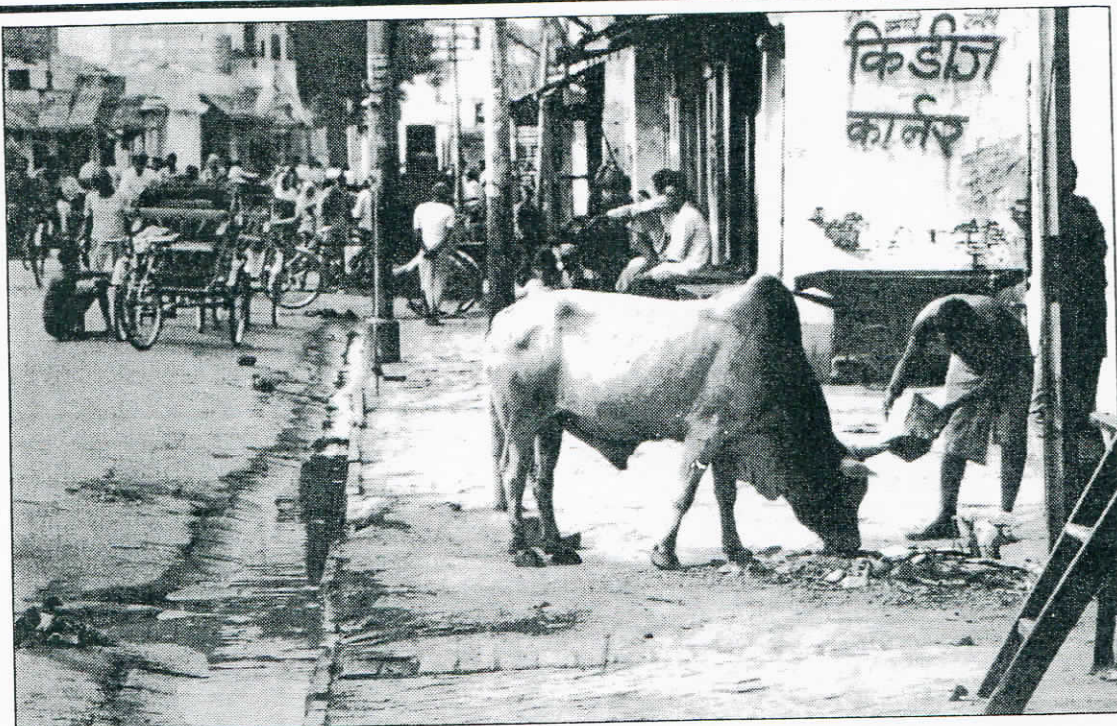

The Christian CENTURY

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Teaching Values in India

MAX L. STACKHOUSE

We Are the Church with AIDS

KITTREDGE CHERRY and JAMES MITULSKI

Israel and the
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domination, and by introducing new religious possibilities that could legitimate new behaviors by those under domination.

Today, modern scholarship is translating and writing commentaries on the great texts of the world's religions at an unparalleled pace. The views of world history's greats are at hand. At the same time, the world church has become alert to the poor and the oppressed who have no voice, and many are being given one as we properly offer our prayers, our resources and our time to aid the dispossessed.

How are we to deal with the new and rising middle classes of the Third World, represented by these Indian teachers and college students? They are at the cutting edge of modernization in their culture. What shall Christianity around the world say to those who are neither part of the elite nor in poverty but on the way to new kinds of leadership?

Part of the answer to this question will depend on what role we think the educated middle classes will play in the church and in the future of civilizations, and what part we think religion plays in shaping social morality. I suspect that religion deeply shapes social morality, and that Christianity implies both a social duty to care for the poor and the oppressed and an intellectual duty to understand the great philosophies of the elites that have shaped cultures for centuries. But the more difficult and

ultimately more fateful question is whether Christians can define and refine those basic ethical principles that can support, sustain and guide tomorrow's middle classes (which we want the poor to rise into and the elites to heed).

It may be as much of a sociological law of history as we can presently establish that it is the middle classes who determine the destiny of modern civilizations. When they are strong, democracy, human rights and economic productivity tend to prevail. When they are not strong, the result is the polarization of the rich and poor and a fluctuation between the tyrannies of the right and those of the left.

In their own unassuming ways, simply by trying to be good teachers for their students, Christian teachers in the Christian colleges of India are taking up questions that are the most crucial for Asia's future. They are embarking on a historical experiment—which will surely last more than a lifetime—that tests this question: Does Christianity provide universal values that can be transposed into a new idiom for a new class and thereby influence the reconstruction of a great Asian civilization? Or does Asian change have to pass through the Maoism of China, the "killing fields" of Indochina, the tyrannies of a Pakistan or a Korea, or the robotics of Japan? On these matters, the still quite modest efforts in the Indian colleges just might be worth following. ■

We Are the Church Alive, the Church with AIDS

KITTREDGE CHERRY and JAMES MITULSKI

“HEAVEN HAS as much to do with life before death as with life after death.” Steven Clover was able to voice that vision in the last months before he died of AIDS, as his body fought off rare forms of cancer, pneumonia and other disease. Once dapper and golden-haired, he was the essence of a refined gentleman, the sort who might own a couple of jewelry stores in Boston—which he did. He also served

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as an assistant pastor of a black church, Union Baptist Church in Cambridge. He left all that behind in August 1986 to attend Pacific School of Religion in Berkeley and Metropolitan Community Church of San Francisco (MCC-SF), a predominantly white church in a denomination that ministers to the lesbian and gay community.

In October of that year he was diagnosed with AIDS, and as Christmas approached he was hospitalized. Thirty children from a black Baptist church in San Francisco showed up at the hospital to sing carols for Clover and other people with AIDS (commonly referred to as PWAs). In the ensuing months he was able to bring together the congregations

of Double Rock Baptist Church, which condemns homosexuality as a sin, and MCC-SF, which preaches that homosexuality is a gift from God. These seemingly irreconcilable churches sponsored events together, including a gospel music concert that raised more than \$1,000 for the San Francisco AIDS Foundation Food Bank in July 1987. Clover died a month later.

Clover's church is our church, MCC-SF, which is encircled by San Francisco's biggest gay and lesbian neighborhood. And in many ways, Clover's story is our story. What he and others have experienced individually, we have undergone and still undergo as an institution. We believe that our drama is having an

impact on the larger body of the whole Christian community, especially churches whose members include parents, relatives and friends of PWAs.

Currently, we know of 30 congregants who have AIDS, and the number threatens to keep rising. About two-thirds of the men in the congregation are "antibody positive," a sign that they have been in contact with the AIDS virus. Every week our worship service attracts at least one person who was just diagnosed. Death also attends weekly—the death of a member or a member's friend. Moreover, we perform several memorial services each month for people with AIDS who have never set foot in our church. Their friends and relatives, who come from churches all across America, turn to us because they know we will welcome them, honor gay relationships, and provide acceptance that they cannot expect from most mainline churches.

Just as our members with AIDS suffer discrimination in housing, employment and medical care, our church suffers anti-AIDS discrimination. For example, a Roman Catholic retreat center said we could not use its facility unless we informed other groups that people with AIDS would be there. We regard this as denying us equal access. For the retreat center, the bottom line was the presence of PWAs in our group. "And what about the bathrooms?" the center coordinator persisted, revealing her ignorance of how AIDS is spread.

We have come to understand ourselves as a church with AIDS. This doesn't mean that our church will soon be dead and gone. No, in fact it means that we live more deeply. The whole gay male community is undergoing a parallel transformation. A lifestyle characterized by carefree promiscuity has given way to dating and friendship. Many people are seeking intimacy and spirituality, which has had the effect of a revival. Thus, despite the deaths of many members, our membership has actually grown by a third in the past year.

The Universal Fellowship of Metropolitan Community Churches (UFMCC) was founded in Los Angeles in 1968 by Troy Perry, a former Pentecostal minister who aimed to spread the new gospel that God loves gays and lesbians. "All we had time to do was to celebrate and to grow," recalled Howard Wells, who founded MCC-SF in 1969. Grow we did: today there are more than 30,000 MCC members in more than 200 churches worldwide. But our innocent

sense of celebration has died of AIDS. Wells, himself a PWA, says we now live with the end in sight, a state he calls "eschatological living."

"The specter of AIDS catapults us into accelerated spiritual growth—or toward early death—and it all depends on the model of eschatological living we choose to follow," he said. On good days, being a church with AIDS helps us to see how fragile and important every moment is. We rediscover images—such as heaven—that we used to dismiss as anachronistic or overly sentimental. We claim for ourselves the model known in Scripture as "the realm of God," which Wells defines as "an alternative way of living."

It's not easy. Institutionally, we suffer the stages of grief on a grand scale, ricocheting through denial, anger, bargaining, depression and acceptance. Long-range planning is difficult for the church, just as it is for people with AIDS, who are overwhelmed by having to make plans about wills, medical care and finances. Yet never has planning been more crucial. Promoting church growth feels almost macabre, but without it we cannot meet the challenges ahead.

Sunday worship is marked by tears, laughter and unforgettable singing. One of our favorite hymns was written by UFMCC members Jack St. John and David Pelletier in 1980, before we were aware of AIDS: "We are the church alive, the body must be healed; where strife has bruised and battered us, God's wholeness is revealed." Like Clover, we

find that our struggle with AIDS has brought us insights into what it means to build heaven into our everyday lives, to try to realize the realm of heaven here and now.

MOST OF WHAT our church has done concretely is in worship, peer support groups, education and counseling. In each area, congregants work together with the pastor, who devotes about half his time to AIDS-related activities. These programs are coordinated by student minister Carlene Ames Waldrum, a seminarian from Pacific School of Religion, along with the AIDS Ministry Team composed of about 20 congregants. In addition, we make our building available to dozens of AIDS-related groups.

Our most intimate, intense worship service is the monthly AIDS healing service, at which 15 to 20 people affected by AIDS request and receive laying-on-of-hands prayer from each other. To listen to their stories is to enter into the enormity that is AIDS: A doctor sobs over his inability to heal his best friend. Someone who recently tested antibody-positive confesses that his anger has separated him from his friends and his God. A withered man prays simply for an appetite. Another person with AIDS proudly proclaims he is "living with AIDS, not dying of it." A nurse who has accidentally jabbed herself with an AIDS-contaminated needle says she feels numb now that ten of her co-workers have died of AIDS. We also hold special services,



such as AIDS prayer vigils and the blessing of banners for the NAMES Project quilt that was part of the Lesbian and Gay Rights March on Washington last October. The quilt will be touring 25 U.S. cities later this year.

In a sense, all of our worship services are AIDS healing services. Every Sunday we provide a gay-affirming environment where Scripture is related to lesbian and gay experience and same-sex pairs can receive, as a couple, communion and laying-on-of-hands prayer. Our very existence challenges the often-held Christian position that AIDS is God's punishment for the sin of homosexuality, a position that breeds a self-hatred that many of us still struggle to overcome. Recently a young man confessed to the pastor before church that, under parental pressure, he had vowed sexual abstinence if God would cure him of AIDS—a typical response and one that reveals the heart of gay self-hatred.

Community prayer is the phase of Sunday worship when the impact of AIDS is most tangible. We join hands and share words and phrases that crystallize our concerns and joys. Every month we hear more petitions for "my friend who was just diagnosed" or "my lover in the hospital" or "more government funding for AIDS research" or "help with my diagnosis."

Peer support groups provide a spiritual context for people to discuss what they have in common—in this case, a life-threatening illness, or being "antibody positive" or being a caregiver to a person with AIDS. In addition to these groups that are obviously related to AIDS, our men's retreats and Men Together discussion/worship series approach the subject indirectly by encouraging men to make and deepen friendships away from bars, the traditional gay male meeting ground. All of these become opportunities for dealing with AIDS-related grief. For example, at the spring 1987 retreat, men wrote, read and discussed their experiences of touching other men. One of the readings discussed was this:

Scott and I spent hard and precious times together from the time he was diagnosed with AIDS in 1983 until he died in 1984 . . . I was at work one day—my great escape from the illness was work—when I suddenly felt the need to be at home . . . I lay with Scott, all the while telling him how much I loved him. I mentioned every person I could think of and made sure he heard that they loved him as well.

Scott's labored breathing continued with long lapses between breaths. Each lapse, I thought, would be his last. At 4:42, Scott's breathing stopped and never began again. I held him in my arms and softly told him again and again how precious he was. We spent 45 minutes alone, with Scott in my arms for the last time. His body grew cold before I was finally able to release my hold of him. That most precious touch was to be our last.

People turn to us for counseling at every stage of the AIDS crisis. Most of this is handled by clergy with support from student clergy and the AIDS Ministry Team. Touching is one of the most important ingredients in all AIDS counseling. Although AIDS cannot be spread through casual contact, people with AIDS tend to be treated as un-touchables, which adds to their pain.

A congregant's first AIDS-related counseling often revolves around being tested for AIDS antibodies; a positive result means people can transmit the AIDS virus and may develop AIDS themselves. Just deciding to take the test is excruciating. Even those who imagined they were prepared to face a positive result are often devastated by feelings of grief, guilt and betrayal when the verdict is presented.

AIDS-related counseling also means providing home and hospital visitation, funerals, memorial services and bereavement support. An unforgettable example occurred in summer 1987 when one of us visited an AIDS hospice to take communion to a member, his parents visiting from the East Coast and a few close friends. The man, obviously near death, urged everyone to pray not just for him but for their own needs—a reversal of the angry response he expressed earlier in his illness. "I can see heaven," he told them. "It's a beautiful place, the place you've always wanted to go to, and anyone who wants to can go there." The boundaries of heaven and earth seemed to shift that afternoon, so that they no longer corresponded to birth and death; it felt possible to reach into the skies and tug heaven into the present. Death became "a foretaste of the feast to come."

The man died a few hours later. His mother spoke at his memorial service, with tears in her eyes: "He was the best son a mother could ever have." But she and her husband dreaded going back to their home church, being reluctant to tell anyone in their United Methodist congregation that their son had died of AIDS. They didn't think anyone there would understand.

Another set of parents, also United Methodists, asked one of us to come to their son's hospital bedside to join them in prayer. There the mother asked, "Why are people so mean?" She was referring to unsympathetic church members back home. The next question was even harder: Was it OK to pray for their comatose son to die soon? The whole church is coming to see that physical death is not necessarily something to avoid; it can even mean healing.

AIDS EDUCATION occurs in every setting we've described, in addition to those programs whose main purpose is to educate. We declared September 1987 AIDS Education Month and brought in experts for a four-part series of forums on medical, emotional and bereavement issues. An AIDS Foundation expert addressed MCC-SF women about possible lesbian transmission of the disease. Our shelf of free pamphlets is dominated by those about AIDS, from basic data on the disease to invitations for safe-sex workshops. People call our office so often for referrals to AIDS agencies that we sometimes feel like an AIDS information clearinghouse.

MCC-SF also strives to educate people outside the gay and lesbian community about AIDS, through letter-writing campaigns, public presentations and workshops on AIDS, which have been given in a variety of settings, including the San Francisco AIDS Interfaith Conference, the United Methodist Consultation on AIDS Ministries, the Presbyterian Ministers Association, and Pacific School of Religion's AIDS Awareness Week. In addition, MCC-SF members enrolled at Pacific School of Religion continually pressure the seminary to live up to its policy of fair treatment for students with AIDS. Joint activities with Double Rock Baptist Church have been educational, too. While we have confronted our racism, the Baptists have had to surmount unfounded fears about catching AIDS. One Double Rock usher described holding hands with gay people during prayer time as "the most growing I have ever done."

In our church, AIDS has also brought reconciliation between the sexes, a rift that has been especially deep between lesbians and gay men. Like other women, lesbians face economic disadvantages. But in the case of lesbians, their resulting anger at men is untempered by romantic involvement with the opposite sex. Most

lesbian feminists feel it is a waste of energy to spend it in the traditional female role of helping men, their oppressors. However, that feeling doesn't prevail in our church. When the topic of lesbians ministering to men with AIDS came up during a reception the women of our church held for Karen Ziegler, pastor of the Metropolitan Community Church in New York, Ziegler responded this way: "I don't feel like I'm sacrificing—I receive energy by ministering to men with AIDS." She told us how "some men I love very much—my friends David and Tim—began to die of AIDS. I had the experience of coming closer than I ever had come to a man before. David and then Tim opened a door to their souls in a way that I had never experienced before, and my heart has been opened in a way it never was before, too. We're all experiencing that transformation together."

We have also connected with Congregation Shahar Zahav, a Reform synagogue with a lesbian and gay congregation, located a few blocks from our church. Together we sponsored a reading by award-winning lesbian poet Adrienne Rich. That evening Rich told us, "Lesbians and gay men have confronted mortality. We have mourned our friends and lovers together and we have stitched an extraordinary quilt of memory together . . . I think that the coming together of Jewish and Christian, lesbian and gay and straight congregants is an important part of this. I also think that the coming together of those of us who are non-congregants with you is very important." Making this kind of connection—between Jew and Christian, female and male, gay and straight, black and white, parent and child—is what eschatological living is all about. With the end in sight, we do more to savor and value life, in-

cluding the people we once viewed as hopelessly different from ourselves. As a church with AIDS, we try to embody eschatological living. AIDS is killing us at the same time that it heals us.

This must be the vision Steven Clover was talking about when he told us, "Heaven has as much to do with life before death as with life after death."

And it must be the vision Rich meant to convey when she wrote the poem that has become a kind of creed for our church:

My heart is moved by all I cannot save:
so much has been destroyed

I have to cast my lot with those
who age after age, perversely,

with no extraordinary power,
reconstitute the world.

This must be what Jesus meant when he said, "Behold, the kingdom of God is in the midst of you." ■

BOOKS

Against Machismo: Women's Struggle in Latin America

THIS MAY BE the longest book title of the season: *Against Machismo: Rubem Alves, Leonardo Boff, Gustavo Gutiérrez, José Míguez Bonino, Juan Luis Segundo . . . and Others Talk about the Struggle of Women*, by Elsa Tamez (Meyer-Stone Books, 150 pp., \$24.95; paperback, \$9.95). Even that is not really complete, for the "others" referred to include Julio de Santa Ana, Jorge Pixley, Hugo Assmann, Enrique Dussel, Carlo Mesters, Milton Schwantes, Frei Betto, Pablo Richard, Raul Vidales and Mortimer Arias. By any standards, this series of interviews "about the Struggle of Women" represents an impressive collection of the major figures associated with liberation theology in Latin America.

Before anyone responds, "How typical that men are arrogating to themselves the right to speak about the struggle of women!" two cautions are in order.

First, the ground rules for the conversations remain in the hands of a woman, Elsa Tamez, a biblical scholar on the faculty of the Seminario Bíblico Latinoamericano in San José, Costa Rica, who has already established a solid reputation of her own as the author of *Bible of the Oppressed* (Orbis, 1982). Second, Tamez is not satisfied having only men speak about "the Struggle of Women." After the interviews, which compose Part I, she has the last word in Part II, a fascinating commentary on what she has heard, concluding with the words, "In a companion volume to this work Latin American women theologians will broaden and deepen the dialogue I

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have barely begun here. The result will be very gratifying for it will represent another step in the process of liberation. I guarantee it" (p. 148).

I believe her. And I am eager for the companion volume in which Latin American women theologians will not only respond to these interviews but will make their own creative contributions as well. In the meantime, we can be grateful to this volume for recording the growing conscientization of a group of important theologians who as recently as a decade ago were hardly aware that there was a "women's problem" in their churches and their society, let alone that they, the

men, had uniformly been part of the problem rather than part of the solution.

Since there is not space to comment on the individual interviews, I will summarize enough of Tamez's own conclusions to whet appetites for the book itself.

Not least of its charms is the informal style the editor establishes in introducing each interview, communicating a sympathy and openness to men talking about issues they have not talked about much before, and displaying a sense of humor that must have put the interviewees at ease. Not being prepared when a chance to interview Julio de Santa Ana arose out of the blue, she comments that she had to borrow her five-year-old son's "toy tape recorder" and a cassette that had merengue music on it. She writes that "Jorge [Pixley] did not want to be interviewed alone. He brought his wife Jenny . . . who was worried that Jorge would look like a male chauvinist in the interview, so she reminded him that he always does the dishes." Of Gustavo Gutiérrez she remarks, "It was good to see [him] in his priestly vestments with bread and wine in his hands. He winked at me from the altar." And elsewhere: "I soon realized that [Rubem Alves] is as crazy as his recent books suggest."

Although each interview took its own course, there are four areas that Tamez tried to explore with every theologian: his