

# Austin Heights and AIDS

BY KYLE CHILDRESS

**All the time when we were praying for God to help us survive as a church, we assumed that the operative word was “survive.” Now we know that the operative word was “church.” God helped us be the church of Jesus Christ. We were not called to survive, but to be the Church. All the rest was and is in God’s hands.**

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**F**ifteen years ago our congregation found out how true the old saying is: “Be careful what you pray for, because you may get it.” We also discovered that God answers prayer in surprising ways.

Austin Heights Baptist Church is a small congregation, but back in 1991 we were a lot smaller, running around forty people in worship on Sunday mornings. Even then we were half again larger than just two years before when, between pastors, the congregation had reached its low ebb and considered closing its doors. In other words, the word “survival” was a frequent part of congregational conversations, and we looked longingly at every young-family-filled minivan that passed our church on its way to somewhere else.

On a Sunday morning a church member handed me the front page of the local newspaper telling the story of a local organizing effort to provide food for some men who had been diagnosed with AIDS. These men had lost their jobs, many had lost their homes and apartments, and some even had been turned away by their families, all because they had AIDS. As a result, their most immediate need was simply finding enough to eat. They did not have enough money to buy food and in a few cases did not have the health and strength to go to the grocery store. The paper quoted a couple of these men as saying, “We’ve gone to almost every church in town and had the door slammed in our face every time.”

When I read the story I knew what we were to do and I knew that God was calling us to meet this need. I just knew. And some of our church members knew as well as we gathered after the service to talk about it. Here were some people who were sick and in need of food, with no one else helping them. We knew what we had to do.

I knew all of this but I did not want to do it because it was going to be hard; it was going to take enormous effort and deep commitment and be full of grief and pain. These men with AIDS were going to die and we were going to be among those helping them die and I didn't know if we could do that or not. And I also knew that this was going to be full of controversy. Not only was AIDS a disease surrounded by fear and ignorance, but it was associated with men who were homosexual or were intravenous drug users, not exactly the constituency by which one grows a Baptist church in East Texas and certainly not the way to attract young families driving minivans.

### **BEGINNING WITH A FOOD DRIVE**

I met with the two young men trying to organize the food drive. They came to my office ready to fight. After having so many rejections from churches, they were not all that eager to have another conversation with a Baptist preacher. But after we listened to one another they said, "If you're willing to work alongside gay men then we're willing to work alongside a Baptist church."

So it began with leading a food drive, but of course it did not end there. Before long delivering food to men with AIDS turned into visiting the men, which turned into the most basic forms of care: taking them to the doctor (when we could find one who would see HIV/AIDS patients), running errands, going to the pharmacy, and so on. All of this led to the discovery that not all persons with AIDS were men: we met and began helping support families in which the mother had received an IV during pregnancy and the baby was born with HIV. We also discovered families, especially older East Texas couples whose sons were diagnosed with AIDS, upon whom the toll of caring in an atmosphere of ostracism was overwhelming.

We were involved in helping put together a fledgling organization called the East Texas AIDS Project (ETAP). At a party hosted by the ETAP board, I met Barbara Cordell, who had a PhD in nursing and public health. She had recently moved to Nacogdoches with her husband and she was writing the first Texas Department of Health grant proposal for money to fund ETAP. I walked through the kitchen where Barbara was making coffee; she turned to me and said, "Aren't you the pastor of Austin Heights Baptist Church?" After I nodded a "yes," she said, "My husband and I are going to join your church." I was taken aback; after having several prospects politely decline to join our church because of our AIDS ministry, this was a new experience having someone join our church because of it.

With Barbara in our congregation we were able to accelerate and improve the level of training of the congregation in caring for persons with AIDS. We learned how to prepare meals for persons with AIDS, our church nursery workers were trained in the care of HIV infants, and we organized the first of several special worship services "for persons whose lives have been touched by AIDS."

### **GATHERING FOR WORSHIP**

We prepared and trained and planned for this first worship service, and we also prayed. We prayed a lot. We prayed because we were scared, partly because we did not know who would come or if anyone would come and partly because we were still trying to learn what to do when someone with AIDS did come to our church. We prayed because we wanted to practice the hope and hospitality of Jesus Christ for persons and families caught in a downward spiral of despair and ostracism. In other words, even though we knew that Jesus did not slam the door in people's faces, we were nervous about what would happen when the door was opened.

What happened is that we had people from the highways and the byways streaming in. This side of the New Testament I had never seen anything like it. Almost everyone in our own congregation showed up because we knew it was going to take all of us to do this. And though we expected a few people with either HIV or full-blown AIDS, we did not expect fifty. We certainly did not expect the large numbers of parents and grandparents and siblings and babies, families who had members with AIDS but could not talk about it.

Through the door people came, packing our little church. Bobby literally had to be carried by friends because he was so weak from being in the last stages of AIDS. Carl and Tim began crying when they came in the door because it had been so long since they were welcomed into a church. Bill confessed to me that his stomach had been in knots over the fear of walking back into a Baptist church. Brandy, sitting with a six-month-old in her arms, cried because her baby son had HIV from a blood transfusion she had received during pregnancy.

For the next two hours we sat together and sang hymns: "Amazing grace, how sweet the sound.... I once was lost, but now am found"; and, "What have I to dread, what have I to fear, leaning on the everlasting arms."

We read Scripture: "The LORD is my shepherd; I shall not want.... Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil; for thou art with me; thy rod and thy staff they comfort me"; and, "What man of you, having a hundred sheep, if he lose one of them, doth not leave the ninety and nine in the wilderness, and go after that which is lost, until he find it?"

And we prayed. We prayed out loud and silently. We prayed for one

another, passing out index cards so people could write their requests down and share them. And we prayed lined up at four stations in corners of the sanctuary, where we put our hands on shoulders, and hugged necks, and cried together.

After almost two hours we were ready to eat. So we gathered around tables and ate together a pot-luck supper of epic proportions. Everyone had brought food, and at the conclusion sacks full of leftovers were carried out the door for folks to eat for days to come.

## **UNDERSTANDING OUR PRAYERS**

Our congregation looks back at that worship service as the time when God answered our prayers. Since that night, we really do not worry over whether the congregation will survive or not. Many of the men who came to that first AIDS service ended up becoming active members of our church and we came to know them as our brothers in Christ and friends rather than someone with AIDS or someone who is gay.

I won't lie to you; it wasn't easy. We had frank discussions about AIDS and about sexuality and sexual behavior, heterosexual as well as homosexual. The hardest thing was that over the next few years we buried almost all of our friends who had AIDS and who had come to that first worship service.

Yet God answered our prayers. All the time when we were praying for God to help us survive as a church, we assumed that the operative word was "survive." Now we know that the operative word was "church." God helped us be the church of Jesus Christ. We were not called to survive, but to be the Church. All the rest was and is in God's hands. Thanks be to God.

One more thing: we came to be known locally as "the AIDS church." But one day the chair of the physics department at nearby Stephen F. Austin State University and a charter member and deacon of our congregation met the young family of the new astronomy professor. The wife, with her two-year-old in tow, asked, "Don't you go to the church with the AIDS ministry?" He said, "Yes, I do." "We want to join your church," she said. Well, they did join, and yes, they drove a minivan. Within a few years she was instrumental in starting the local affiliate of Habitat for Humanity. But that is another story.



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