

Churches hold healing services for AIDS sufferers

By Maggie Mulvihill

BOSTON (AP) — In wheelchairs, hobbling on canes, or just leaning on the arm of a friend, they inched their way into the pews at Boston's Trinity Episcopal Church.

They were AIDS patients who had come with family and friends to pray for their lives.

Trinity's "healing service," an hour of high religious pageantry and staggering earthly sorrow, is typical of scores of services being held across the United States as churches slowly accept those infected with the disease.

People like Bob, 32, a gay Roman Catholic, already have grown to count on the services.

"It's not death so much that I'm afraid of," said Bob, who would not give his last name. "It's the getting there that worries me."

At Trinity, 13 priests and a choir clad in white robes led the prayer and singing one recent evening.

As in many churches, the pinnacle of the service was the laying on of hands, an ancient Christian ritual combining prayer and physical touch, as a healer, often a member of the clergy, and the person seeking healing pray together for several minutes.

Because so many with AIDS are forced to suffer emotional and physical leprosy, the human touch of a healer can have great emotional impact.

At Trinity, Robert, 40, who is HIV positive, sat behind the elaborate gilded altar nearly hidden by flowers given in memory of AIDS victims. He thought of the 12 friends he has lost to AIDS in the last three years, especially James, his 34-year old roommate,

who died in November.

Then he made his way up the long aisle until he reached Right Rev. Barbara Harris, one of the first women to be consecrated a bishop in the Episcopal Church. Minutes before, she had given a stirring sermon that included a forceful prayer for those still ignorant about AIDS.

Robert knelt before her, and she took his head in her hands. He cried both for himself and for the friend, whose ashes are buried in the garden of a church on Beacon Hill.

"His name isn't written on a headstone anywhere," Robert said. "I carry it with me in my heart."

Church services that developed quickly in and around gay communities were slower to appear elsewhere. But now they often are "the bread and butter of ministry," said Kenneth South, executive director of the Washington-based AIDS National Interfaith Network.

In eastern Massachusetts, the services are organized by roommates Rusty Miller and Phil Nightingale, who run the Ecumenical Task Force on AIDS Inc. from their home in Somerville. The pair has been persuading area churches to hold the services since 1985.

"Up until about two years ago, we had to fight our way in, but now we work by invitation," Nightingale said.

Many people from the medical community who work with the patients show up frequently, said Ben Feeney, a member of Trinity's AIDS Support Committee.

"It's a chance for them to ask

for some guidance," he said. "A lot of people look for medical answers but this is a way of reflecting inward."

Though churches are being lauded for holding the services, they also are faulted for being slow to address the spiritual needs of those living with AIDS.

In March, Bernard Cardinal Law celebrated his first Catholic liturgy for people with AIDS — a decade after the disease got the world's attention.

"For the past 10 years, my friends have died abandoned by their church, and it's not Christian," said Jim Volt, a devout Catholic and executive director of AIDS-Project Worcester.

Sister Zita Fleming, director of the Office of AIDS Ministry for the Boston Archdiocese, open since 1988, defends the efforts the Catholic Church has made.

"The church is for all people," she said. "We don't deny services to anyone who comes to us."

At Trinity, Robert said "I don't think the fear ever goes away, but the proximity to other people who are experiencing it helps me cope."

As the rite drew to a close, the church grew still. Then the choir began singing the traditional hymn Amazing Grace. People joined in, singing over their tears.

As Robert said: "I can feel the spirit breathing there amongst that gathering, and I know that God is there."

Harris