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The Presiding Bishop's Message on AIDS
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Dear Friends in Christ,

More than six years after the initial cases were diagnosed, Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome (AIDS) continues to be a frightening, powerful force in our lives. To date there is no vaccine, no cure, and little available treatment for AIDS. By 1991, 270,000 of our brothers and sisters will have been diagnosed with the disease and 179,000 will have died in the United States of America.

AIDS now touches most of our lives. There is scarcely a person I meet these days who has not lost a relative, friend, fellow parishioner, or acquaintance to AIDS. Some have lost dozens. But even if the disease does not impinge on our lives in the form of an actual afflicted person, AIDS assuredly touches all of us with the terror it evokes: the fear that we, a son or daughter, or a close friend will begin showing symptoms, suffer the painful physical wasting and mental deterioration that AIDS frequently produces, and then die. The fear of AIDS and our response to that fear draws us all into the AIDS circle. None of us can escape the dilemma. How shall we endure this?

The most supportive rhetoric one hears publicly about AIDS usually is couched in terms like, "We're going to lick this virus," or "AIDS is our Number One Enemy." There is no question that we must do everything possible to find a vaccine and a cure for AIDS. We must engage the best minds and the most advanced methods of scientific inquiry to try to alleviate the enormous suffering being caused by this disease. Compassion demands that we try to eradicate it. Yet in the interim, what are we to do?

Perhaps what most challenges our secularized 20th century world is AIDS' seemingly unavoidable fatal outcome, often claiming the young and the robust. Death, especially "untimely" death, knocks the slats out from under our contemporary illusions of immortality. We thought that science would deliver us from plagues and pestilence. We were convinced that technology would provide relief from all our woes. We had even begun to believe that by "taking good care of ourselves" we could stay young and

healthy forever. AIDS has pulled us up short on all these scores. It shouts "Death!" to the ends of the earth now, and no scientific savior is in sight.

This rude intrusion of AIDS into our lives, its persistence, and the slim hope of any imminent scientific solution leave us profound and disturbing questions: Why is this happening? What is God's will in this? And how are we to respond? Some would give us facile answers to those questions. The most hateful rhetoric one hears about AIDS nowadays centers on blaming some of the victims of AIDS for the disease: "Drug addicts are getting what they deserve," "Homosexuals are being punished for their lifestyles" or "This is God's judgment on our corrupt and decadent society." These are regrettable, unconscionable responses.

For Christians, AIDS challenges the heart of our faith. Because AIDS is ruthless and indiscriminate, it confronts us with the oldest and hardest paradox: how can an all-loving God permit this plague? Or worse, we ask: Is this what God wills? Why does the Lord not intervene? Can our loving God really want an infant to suffer and die from AIDS? Or hemophilia? Can a truly all-merciful deity stand by and watch any child suffer so?

It is hard not to be spiritually shaken in the face of these questions. It is so much easier to focus on fighting AIDS on scientific, secular turf or, on supposedly moral grounds, to blame its victims.

And so it is that AIDS provides us with a prodigious spiritual challenge. For I am persuaded that, in the midst of the anguish of AIDS--in the very center of it--we are being called home to the basic tenets of our faith. While it is not easy to see grace in so dreadful a situation as this, I believe God's light can shine forth with unprecedented radiance precisely by virtue of this excruciating chapter in world history. I believe we are being called anew to trust in God and to be willing to help and suffer with others. I call for compassion.

First, AIDS confronts contemporary rationalism, scientism and narcissism by reminding us that death awaits each of us. If the fact of death is not owned as part of the reality of being human, Christianity becomes vapid, as indeed it has become for many who call themselves Christians. AIDS demands we flesh out the affirmation that we are a "Resurrection People." AIDS puts us on the line about our faith in the life of the new age. For we claim that life is not stopped at the ending of one's earthly existence. We hold that Love is stronger than death. AIDS compels us to look deeper into our Resurrection hope.

Second, AIDS leaves us no choice but to surrender to God's loving care. We simply cannot know why this disease has erupted into

human history. And we dare not be so arrogant as to claim this as God's judgment on anyone. All we can affirm is that God's wisdom is not our wisdom and that it is for God alone to judge. And so, forced to the edge of our technological prowess, we are left with only one viable option: to trust in God's care for the creation and God's strong purpose of redemption even in all of this, to throw ourselves on the Lord's mercy and to trust--when all reason fails us--that God is loving us even now, even as those we love are dying. We must remember that we worship and trust a God who became incarnate, who was an outcast, who suffered, who overcame death.

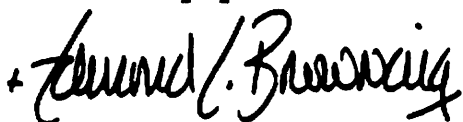
Finally, AIDS gives us a new and compelling opportunity to be the authentic Church our Savior Jesus Christ calls us to be. For if Love is stronger than death, if the kingdom truly is in our midst as Jesus proclaimed, and if we take seriously our claim to be Christ's Body on earth, then AIDS can be balanced by a divine mandate: we must love those who, in this crisis, need our love. We must help those whom this disease leaves helpless. We must comfort those who mourn. And we must encourage those whose courage has flagged. For if we are to show forth the kingdom we proclaim, my brothers and sisters, then in this particularly painful time, we must be noteworthy above all for our compassion.

The Episcopal Church has taken a leadership role in both the personal ministry to people living with AIDS and the pastoral and educational task of changing social attitudes from fear to compassionate love. In parishes, through interreligious coalitions, by diocesan taskforces, in partnership with medical and governmental agencies, Episcopalians are deeply engaged in AIDS ministries. I am deeply gratified and encouraged by this overwhelming response across the Episcopal Church in every place. It is testimony to God's call to the faithful to address a current need.

In 1986, I asked that a Sunday be observed in our churches as a special day of prayer for those suffering from AIDS. In 1987, as the number of afflicted increases, I request with renewed fervor that this observance be repeated. I have set aside Sunday, November 8, to be an AIDS Day of Prayer throughout The Episcopal Church. I urge you to join with me on that day in asking God to grant continuing love and care to those who have died of AIDS, to be merciful to those who suffer, to comfort those who are bereaved or afraid, to bless those who provide primary care for AIDS victims, and to strengthen all of us in faith so that we may show forth God's love in the midst of this tribulation.

God bless you in all your faith and good works.

Faithfully yours,



The Most Reverend Edmond L. Browning
Presiding Bishop and Primate