

Terry's story

by Terry Boyd, member of Lafayette Park United Methodist Church, St. Louis. Terry died in 1990 from AIDS-related complications. Excerpt from his article in HIV/AIDS Ministries Network Focus Papers, a publication of the Health and Welfare Ministries, General Board of Global Ministries, The United Methodist Church, New York.

I vividly recall a night in December about a year ago. It was 6:00 p.m., very cold and getting dark. I was waiting for a bus to go home, standing behind a tree for protection from the wind. I had recently lost a friend to AIDS. From whatever measure of intuition God had given me, I knew suddenly and quite certainly that I also had AIDS. I stood behind the tree and cried.

I was afraid. I was alone and I thought I had lost everything that was ever dear to me. In that place, it was very easy to imagine losing my home, my family, my friends and my job. The possibility of dying under that tree, in the cold, utterly cut off from any human love seemed very real. I prayed through my tears. Over and over, I prayed: "Let this cup pass." But I knew.

Several months later, in April, the doctor told me what I had discovered for myself. The challenge of having AIDS is not dying of AIDS, but living with AIDS. I didn't come to these realizations easily and, unfortunately, wasted precious time caught up in what I thought was the tragedy of my impending demise.

Back when I lost the first of my friends to AIDS, I knew that one friend, Don, had been sick. It seemed like he was in and out of the hospital with this and that and didn't seem to be getting any better. Finally, the doctors diagnosed AIDS. By the time he died, he had been affected with dementia and was blind. When his friends found out he had AIDS, many of us did not visit him while he was in the hospital.

Yes, that included me. I was afraid, not of catching AIDS, but of death. I knew I was at risk and that in looking at Don I could be looking at my own future. I thought I could ignore it, deny it, and it would go away. It didn't. The next time I saw Don was at his funeral. I am ashamed and I know that none of us, even those with AIDS, are exempt from the sins of denial and fear. If I had just one wish, just one, it would be that none of you would have to experience the death of a loved one before you realize the extent and seriousness of this crisis. What a terrible, terrible price to pay.

I can tell you truthfully that I have seen Christ. When I see someone holding a person with AIDS who is crying desperately, I know I am in the presence of holiness. I know Christ is present. He is there in those comforting arms. He is there in the tears. He is there in love, truly and fully. There stands my Saviour. Critics notwithstanding, He is here in the church, in the person sitting next to me in the pew on Sunday; in my pastor who has shared tears with me on more than one occasion; in the widow at church who is helping us to set up an AIDS caring network. And you can be a part of that ...

Soon after I had discovered I had AIDS, the most important person in my life brought home a small package of seeds. They were sunflowers. We lived in a small apartment with a tiny patio with a bare patch of earth — really more of a flower box than any sort of a garden.

He said he was going to plant the sunflowers in the “garden.” Okay, I thought. Our luck with growing things had never been tremendous, especially such large plants as pictured on the package in such a small plot of ground. And I had much more important fish to fry. I was, after all, dying of AIDS and I had never paid much attention to anything as mundane as flowers in a flower box.

He planted the seeds and they took hold. By summertime, they stood at least seven feet high with glorious, bright yellow blooms. The blossoms followed the sun religiously and the patio became a hive of activity as bees of all descriptions hovered relentlessly around the sunflowers. Out of row upon row of apartments, which were indistinguishable from one another, it was always easy for me to spot our patio with those great halos of yellow towering high above the fence. How precious those sunflowers became. I knew I was coming home: home to someone who loved me. When I saw those sunflowers, I knew that everything, in the end, would be all right.

For those of you who do care and find yourself ready to make this kind of Christian commitment, I would like it very much if you could come to my house. We wouldn't do a whole lot. We would just sit on kitchen chairs, have some iced tea, and watch the bees in the sunflowers.