

Churches chastised for AIDS failures

By MICHAEL LIGHTSTONE
The Daily News

Churches have been less than charitable in their handling of AIDS issues, a Halifax conference heard yesterday.

And it will take a grassroots effort to improve things, delegates were told.

"The average person should help himself or herself become educated about what AIDS is and its effects upon people," spirituality professor Richard Hardy said.

He suggested people volunteer at AIDS support groups or attend educational sessions and then share their knowledge with peers.

Hardy, who teaches at Ottawa's St. Paul University, was addressing a spirituality and AIDS forum at the Atlantic School of Theology. He wrote a book on the subject: *Knowing the God of Compassion*.

Delegates acknowledged churches have sometimes failed their flocks when it comes to dealing with acquired immune deficiency syndrome.

"Church is the community and it has to begin with each one of us. Each one of us could work at doing some good," one delegate said.

Another said rank-and-file parishioners should do some soul-searching and not be quick to judge others. "We really don't love unconditionally," she said.

Last year, Pope John Paul told a crowd in Uganda chastity is the only proper way to stop the spread of AIDS. Uganda has about 35,000 reported AIDS cases.

"The institutional church has a particular view of certain moral teachings and they don't want those views forgotten or taken away,"

HOTLINE
468-2784

Time to move on?

Nova Scotians just marked World AIDS Day with everything from artistic performances to a giant quilt embroidered with the names of victims.

Given that other illnesses such as cancer and heart disease kill far more people, is it time to start rethinking the attention — and money — given to AIDS?

Call the Hotline at 468-2784 and tell us what you think and — briefly — why. You may leave your name and phone number.

The Hotline will be open until noon tomorrow. Read the results Wednesday.

Hardy said. "In the process of trying to maintain those, they have come out with statements that haven't been that effective or helpful to persons living with AIDS."

Hardy said homophobia plays a role in society's view of AIDS but says churches don't believe the disease is a punishment from God. He said people should educate themselves about homosexuality.

"I think most of the churches — the institutions — have gotten beyond that view. You still have a few very fundamentalist groups who haven't, but they're definitely in the minority," Hardy told *The Daily News*.

Challenge to the churches

'(People with AIDS) challenge the religious establishment to find the real God, who is loving and suffering with them.'

By **BARRY DOREY**
Staff Reporter

People with AIDS challenge churches to become the type of religious establishments they should be. And they challenge society to become the compassionate community it should be.

That was the message Dr. Richard Hardy, a professor at St. Paul's University in Ottawa, brought to a recent conference on spirituality and AIDS.

The conference was sponsored by the Nova Scotia Persons With AIDS Coalition and Churchmembers Assembled to Respond to AIDS.

"The community becomes more humane as it enters the life story of others," Dr. Hardy told a group at

the Atlantic School of Theology. When society listens and learns, it's possible to eradicate discrimination, racism, hatred, sexism and homophobia, he said.

Persons living with AIDS often find a non-religious spirituality that mirrors — and in some ways is better than — religious spirituality.

"What they reject is the false God, an idol that, more often than not, is presented to them in churches. It's a rejection of a judging, policing, condemning God" who would punish them for the "sin" of being gay.

"They challenge the religious establishment to find the real God, who is loving and suffering with them."

Society must accept, learn and be

active in combatting AIDS and discrimination against its victims.

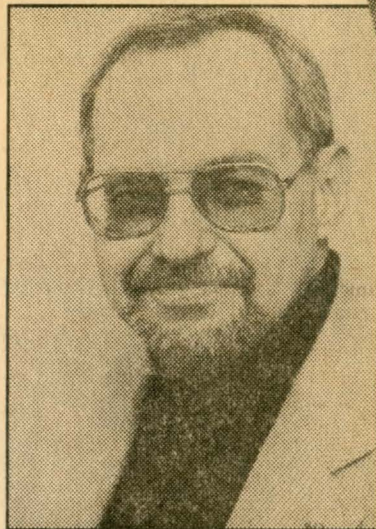
"When the war of AIDS is over and we're telling our war stories ... you must be able to say you shouldered a coffin, lifted a burden, emptied a bedpan," said Dr. Hardy, who lost his partner to the disease four years ago.

"You find out who you are when you start loving somebody else."

He quoted one author who wrote of his transformation, "AIDS has made me the man I am today."

Author of *Knowing the God of Compassion*, Dr. Hardy said people with AIDS must make an "active surrender" to AIDS. When they accept the reality and "take the risk of living," they can be transformed.

"It's not giving up, it's embracing



David Grandy / Clark Photographic

■ **Prof. Richard Hardy**

and living the reality, bursting into awareness." Loving and helping yourself and others is the result.

Scholars expect years of tension in churches over homosexuality

By MICHAEL PARKER
San Antonio Express-News

San Antonio

Christian denominations can expect years of tension over how to balance traditional condemnation of homosexuality with the pastoral needs of gays and lesbians.

But in the end, gays and lesbians will be accepted, scholars predict.

Presbyterians, Lutherans and Episcopalians have been embroiled in controversy over recent moves to bless homosexual marriages and ordain practising gays and lesbians.

The Episcopal (Anglican) Church ended its General Convention this year by reaffirming the traditional teachings on sexuality in a bishops' statement that reflected deep division over gay and lesbian issues.

In Canada, the Anglican Church has just released a study guide on homosexuality and homosexual relationships to "seek the mind of the church" on the issue. It is expected to reveal a church of two minds.

But experts see fierce debate as a harbinger of change.

Many religious leaders are coming to believe homosexual orientation is not chosen, but genetic — a realization that is softening attitudes toward gays and lesbians, said Lynn Mitchell, residential scholar in religion at the University of Houston.

But getting people in the pews to agree will take a long time, he said.

"Even in some of the liberal denominations, the laity don't comprehend some positions that the bureaucracy takes. So they're really not going to make much headway until they've done a lot of educating."

"The leadership can be very progressive, but that doesn't mean they can just write a report and the laity will accept it," he added.

Such was the case in the United Church in Canada a couple of years ago when a move to explicitly accept homosexuals as ministers resulted in many members leaving the church.

'Most Christians, under Scripture and natural law, believe homosexual activities are the result of a disorder of creation and not simply a beautiful variation.'

LYNN MITCHELL

Religion scholar, University of Houston

But, said Mitchell, even some conservative denominations that oppose same-sex activity have become more sensitive.

"They no longer have the old knee-jerk, redneck reaction. They're more sympathetic to the struggle gays and lesbians go through," he said.

Mitchell said heterosexuals are struggling, too. They are trying to balance sympathy for the pain gays and lesbians feel with the long-standing tradition that teaches homosexuality is an abomination to God.

And condemnation of homosexuality isn't just an arbitrary Biblical idea, Mitchell said.

"It also comes from the natural law, which says that you learn what's right by seeing what nature intended. If nature intended procreation, sex between males or between females frustrates the goal of sex and, therefore, is a dysfunction or a disorder of creation," Mitchell said.

"Most Christians, under Scripture and natural law, believe homosexual activities are the result of a disorder of creation and not simply a beautiful variation," he said.

David Switzer, recently retired professor of religion at Southern Methodist University, agreed that change will be slow until people become better educated.

Nevertheless, he believes change is coming.

Switzer, who wrote "Parents of the Homosexual" to help people cope

when they discover their child is gay or lesbian, said Bible teaching isn't the real reason conservatives rail against homosexuality.

"It's because they themselves think it's weird, and they have a strong emotional reaction to it. They just use the Bible to justify their emotional reaction. Do these people take every injunction in the Bible literally?" he asked. "Of course they don't. Nobody does."

For example, while many Christians condemn adultery, they react to it less emotionally because they can identify with the temptations that lead to it. But they can't identify with same-sex activity, he said.

Often Christians who criticize homosexuality overlook other kinds of behavior forbidden by the Bible.

"In the New Testament, homosexual behavior would be on the list of things people in the church shouldn't do. But people go wild over those homosexuality passages and use them to club other people over the head while ignoring others," Switzer said.

Linda Pritchard, an assistant professor of history at the University of Texas at San Antonio, predicted that gays and lesbians gradually will gain acceptance.

"In the 19th century, religious denominations split over whether slavery was moral. In recent years, there have been minor splits over ordaining women. Homosexuality is even more explosive because it cuts at fundamental, traditional beliefs on the role of sexuality in life," she said.

"Traditionally, sexual activity was socially acceptable only for procreation. Now, many see it as useful also for intimacy and for just plain fun.

"I see more tension and possible denominational fragmentation, but in the end, I believe gays and lesbians will be accepted in the same way that blacks . . . and women have won acceptance through the civil rights struggles."