosexual than not, and affection and compassion for a familiar marginalized individual does not always translate perfectly to others in a similar marginal state. Likewise, this particular scripture passage, especially as Byrne interprets it, allows room for honest disagreement even over the question of AIDS as punishment while still arguing that exclusion is not the answer. As is the case with the example of Job, we mere mortals may never possess the perspective to gain a sufficient theological answer for why the epidemic, why then, why there, why them. These sexuality-neutral interpretations of the Christian message draw individuals away from the sticking point of that question, and thus toward the need for practical response no matter what the cause. While miraculous healings may not be an option, Christians were still invited in these services and by these scriptures to do justice, love kindness, and speak out against the cultural stigma against both AIDS and the people with it.

The Word Beyond the Word

Cone writes that "the truth of black religion is not limited to the literal meaning of the

[biblical] words,"⁴⁴⁸ something that is almost by necessity true in queer Christianity. Simply put, the Bible is not kind to same-sex sexual activity; the few passages in which the idea of it appears all treat it negatively, and its few available models of paired same-sex romantic affection claimed by later gay Christians do not end in traditional happily ever afters. While one may argue hermeneutics and ancient languages as one likes, the inescapable fact is that the English-language translations of the Bible with which most American Christians are familiar are the ones most easily pressed into the service of anti-gay theologies. Those who practice "spiritual violence", to again use Mel White's term, frequently do so with textual support as the main justification for their standpoints. To call them the 'clobber' verses is not wholly figurative language; biblical texts such as those have historically justified centuries of often state-sponsored outright violence against and murder of persons whose genders and sexualities did not conform to contemporary cultural standards.

Thus, the Bible has been and remains a touchy subject for queer Christians. It is a fraught document in many ways, especially for those who have strongly negative connections with conservative, so-called 'literalist' interpretations of its contents. Few LGBT individuals coming out of even more liberal, mainstream, Christian traditions have missed having the experience of being personally confronted with particular texts in order to cajole, beg, and/or threaten them to change their ways; I personally do not know a single openly gay Christian who has not, at some point, been confronted by others of the same faith wielding chapter and verse about the fate that awaits those who do not repent

⁴⁴⁸ Cone, 21.

heterosexually. Additionally, given how a significant portion of queer and AIDS activism at the time constructed itself in direct opposition to those interpretations and those who pushed policy based on them⁴⁴⁹, one can imagine how gay and lesbian Christians at the time might have found themselves still deeply fond of Jesus as a figure of compassion and deliverance, but been less comfortable with the work of trying to reconcile the whole book that went along with him.

That the contemporary readings in these prayer services often outnumber the scriptural ones speaks not to a perception that the Bible is a necessarily unhelpful resource, but to one that regards its wisdom as insufficient without immediate referents – the lived experience through which the *word* reveals the *Word*. The altogether-too-glib cultural treatment of the Bible as "God's Little Instruction Book" blurs unhelpfully the translation from source to application, when in fact, as the contents of these prayer services show, the gap between the ancient and the present must be crossed by the contemporary worshipper. Contextualizing the Bible with these modern-day news items and reflections from living authors also serves to anchor its meaning, using modern evidence to prove correct readings of ancient literature, which then in return justifies the congregational response to those pieces of evidence. The Bible becomes the lens through which the world is read, yet at the same time, the world becomes the lens for turning (and sometimes outright returning) to the Bible.

Perhaps it is not ultimately surprising that the majority of the texts produced by these gay Christian communities treat AIDS first and foremost as a practical, immediate concern.

⁴⁴⁹ Most notably, the title of ACT UP's 1989 "Stop the Church" action characterizes Christianity in general as a force to be opposed, when in fact the targets were specifically the New York Catholic hierarchy.

For every scriptural engagement with the meaning behind the epidemic found in the texts from these "AIDS years", there are many more reminders of opportunities for activism, calls to political protest, distillations of the newest medical advice available, and reminders of communal solidarity and support. When the theological arrives, it is in support of the quotidian. Reminders of the love of God and Jesus come with no scriptural citations. Often, sorrows and remembrances of individuals in these texts follow the order of the Christian year, appearing often during Lent and Advent, traditional seasons of waiting – events associated with, but also in a sense divorced from the actual biblical texts. To experience these church settings with no associated knowledge of the Bible itself takes no more effort than it does to experience spring without a science textbook. They are more keenly part of active, lived Christian reality, no longer belonging to an ancient, translated, interpreted set of pages.

This is not to say that gay Christians were willing to cede the Bible during this period to the Christian Right – to the contrary, continued insistence on familiar elements of Christianity, scripture included, shows a desire to prove that these traditional components still could have meaning and relevance beyond the exclusive ways in which the most prominent voices in the discourse claimed they must by necessity operate. As evidenced in several of these texts, particularly those produced by Dignity, gay and lesbian Christians from this period did *not* want to give control of their religious traditions over to the conservative and exclusionary camps laying claim to them. In part, simply refusing to leave *any* church or to give up claim to the label "Christian" was an act of resistance. Thus, scriptural relevance can only be understood in these communities in light of what were at the time non-normative experiences. The importance hung less with the individual

quotations of canonical texts and tales of past events, and more with the contemporary promises of deliverance from the evils of this world and the next. In this, gay Christians found that same truth beyond the confines of literalism, the Word beyond the word that leads to liberation.

CONCLUSION

The Book of Job carries one of the most poignant biblical discussions on the issue of theodicy, so poignant that it provides the basis of Rabbi Harold Kushner's well-known *When Bad Things Happen to Good People*. Throughout the Hebrew Bible, the righteous are promised great blessings upon them and their children. So what is a righteous man to make of not only not seeing this promise realized, but having tragedy upon tragedy befall him and his family? How does one, believing in a single omnipotent deity, reconcile faith in the goodness of God with the reality of suffering? When bad things do happen to good people, does it mean that those people are not actually as good as we thought? Does an all-seeing, all-powerful Almighty simply turn a blind eye to those who have ostensibly been promised protection? Or is there a different cosmic order at work, one which we lack the power to understand?

Taking a cue from Perry's rejection of a theology of AIDS, I argue: There is no "lesson" to be learned from AIDS. There are lessons, plural, to be certain: about safe sex, acceptance, community organization, political action, comfort in times of grief and loss. But the texts from these Christian communities refute time and again the idea that the theologically interesting part of the AIDS epidemic is the existence of the virus itself. In that sense, it is not surprising that the figure of Job appears throughout these texts, the model of the man visited by the wrath of the inexplicable. The frame to the story finds someone to blame, an Adversary intent on testing what seems to be a direct relationship between Job's professed righteousness and the goodness of his life. But Job himself never knows about this heavenly wager, and neither do his wife, his friends, or any of his children, dead or later born. They,

like PWAs and their loved ones in the first decade of the AIDS epidemic, see only what is before them, and proceed from that point forward.

It is through this understanding of the world, through a specifically Christian lens, that the communities represented here made sense of the first decade of AIDS and the swath it cut through Philadelphia. In response to the prevailing rhetoric from the Christian Right at the time, which did not blame but in fact credited God with visiting AIDS upon the world, gay and gay-friendly Christians returned to scripture and tradition in order to find an understanding of that same religious tradition that saw God not as the cause of maladies, but their remedy. They did so from the margins, creating these texts from a distinct position of disempowerment, in relation both to the culture at large and to the more prominent representatives of Christianity. However marginal their readings are, though, they are not disingenuous or shallowly self-serving; instead, they come from places of deep conviction and need, looking to much-loved stories and figures in order to answer profound questions not only in the abstract, but in response to the immediate present.

This is hardly a new development, nor is it particular to that time or place. The United States in the twentieth century in particular was full of individuals and groups re-reading Christianity from the periphery, responding to institutionalized oppression supported by mainstream Christian voices, and offering instead what they characterized as more authentic opportunities for liberation in Jesus' name. The American Civil Rights Movement is perhaps the most notable and visible of these, with its highly visible demonstrations and rhetoric against white supremacist readings of scripture, but other liberation theologies and Social Gospel movements during that same period sought to enact both secular and ecclesiastical change, using the Bible the primary support for their causes.

Likewise, the emergence of AIDS was neither the beginning nor the end of queer liberation theology, as the ill treatment of sexual and gender minorities by both branches of Christianity and secular culture prompted responses from Christian viewpoints that predate the first diagnosis by whole decades and have continued on to the present moment. AIDS, however, did change that rhetoric significantly, creating a crisis point which made that kind of theology not a luxury, but a necessity. The reality of the epidemic fuels action and reaction. It brings to the forefront Gary Byrne's *Last Things*: death, judgment, heaven and hell.⁴⁵⁰ It creates, especially for gay Christians, an unenviable dilemma: how, like Job, to keep praising God in the face of something which may kill you and everyone you love.

Nor, for that matter, should AIDS be considered a "worse" threat than that which prompted any other marginalized Christian response throughout history. It is both reductive and unproductive to attempt a hierarchy of oppressions, as no one's suffering should be dismissed or belittled simply because someone, somewhere, may have been having a worse day. The AIDS epidemic does, however, exist at a crux of factors that makes theological responses to it of particular interest. It struck (or seemed to strike) a group of individuals distinguished not by any uncontrolled genetic or physical factor, but by chosen identity and/or behavior; unlike marginalized communities unified by generations of struggle against a shared ethnic or cultural identity, gay men and lesbians had often only their chosen networks of caring and support to rely on, having often been rejected by their families. Its ability to spread to those beyond that initial identified infected group made it possible to divide the affected into categories of the "innocent" and those who were, by extension,

⁴⁵⁰ Byrne, 5.

guilty as sin. Its social stigma was repeatedly justified by legitimate fears of virulence and contagion, including pleas for radical action, lest the larger population be put at risk. Its connection to sex and sexuality built upon extant anxieties from the previous decades raised by prominent challenges to gender roles, family structures, and even the traditional mechanics of reproduction. Its connection to disease and contamination not only forced many to cede authority to scientific and biomedical communities, but played into other narratives of risk, behavior, and deservedness. It forced those most at risk to rely on structures and methods of knowing outside their immediate control, as the (often unknown) reality of the virus could not be changed simply by changing hearts and minds. And, of course, especially in the first decade, the disease itself was relentlessly debilitating and overwhelmingly fatal.

Providing a comprehensive picture of gay-positive Philadelphian Christian communities' responses to AIDS would be a task far larger than the scope of this project, and perhaps even an impossible one, considering the relative lack of text production and preservation during this period; adding to the difficulty of creating such a thorough retrospective is how many individuals active during this time period chose to remain anonymous or pseudonymous, or have died. Instead, the focus of this research has been to look at texts from a single place and a single time, from communities of similar social and theological opinions, in an effort to draw larger conclusions about how non-mainstream and marginalized Christian communities use their faith to respond visibly to crisis. During the twentieth century, congregations and other Christian groups that were openly and vocally inclusive of queer sexualities and gender identities were far off the mainstream experience of Christianity in the United States; often they were expressly unwelcome as

part of their larger denominations, or if they were permitted to keep fellowship, they found solidarity on these matters only with networks made of like-minded churches, creating connections in spite of larger ecclesiastical policies. Denominations such as the MCC, founded specifically to address the needs of gay and lesbian Christians, were often not considered "legitimate" denominations and as such were not allowed entrance into many larger ecumenical organizations.⁴⁵¹

However, this disconnect did have the added benefit of creating a sort of freedom which made both theology and activism possible. For instance, had Dignity been working fully under the auspices of the Catholic church, it would surely not have been able to offer its members endorsements of non-heterosexual sexualities (one can hardly imagine an official Catholic newsletter including an explicit endorsement for safe male-male sex, condoms included), nor would it likely have been allowed as many open challenges to Catholic hierarchy as the *Independence* included without serious reprisals. The need for both financial and spiritual support created ecumenical networks supported by representatives of multiple denominations – and sometimes even those outside Christianity – which could respond to immediate concerns regardless of denominational policy or polity. These groups could bring in controversial speakers, organize practical action, coordinate responses, and disseminate information without worrying about approval from a more conservative overseeing authority.

Likewise, the closer to the mainstream churches remained, the less radical their responses about AIDS and sexuality tend to be – in a sense, less "embracing the exile" and

⁴⁵¹ Most notable among these is the MCC's ongoing campaign to be recognized by the National Council of Churches; see Nancy Wilson, *Our Tribe: Queer Folks, God, Jesus, and the Bible* .

more merely tolerating it. In an era of declining church membership, pastors had (and still have) to be careful about the messages brought to their congregations, lest those congregants flock to less challenging messages, as seen in the responses to Germantown Mennonite's discussions about biblical perspectives on same-sex sexual behavior. Thus, it is not surprising that evidence of these responses is much sparser, and it comes around comparatively late in the epidemic. When these responses do arrive, usually created under the auspices of larger denominations and committees, they often sideline questions of sexuality or skirt the issue entirely beyond general calls to non-judgment; some shift the focus onto the effect of AIDS on groups other than homosexuals and IV drug users, generating more sympathy through the use of more unequivocally sympathetic victims. These also tend to be the viewpoints that characterize a needed response to AIDS as one of reaching out to the unfortunate Other, understanding it as a disease very near the Christian community, but rarely *in* it.

These individuals and organizations could take this slower, more measured approach because they – and the people they were addressing – were not the ones dying. AIDS was a terrifying unknown for most all Americans between 1982 and 1992, but the perception of risk often did not match up with its reality. As Treichler's work details, the coverage of AIDS in mainstream media is disproportionate in frequency and tenor to the likelihood that most readers would be infected. More mainstream books such as Amos' *When AIDS Comes to Church* assumes that when the disease does arrive in congregations, it will do so in the form of young men returning to their churchgoing families in their dying days; the funeral registry at St. Luke and the Epiphany reflects one example of that assumption made reality. The growing urgency of responses to AIDS from black churches in Philadelphia from 1990

going forward shows exactly how much proximity affects immediacy, as the changing infection patterns of the epidemic demanded new and more active responses from the communities now being affected. This is not to condemn these changes of heart and approach as insincere, or to chide these Christians for being unwilling to take radical action until their own loved ones began to suffer; rather, it is indicative of the truth shown time and again that the ones doing the most radical theological work are the ones most in need of it.

It was, therefore, the churches and Christian groups with LGBT congregants who took upon themselves the greatest weight of constructing this survival theology during the first decade of the AIDS epidemic. As important as these interpretive approaches would have been in the shadow of any contagion, they are doubly so considering that they were not only narratives, but *counter*-narratives. To remain silent would have been not to remain neutral, but to cede the rhetorical ground to Christian voices actively cheering on the demise of the gay community and everyone in it. To accept the "God's punishment" interpretation of the Christian Right would have been to accept an interpretation of the Divine that ran contrary to the message of loving acceptance and perfect intentional creation found in liberation theology. And to internalize this message might even have proven as deadly as AIDS itself, considering the high rates of self-harm and suicide among LGBT individuals (especially young people⁴⁵²) from conservative Christian households.

Allowing the Christian Right control of the discourse surrounding AIDS would not

⁴⁵² Gibbs, Jeremy J. "Religious Conflict, Sexual Identity, and Suicidal Behaviors among LGBT Young Adults." *Archives of suicide research : official journal of the International Academy for Suicide Research* 19.4 (2015): 472–488.

only have had ecclesiastical consequences. Political movements withdrawing funding for education and research about AIDS were often spearheaded by the politicians most ostentatiously aligned with conservative Christianity. While it is difficult to speculate just how far the public would have entertained proposals such as quarantine camps,⁴⁵³ creating a giant public list of the infected⁴⁵⁴, and making PWAs wear distinctive articles of clothing⁴⁵⁵, the fact that these ideas were being loudly supported by respected members of the Christian Right with prominent public platforms should not be downplayed. On a more local level, given the degree of practical activism, information-sharing, and fundraising undertaken by Christian groups shown in these texts, one can only imagine the different trajectory of the epidemic had these groups resigned themselves to God's purported judgment upon them.

Several larger themes characterize the responses from these groups, shedding light on ways in which other marginalized, besieged Christian communities might also use a shared religious identity as a unifying force to mobilize against whatever threatens its members.

Incorporation of Scripture

While the intense (and often violently divergent) diversity of Christianity cannot be overstated, as discussed in Chapter 5, one of the few unifying factors is an understanding

⁴⁵³ "Poll Indicates Majority Favor Quarantine for AIDS Victims." *New York Times*, December 20, 1985.

⁴⁵⁴ Kirp, David L. "LaRouche Turns To AIDS Politics." *New York Times*, September 11, 1986. History shows that at least the people of California would have none of this particular measure; LaRouche's controversial Proposition 64 was defeated.

⁴⁵⁵ "Putting Out the Message, Politicizing the Issues." *Los Angeles Times*, August 9, 1987, AIDS: A Global Assessment: Western Europe sec.

of the Bible as to some degree authoritative. Despite disagreements over translation, interpretation, and historicity, most modern Christians, particularly mainline Protestants and Catholics, recognize essentially the same Bible: the same set of books, verses, and foundational stories underlying the Christian tradition. Therefore, to use scripture is not only to make a bid for connection with Christianity's earliest roots⁴⁵⁶, but to call upon a language of signification shared among Christians in general. Incorporating biblical texts in these materials serves a variety of purposes, but these marginalized Christians use these scriptures to articulate their experience in two particular ways:

First, these readings are intentional, conscious counter-readings. These appeals to scripture do not occur in a vacuum; they exist in the very real context of mainstream Christianity near the end of the twentieth century, where anti-gay sentiment was not only present, but often at the forefront of the discourse. Most of the people who were part of these communities had either been ostracized from their home congregations or had otherwise encountered the idea of the incompatibility of homosexuality and Christianity. Appeals to scripture were (and remain) commonplace among anti-gay Christian rhetoric, particularly from the Christian Right, as leaders frequently called upon the Bible to justify continued social and legal condemnation of non-heteronormative sexuality and gender identities. Some even presented this in an apologetic manner: They would *like* to be accepting of homosexual identity and behavior, but they couldn't take a stance in opposition to God's Word. What the readings from these gay and gay-friendly communities provide is a response that declares the more restrictive readings incorrect interpretations of the

⁴⁵⁶ The Christian Trinitarian understanding of God characterizes Jesus as co-existent with God from the beginning (as perhaps best articulated in John 1); thus, all scripture by this reckoning is technically Christian scripture.

original texts, unjustly harsh in light of Jesus' later teachings on acceptance and inclusivity, or both.

Second, they connect modern struggles to authoritative faith figures, refuting the idea that somehow homosexuality is a uniquely modern malady, irreconcilable with true Christian identity – or that it is a condition so Othering that the homosexual and the heterosexual have nothing in common. These readings insist not only that the Bible has something to say about the experience of non-heterosexual persons, but that what it has to say is positive and compassionate. To apply these texts to members of this marginalized community is to claim that the struggle of gays and lesbians are not unique, but instead can be addressed by the same scripture beloved of heterosexual Christians. Reading stories such as Job and texts such as the Psalms toward the experiences of modern gay men and lesbians insists that the Bible has more to say about homosexuals than condemnations of their same-sex sexual behavior – and, contrary to rhetoric from the Christian Right, that there is more to homosexuals than genital activity. While not all comparisons are wholly favorable – the homosexual-as-leper paradigm retains its problematic aspects despite good intentions – inserting gays and lesbians into the same positive scriptural paradigms recognized by other Christians articulates a belief in the validity of their inclusion in Christian communities.

Applied Theology

The joking "let's pray about it" response to the conference-goer's pepper-burned mouth highlights a real concern about Christianity and social action – that, as the saying goes,

Christians are so heavenly minded that they're no earthly good. But certainly marginalized Christianity in the United States has a long connection with social action, using both the message of the Gospel and extant structures of communication to spur hearers to be doers. The power of the latter cannot be underestimated, especially given groups such as the gay community in the 1980s, where many members were not openly identified and thus not easily identifiable by those wanting to rally like-minded individuals toward activism even in their own interests. From fundraising drives to prayer groups to dinner services, these communities not only provided direct ways for individuals to get involved in AIDS-related causes, but characterized that activism as sanctified. Even the prayer services organized were their own forms of practical action, as they were not abstract gatherings for group prayer, but provided communal support for individuals dealing with fear, grief, and loss.

Another practical concern addressed by these groups was the concern of ignorance, which in the case of AIDS had the potential to bring about particularly deadly causes. Time and again, these groups not only disseminated practical, scientific, and/or legal information about the AIDS epidemic, they did so through officially sanctioned and produced church materials, giving the material an extra air of legitimacy. In a time of confusion and panic, with rumors and speculation flying, this kind of reassurance was key to stopping both the spread of the disease and the stigma surrounding it.

Perhaps most notably, the action these churches and groups undertook was rarely self-contained or religiously isolationist. Far from any sense that only approved Christian actions or actors would be sufficient to address this problem, these groups coordinated outside their denominations and with secular organizations as soon as those connections could be made. This indicates, among other things, an understanding of the AIDS epidemic

as multifaceted, complex enough to include issues that could be better addressed by more targeted organizations (such as the AIDS Law Project of Pennsylvania). It also involves not only a general loss of control over funds and authority, but an awareness that spiritual approaches would not be sufficient to address the issues. This is never characterized as a lack of faith in the ability of God to solve the practical problems of the world – indeed, the hope of miraculous healing appears time and again in these texts. Instead, prayers are for God's control over the mechanics of scientific advancement and knowledge, the wisdom of lawmakers and politicians, the hearts of everyday people. In direct contrast to the belief of AIDS as God's direct and divinely directed punishment, these approaches to theology reflect a somewhat less grandiose vision of Divine power. The answer, as put forth by these texts, is not to stop petitioning God for miracles, but to understand two things: first, that the lack of miraculous intervention does not indicate a lack of faith or a judgment upon an individual's righteousness; and second, that God's hand can be seen not only in radical, inexplicable happenings, but also in guiding human action. The sudden scientific discovery of a vaccine or even cure for AIDS would not, then, be understood by people with this mindset as a failure of action on God's part, but a successful campaign to convince God to give the individuals the wisdom they needed to make the relevant discoveries.

It is not difficult to understand why this particular theology might be so appealing to marginalized groups; after all, understanding God as capable of frequent, large-scale miraculous intervention then raises the question of why God has not as yet intervened in the sufferings of minority communities. Those in positions of privilege outside the community can more easily feel comfortable in interpreting this continued subjugation of the Other as a natural and even deserved state. From those socially marginalized faithful,

however, the reality of oppression runs counter both to the liberation promised by Jesus and to their lived experiences of grace. Oppression, then, is not understood as a constant state maintained by the will of God, but an imperfect condition requiring direct human action to rectify. Thus, these texts return time and again to the good of practical action such as spreading awareness, petitioning secular lawmakers, giving of time and money, and satisfying the immediate physical and emotional needs of those most affected by AIDS – not waiting for God to work, but becoming the means through which God's work is accomplished.

Visibility

One of the major early strategies among groups during the early years of the AIDS epidemic involved simply being seen. Some of these tactics centered around the visual arts, posting artwork in public places and putting "AIDS profiteer" stickers on Burroughs Wellcome products⁴⁵⁷; others, like coordinated "die-ins" and other acts of bodily civil disobedience, took their cues from the Civil Rights Movement and created un-ignorable human presences; still others crossed straight into the illegal and arguably unsanitary, such as bringing deceased PWAs' crematory ashes and casketed bodies to the White House fence with intent to deposit those remains on the front lawn.⁴⁵⁸ While these tactics were preceded among gay and lesbian activists by events such as the Annual Reminder and pride parades, the urgency of the epidemic led to more intrusive demonstrations. Regardless of the

⁴⁵⁷ Hilts, Philip J. "Wave of Protests Developing On Profits From AIDS Drug." *New York Times*, September 16, 1989.

⁴⁵⁸ The "Political Funerals" chapter of David Feinberg's *Queer and Loathing: Rants and Raves of a Raging AIDS Clone* tells the story of several very pointed attempts at body disposal.

specifics of the approach, the overall goal was to reach the people for whom AIDS was not an everyday threat, those who could (at least for the time being) afford to ignore it and hope it went away.

Especially during the 1980s, AIDS was a disease of closets, and much of what let it spread as far as it did unchecked was both its connection to gay male sexuality and culture's insistence that if this type of sexual behavior be allowed to happen at *all*, it occur far out of sight of normal, decent people. But as a number of queer theologians from the past decades have noted, concealing one's real identity runs contrary to the New Testament messages of not hiding one's light under a bushel and not denying truth even under penalty of death. While the messages from these majority-gay congregations did not out or even threaten to out people against their will, they did associate Christian identity with making one's authentic presence known. Similarly, messages such as those from University Lutheran encouraged straight congregants to open their eyes to that visibility, noticing the plight of those who might otherwise feel compelled to suffer in silence. Churches and other Christian groups could coordinate their members to provide overt support and outreach, especially on special occasions; communal demonstrations such as candlelight marches and participation in AIDS walks provided opportunities for group visibility and safety in numbers.

What the connection to Christianity and established congregations/denominations provided these groups was respectability, often in a way that secular groups such as ACT UP did not attempt to achieve. Leaving aside for a moment (if not forever) the fruitless question of which approach was more effective, it is important to note that the approaches put forth by these groups could be considered theologically radical, but were somewhat

socially mainstream, especially in comparison to acts of civil disobedience. The goal of these groups was not anti-establishment deconstruction, but eventual inclusion into extant structures, an approach supported by appeals to respectability and existing presence. While this is not true of all marginalized Christians, the gay and lesbian Christians of these groups and their supporters were able to respond by working with and inside existing systems of power and authority, such as supporting scientific research and championing political activism. To this end, visibility was key in allowing gay and lesbian Christians to present themselves not as outsiders, but as unjustly marginalized members of the Body of Christ. This also opened up opportunities for others to see and join in: "WE BUILD COMMUNITY FOR ONE ANOTHER," proclaims 'Scotty' in the June 1985 issue of the *Independence*,⁴⁵⁹ proclaiming not only the benefits to members who put their time and effort into Dignity's causes, but the opportunities those actions open up for others who might not otherwise have been aware.

Apocalypse

Christianity cannot disentangle itself from the language of apocalypse, not without divorcing itself significantly from its foundational texts. Nearly the whole of the New Testament exists on the assumption of the imminent coming of the Kingdom of God, the return of all things to the perfect Divine order promised, where the good will be rewarded for the injustices they have suffered at the hands of the wicked, and the wicked punished for the same. For communities suffering under persecution and/or catastrophe, apocalypse

⁴⁵⁹ Scotty. "We Have Met the Enemy and He Is Us!" *The Independence* 12 (June 1985): 2.

is an appealing narrative; not only does it assure them that the pains of the world are only temporary, it reaffirms the *theo* in theodicy, assuring believers that even though God's plan may be ineffable, it does exist. It is for this reason Christian thinkers throughout history have urged believers to cast off material concerns, understanding worldliness as a direct contradiction to the ideal state promised in Christ.

Reading AIDS as a harbinger of the end of days is not a strategy unique to gay Christians; many conservative Christians have interpreted the epidemic as one of what Amy Johnson Frykholm calls "the Signs of the Times", dispensational premillennialist proof that the world is spiraling downward toward a glorious conclusion.⁴⁶⁰ The difference, of course, hinges on whether one believes that homosexuals will be sorted among the sheep or the goats⁴⁶¹ at this decisive moment. Conservative Christian interpretations see the eschaton as something that gay men and lesbians should fear and, fearing it, should then use as the catalyst to turn their lives back toward the ideal of heterosexuality.

When the idea of these Last Things appears in texts from these gay Christian communities, however, it does not carry the same call for lifestyle change. Instead, it is a promise: sometimes fearful, sometimes joyful, but always with the same reassurance of God's control of history. Picking up the rhetoric of the world as evil seems particularly poignant for a minority community accustomed to social stigma and legal discrimination, and now visited by the horror of disease. Instead of proposing repentance, these texts encourage readers to be strong in their convictions, so that they will hold on to hope instead

⁴⁶⁰ Frykholm, Amy Johnson. *Rapture Culture: Left behind in Evangelical America*. Oxford, England: Oxford University Press, 2004. 106-107

⁴⁶¹ See Matthew 25.

of drowning in sorrow. That hope is the hope of a 'correct' restoration, where human standards will give way to God's standards – with the assumption here, of course, being that God's standard includes the loving and erotic relationships shared among people of all genders, sexualities, and physical configurations.

To this way of thinking, at the end of the day, the end of the world is good news! As true as one could argue this possibly ought to be for all Christians, it is a particularly appealing promise to those who are (or at least perceive themselves to be) persecuted. It answers the question of theodicy with a promise that no matter how out-of-control everything may seem, it is all in more capable hands. The sick may suffer and die unjustly, but their souls are more important than their bodies, and someday they will have perfect, even angelic, bodies free of disease. Those who have been punished for loving will be made free to love in the embrace of a God who *is* love. The "day of very real and great glory", to use the language of Pastor Joseph Gilbert writing in the *Bellringer*, is on its way despite hardships: "So maybe the troubling thing...whatever that may be...is itself a sign that better things are at hand."⁴⁶²

Embracing the Exile

Contrary to efforts in popular secular and religious discourse to characterize gay identity as a risk factor, an unwise choice, or a one-way ticket to eternal damnation, the Christians who were a part of the communities that produced these texts consistently understood their difference as blessing. In no way was it an easy blessing – the practical

⁴⁶² Gilbert (1985-6), 3.

realities of operating inside largely anti-gay society and religion made arguing otherwise impossible – but as Dignity member Bob Fritz articulates in a thanksgiving prayer printed in the November 1987 issue of the *Independence*, there is insight to be had from the margins. The hardships of being gay in a majority-straight society, like the hardships of being part of a demographic disproportionately affected by AIDS, are also opportunities for learning to be better people:

Thank you, Lord, for the gift of homosexuality.

Because, in being different from others, we learned to value those who are different from ourselves.

Because, in being misunderstood, we learned how to value understanding.

Because, in being rejected, we learned to welcome those who are alienated.

Because, by enduring laughter and ridicule, we learned to value ourselves.

Because, by being denied our rights, we learned to be strong and assertive.

Because, by being excluded from the mainstream, we learned to be creative.

We thank you, Lord, for the gift of homosexuality.

Because, when we were isolated from the crowd, in our loneliness, we discovered one another, and we discovered You.⁴⁶³

As John Fortunato says in his own 1982 discussion of embracing exile, "For gay Christians to be able to love, give, and find meaning in a world that rejects and isolates them, the cruel gash separating their sexuality from their spirituality must be healed."⁴⁶⁴ The advent of AIDS shortly after the publication of Fortunato's book made that healing an

⁴⁶³ Fritz, Bob. *The Independence* 14 (November 1987): 3.

⁴⁶⁴ Fortunato, 18.

even more theologically radical proposition. To claim a positive connection between queer identity and Divine love was not only to reject accusations that AIDS was a God-sent plague to punish sexual deviants, but to claim that God's love is even stronger for those on the margins than it is for those doing the marginalizing. While calls to action among majority-straight congregations often took to ignoring questions of sexuality altogether, the responses to AIDS from gay communities never faltered in an insistence that not only was gay good, but that the gay community's insights had much to teach everyone else. AIDS itself even became proof of that blessing – not in its existence, but in the ways that it gave gay and lesbian Christians the opportunity to act faithfully and compassionately toward those in need. By that argument, the visible proof of how excellent gay and lesbian Christians are at following the example of Jesus should make them a model for others, especially those Christians who did not feel compelled to respond compassionately to the epidemic.

While the texts from this period pushed back (albeit infrequently) against the promiscuous excesses of the previous decade, they echoed that same need for solidarity inside a clear identity. Though shared identity is always important, especially among marginalized groups, it is perhaps even more vital for LGBT persons, who especially during the twentieth century needed to shore up support against the double rejections of family and society. At the same time, I believe it is critical to note that what is being embraced here is not only gay identity, but a specifically Christian gay identity. To embrace the exile in Fortunato's terms is not to embrace the idea that said exiling was justified, but neither is it to reject outright the structures that have been used by others to justify marginalization. In the midst of an overwhelmingly binary cultural discourse about religion

and sexuality, the gay Christians in these texts – and, to a somewhat lesser degree, their supporters – rejected entirely a narrative of incompatibility. The argument was not Paul's Galatians 3 approach, insisting that in Christ there is neither homosexual nor heterosexual, but instead involved celebrating that difference. Reconciliation between the church at large and its exiled queer children, then, is not understood here as doing the lepers the favor of letting them back into the acceptable community, but as re-membering the broken Body of Christ, until everyone is healed and whole.

Synopsis and Findings

The story of the AIDS epidemic in the United States is a complicated one, and one which changes in the telling. That multiple secular organizations were involved in fighting for the political and social rights of PWAs is absolutely true; so is that influential conservative Christian voices were often the forces they found themselves opposing. As Lierman's work shows, there is incredible wealth in this analysis, especially in terms of illuminating the way culture has constructed these concepts of 'gay' and 'religious', and how those who claim each identity have often constructed said identity in intentional opposition to the other group. Similarly, New York and San Francisco were and are still coastal cities of tremendous importance to gay life in the United States, providing centers of activity and culture that were hit hardest by AIDS, and that fought back in equal, visible measure. These were the clearest battles, the most influential locations, the places that saw the most clearly articulated categories of difference and resistance.

And yet, looking at the middle, at just some of the places where these poles not only

meet but overlap, changes the story completely. Just as the individuals and groups examined in this dissertation sought to provide a counter-narrative to the prevailing discourse that claimed authority over biblical truth, my work here exists in no small part as evidence that the story is more complicated than culture and academia alike have made it out to be.

Chapter 2's accounting of the years from 1982 to 1985 focuses predominantly on two gay Christian groups, MCC Philadelphia and Dignity Philadelphia, largely because the AIDS epidemic to that point had disproportionately affected gay men and MSMs. The slow political climate and scientific uncertainties meant that even though much of the country had heard of AIDS by 1985, understandings of its scope and impact had not become sufficient to counteract its initial characterization as a 'gay plague'. In response to accusations from the Christian Right assigning blame for AIDS to the sinful life choices of homosexuals, these groups used religious language to reassure their members that God still loved them and would not visit a plague upon them. At the same time, the longevity of the epidemic had not yet begun to be clear – nor, for that matter, had the mortality rate, meaning that pleas for political action and fundraising from these predominantly gay Christian groups were often more prominent than theological discussion. Only as the epidemic grew in magnitude did the apocalyptic uncertainty begin to creep into the discussion.

The period from 1986 to 1989, discussed in Chapter 3, was characterized largely by the involvement of churches whose membership was predominantly heterosexual. Churches such as University Lutheran still presented "the homosexual" and PWAs as belonging to an othered group, but at the same time called for compassion and welcome toward these individuals. Due to a multiplicity of factors – C. Everett Koop's household mailer, more

comprehensive and accessible media coverage, a growing number of celebrities diagnosed, skyrocketing numbers of diagnoses in Africa – the American public had begun to understand that whatever the epidemic might become, it would not be contained to the gay community. Focus in both gay and gay-affirming churches began to incorporate responding to the basic needs of those affected by AIDS, such as UniLu's Feast Incarnate for homeless PWAs, Dignity's multiple donation drives for everyday and medical necessities, and cross-church political activism against cuts in funding for AIDS programs. As the end of the decade neared, being gay-affirming was no longer such a requirement for an individual or congregation to get involved in Christian AIDS activism; instead, interfaith services and denominational efforts began to discuss gay PWAs as just one group among many, and homosexuality as something worth pity, not death.

At the start of the 1990s, the larger landscape in the United States regarding AIDS shifted considerably, a change made possible in part by significant celebrity and political involvement. As discussed in Chapter 4, between 1990 and 1992, figures such as Ryan White and Magic Johnson changed the public face of AIDS forever. At the same time, shifting demographic patterns of the infection meant that while new infections among gay men were on the decline, heterosexual and IV drug transmission, particularly among communities of color, had sent the epidemic marching through entirely new communities. Thus, while AIDS never stops being a religious issue, during this period it becomes a cause taken up by corporations, celebrities, individuals, and agencies unlikely to ally themselves with necessarily gay-associated causes. Churches such as Berean Presbyterian, which had formerly condemned AIDS and those with it, found a need to change their rhetoric as new infections began popping up inside their congregations. Freed from both the stigma of a

perceived targeted infection and the constant need to defend themselves rhetorically against arguments from the Christian Right, gay Christians in these Philadelphian communities could turn their attention more fully to the idea that not only might they live through this, but that their ability to form an ethical response to sexuality in the light of crisis showed God's blessing on gay Christians.

What I feel is of particular interest in the findings here is not so much that this work presents any change to the existing timeline or understanding of the trajectory of AIDS in the United States, but that the materials contained herein emphasize exactly how important Philadelphia's gay-affirming Christian communities were both to the city's gay heritage in general and to its response to the AIDS epidemic in particular. It is impossible to tell a secular AIDS story in Philadelphia – from the beginning, Christian groups were involved, creating and shaping both spiritual and practical responses that rejected the "Wrath of God Syndrome" narrative and affirmed the divine goodness of gay individuals and relationships. Telling the story of AIDS as a story of opposites characterizes the prevalent cultural narrative, but leaves out the lives and efforts of a significant number of people and organizations. And this work is not wholly comprehensive – even here, there are a number of churches left unrepresented, faith traditions (such as the city's significant Jewish population) left unconsidered, and voices left unheard. Still, that such substantial evidence of the gay-affirming, activist faithful exists even in the records of only a few groups should lead us to question if the stories we tell about sexuality, religion, and disease reflect the reality they claim to depict.

Thus, it is my hope that this work contributes not only to the specifics of Philadelphian and epidemiological history, but to the way scholars of sexuality and religion consider the

importance of the intersection between the two identities. While significant scholarship of late has given more and more weight to the importance of queer believers of all stripes, it is also important to consider exactly how important those individuals and their communities are to gay communities at large. Without Philadelphia's gay Christian activism and organization, its secular responses to AIDS would have been substantially diminished. At the core of this activism was not only self-interest, but a faithful understanding of Jesus' healing and transforming message as belonging to gay and lesbian Christians not in spite of their sexuality, but ultimately because of it.

CODA: Revelation

When I went to the William Way Community Center, I found some of the material I needed had been three-hole punched and stored in massive, thick-ringed binders. Because of the way the pages had been turned before they'd last been put away, I found that instead of shifting all the papers to the right side of the binder at once, I'd have an easier time going through the material in an antichronological right-to-left manner.

1992 was never difficult to find – but what *was* difficult to find were mentions of AIDS. They were still present in various contexts, but they were few and far between, and were presented as cause for concern, but not alarm; overwhelmingly by that point, the advice was more practical than spiritual, and sometimes the language even focused on AIDS abroad to the point that one might be forgiven for coming away with the assumption that the epidemic at home had been settled. Back, back I went, leaf by leaf, rolling back the clock on the crisis. It rose like a wave, peaking and fretting and cresting all the way back

to 1986, when panic and confusion seemed written between every line.

And then, almost as though that wave had crashed, mentions thin out. Other concerns and objectives begin to filter back in. The plague language dries up. Flipping back on the way to my chosen start date of 1982, I began to find nothing. To my eyes, which had been so tuned to finding related material, the pages were all but blank. Back, back, I went, rewinding time, back before the plague existed, before *I* existed, before the NAMES Project and AZT and ACT UP and GRID and WOGS and all other acronyms created to describe the indescribable. Back before anyone knew what was to come.

Moving from one end to the other, I had seemed to have erased history just by turning pages, until at last it was as though none of it had even happened at all. In a way, it was all so perfectly eschatological, a movement not unlike that dreamed by biblical prophets, back to the Garden, to a time before some Fall, for better or for worse, made us all what we are.

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