

AN INTRODUCTION

World AIDS Day is both a celebration of the progress that is being made to slow and stop the greatest disease pandemic in human history and a commemoration of over 33-million family and friends lost in the process. On December 1, **“Getting to Zero!”** is also a commitment to keep fighting for the 34 million who live everyday with HIV&AIDS.

You’ll see **“Getting to Zero!”** expressed worldwide until at least 2015. There still is neither vaccine nor cure for HIV&AIDS, but the unabashed goal is to get the number of new HIV infections to zero. Admittedly, it takes a gargantuan collaborative effort in science, medicine, social policy and human behavioral change to achieve this reality. Most importantly, the church—that’s you and me—has a huge stake in this endeavor!

We often don’t think of ourselves as having an active role in **“Getting to Zero!”** as members of a faith community. In fact, we have sometimes dismissed those living with HIV&AIDS as people who “deserve what they get,” building up both conscious and unconscious prejudices against them. As a result, few people living with HIV&AIDS think of you and me as either friendly or helpful.

To capture our role as the church this **World AIDS Day 2012**, we explore **“Getting to Zero!”** as a church and embark on a journey of discovery through reflecting on Scripture in the prayerful power of the Holy Spirit. It’s a way of diving deep into the heart of God and the soul of Christianity as we engage the reality of HIV&AIDS and embrace our brothers and sisters living with HIV&AIDS and their families and friends.

Our encounter with Scripture over the next few days asks the Holy Spirit to examine our hearts and change us. As an introduction to the series, we are all praying as David, *“Search me, O God, and know my heart: try me, and know my thoughts: And see if there be any wicked way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting,”* **Psalm 139:23-24 (KJB)**.

After praying and spending some quiet time in His presence, take a few moments to write down any thoughts on the following questions ...

1. Who do I know that is HIV+ or has AIDS?
2. What are the first words that come to mind about people living with HIV&AIDS?
3. When God speaks to me about what I can do about/for people living with HIV&AIDS, will I listen and act?
4. What other questions or thoughts come to mind...?

A HOPEFUL FUTURE IN WHICH WE ALL HELP

It's a dream we never thought we'd realize—a fantasy we dared not entertain. But now, this hopeful goal is both within the grasp of imagination and the scope of reality! Imagine, a world **"Getting to Zero!"** A planet virtually absent of new cases of HIV&AIDS; absent of HIV&AIDS related deaths; and absent of stigma and discrimination against people living with HIV&AIDS!

"HIV and AIDS?" Bewildered, you might ask, "Aren't they gone? Hasn't this disease been eradicated! Why resurrect ghosts and be haunted again by this virus?"

Today, HIV&AIDS remains humanity's greatest, **most stubborn**, and **deadliest pandemic**, having **killed over 33 million**. There are 34 million people living with HIV&AIDS worldwide; 1.2 million of these are family and friends in the United States; 6,674 are our neighbors in Orange County; 170 of us being recently diagnosed with HIV; and 145 newly discovering we have AIDS. Bottom line, many people, both near and far, need our help!

It is always surprising to see how much the face of a person living with HIV and/or AIDS looks just like us, representing all age and faith groups and every demographic accounted for by ethnicity, culture, race, and socio-economics. And it's heartwrenching to know that not one person now testing "positive" for the virus ever willingly welcomed the havoc wrecked on everyday life and the future by this pernicious killer.

When God revealed himself to Isaiah, asking him to get involved in a great mission to his peers, the prophet humbly began by acknowledging his own shortcomings, *"Woe to me!" I cried. "I am ruined! For I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips, and my eyes have seen the King, the LORD Almighty,"* **Isaiah 6:5 (NIV84)**. After God ministered to him, Isaiah again, *heard the voice of the Lord [call], "Whom shall I send? And who will go for us?" It took only an instant to reply, "Here am I. Send me!"* **Isaiah 6:8 (NIV84)**.

What about us, you and me? Are we willing to listen to God's call and help people living with HIV&AIDS around us? Hear again God's hopeful call, *"Whom shall I send? And who will go for us?"*

Pray Isaiah's words as a commitment to help, "Here I am, send me!"

Pause for a few moments and reflectively ask God ...

1. Help me take steps to become more aware of the needs of people living with HIV&AIDS and their families and friends in my community.
2. Help me meet someone living with HIV&AIDS to befriend him/her.
3. Help me start or join an HIV&AIDS ministry in my church and begin helping people living with HIV&AIDS and their families and friends.

THOSE WHO FEEL UNLOVED

Christians have sometimes referred to the Great Commandment and the Great Commission as “GC2.” They are the most important words Jesus ever spoke and the transformative basis of living out a Gospel that cares for the sick, specifically for people living with HIV&AIDS and their families and friends.

Jesus’ version of the Great Commandment reads, *“Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength ... Love your neighbor as yourself.”* There is no commandment greater than these” **Mark 12:30-31 (NIV84)**. His statement proclaims that we cannot live truly fulfilled lives until we discover and develop essential relationships that transform who we are and define everything we do.

Note that “we’re all in” when we love God and others as Jesus commands: our “heart”– intellect, emotion and will; our “soul”– the internal-eternal us; our “mind”– the intentional, creative, imaginative us; and our strength – the physical, actional us. No part of our being or behaving should be unloving. What’s more, because of the construction of Jesus’ commandment and connection of his words, “heart, soul, mind, and strength” also apply to our “neighbor” and “ourselves.” NO ONE should be unloved. This is the integrity of the Gospel.

This **World AIDS Day**, we want the number of people living with HIV&AIDS and their families and friends who feel unloved by Christians and the Church to **“Get to Zero!”** With the Lord’s help, we can do that by praying the Great Commandment: “Lord. Help me love you with all my heart, soul, mind, and strength and love my HIV&AIDS neighbor and his/her family and friends as myself.”

Take a few moments in the Spirit’s presence, and...

List three next steps you will take to love a person living with HIV&AIDS and his/her family and friends so that NO ONE IS UNLOVED:

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.

THOSE WHO ARE LEFT OUT

Next to feeling unloved, being left out is perhaps the most miserable existence a human being can know. Unintentionally being overlooked or deliberately shunned contributes to a profound loneliness that people living with HIV&AIDS all-too-frequently experience.

We are all made for love and community. Jesus declares that love is the most persuasive evidence of Christ-like faith, *"By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another,"* **John 13:35 (ESV)**. He also commands us to build a great community by fulfilling the Great Commission, *"Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you,"* **Matthew 28:19, 20a**. That calls the Church to be the most inclusive community ever, a community that exists to grow because members of the family consciously and constantly work so that others are included.

Tragically, the Church's response to HIV&AIDS has contributed to the formation of a community whose calling might better be described as "The Great Omission." Not many people living with HIV&AIDS feel welcome in most churches or around us as Christian believers. And if there are people living with HIV&AIDS in our faith communities, they often feel much safer not revealing their status. The next sentence deserves its own paragraph for emphasis.

You and I have no greater calling than to love people into Christian community, **"Getting to Zero!"** the number of people who are left out, especially those living with HIV&AIDS and their families and friends.

"Make disciples" is actually a command to "make friends!" Friends is precisely what Jesus called His own disciples: *"I have called you friends, for everything that I learned from my Father I have made known to you,"* **John 15:15b**. Friendship with Jesus is, was and forever will be, friendship with a purpose. "Make disciples" means you and I are building a Kingdom community of the dearest friends, which includes any and every person living with HIV&AIDS and their families and friends.

People living with HIV&AIDS and their families and friends need us to be interested in, spend time with, care about, love on, pray for, learn together with, and include them as family in the church. Jesus does it for us! We can do no less for others!

Let's pray today, "My HIV+ and/or AIDS friend, I love you. Welcome to the family. Let's hang out, and I promise that everything I learn from my Father I will make known to you."

And while we're on our knees about this, let's ...

1. Ask God to bring a person living with HIV&AIDS into our lives to befriend.
2. Be intentional about the Great Commission, being interested in, spending time with, caring about, loving on, praying for, learning together with, and including people living with HIV&AIDS as friends and family in the church.
3. Let people in our community know that our church is a community of friends that welcomes everyone into the family.

THOSE WHO ARE STIGMATIZED

Stigma is a Greek word with a nasty history. It means a “brand” or “mark,” usually inflicted with a hot iron. Stigma is also a mark of disgrace or infamy—a sign of stain or reproach. Stigma is not limited to physical injury, but wounds, inflicts pain, and causes scars on the hearts and minds of its victims. Stigma is why many people living with HIV&AIDS form their own communities and fear engaging the larger culture and church.

Jesus confronted stigma with the disciples early on, *“But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth,” Acts 1:8 (NIV84)*. Geography carries stigma in Jesus’ day, and we could well-interpret this passage as an anti-stigma message to the church, “You will be my witnesses to people exactly like you, people a little unlike you, people you love to hate and people unthinkable to you.”

Dr. David Barstow, a researcher on stigma related to HIV&AIDS has developed a list of ten marks of stigma-free people and their faith communities. **A Stigma-Free Faith Community ...**

- Talks openly about HIV&AIDS, as well as related issues such as sexual behavior ... ;
- Describes HIV&AIDS as medical conditions, not punishment for immoral behavior;
- Provides basic factual information about HIV&AIDS, including methods of transmission, treatment and prevention, to those who are uninformed;
- Encourages members to participate in all-faith community activities, regardless of HIV status;
- Repeatedly and consistently gives messages of compassion, not judgment, toward people living with HIV;
- Focuses on providing care and support to people living with HIV, rather than on how they became infected;
- Encourages positive living through education and support groups for people living with HIV;
- Actively encourages testing for all members and provides facilities for voluntary counseling and testing;
- Affirms the individual responsibility of all members to know their HIV status and to refrain from behavior that risks transmission of HIV; and ...
- Works proactively with other organizations to address HIV&AIDS issues in the wider community.

So, how did you and your faith community do? Are you stigma-free, or do you still have work to do? Why not pray, “Father. Help me to love everyone you call into my life and community of faith, whether they be people exactly like me, people a little unlike me, people I have loved to hate or of whom I have been afraid, and people unthinkable to me. Especially, do not let me stigmatize people living with HIV&AIDS and their families and friends through fear, anger or prejudice, for Your honor and glory.”

Take a look at Barstow’s list, **“Getting to Zero!”** stigma by ...

1. Beginning to eliminate stigmatizing thoughts and actions from your life, and...
2. Talking with your faith community about how you might eliminate stigma towards people living with HIV&AIDS and their families and friends.

THOSE WHO LACK HOPE

Churches who love people with HIV&AIDS and their families and friends are gifted faith communities which intentionally create ministries that effectively communicate hope by the grace of the Holy Spirit to all.

Describing such churches and their grace-ministries, the Apostle Paul instructs, *“Follow the way of love and eagerly desire spiritual gifts ... for their strengthening, encouragement, and comfort,”* **I Corinthians 14:1,3b (NIV84)**. These three characteristics are crucial to providing effective ministries of hope and should be applied to every endeavor of the church, especially ministries for people living with HIV&AIDS and their friends, and families. Each of these characteristics is a study in compassionate community.

“Strengthening” means “to build (up)” and its root word also means “a house, a home.” We can never underestimate the value of house and home for a person living with HIV&AIDS, for many lose housing as the result of economic hardship and some suffer the loss of home because they are physically, emotionally, and socially abandoned by family and friends. Ensuring a place to live and a family to love are gifts beyond measure for the person living with HIV&AIDS.

“Encouragement” means “to come alongside (to help),” and carries the connotation of “giving heart” to someone who has lost hope. People living with HIV&AIDS and their families and friends benefit greatly from constant support, friendship, and even mentoring at personal, small group, and community levels.

And “comfort,” means just that, “to console.” Given over the longer-term, it further means “to make strong.” People living with HIV&AIDS encounter both momentary and marathon challenges, and our “just being there” in advocacy and pastoral care creates hope.

“Getting to Zero!” the number of those who lack hope is not easy, but it’s doable! Make Paul’s guidance part of your prayer: “Father. Help me to follow the way of love and eagerly dispense gifts of the Spirit ... for the strengthening, encouragement, and comfort of people in my life living with HIV&AIDS and their friends and families.”

Take a few minutes now to ask:

1. Am I certain that all of the people I know who are living with HIV&AIDS have a roof over their heads and a family to love them? If not, what can I do about that?
2. Which person living with HIV&AIDS needs me to come alongside and offer hope today by a text, an email, a snail-mail card or letter, a phone call, or a visit?
3. Is there a person living with HIV&AIDS who needs consolation today or an encouragement to stay strong through a difficult period? In what way/s can I do that?

THOSE WHO EXPERIENCE CHURCH AS DANGEROUS

We want “**Getting to Zero!**” to mean that people living with HIV&AIDS and their families and friends NEVER encounter a church or Christians that are dangerous!

The Early Church was a wonderful and safe place for everyone who became a part of that compassionate community: *They devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and to the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer. Everyone was filled with awe, and many wonders and miraculous signs were done by the apostles. All the believers were together and had everything in common. Selling their possessions and goods, they gave to anyone as he had need. Every day they continued to meet together in the temple courts. They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts, praising God and enjoying the favor of all the people. And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved.* **Acts 2:42–47.** Further, even the quickest overview of this text demonstrates that the Primitive Church set the standard for real solutions to challenging life problems by ensuring that all kinds of practical needs were met for those who became part of the family of faith.

Yet, there is an insight that may escape us if we do not think carefully of the church’s welcome and work in this passage. Note that, *Everyone was filled with awe at the many wonders and signs performed by the apostles,* **Acts 2:43.** “Wonders and signs” is code for the fact that the church welcomed in those who were sick and needed healing. In fact, almost all of the miracles performed by Jesus and his disciples were on behalf of the sick. Secondly, it is God who is healing the sick by working through the performance of the apostles. The Early Church practically trusted God with their sick and acted in accordance with his will to pray for them.

The bottom line is this. Anyone who joined the Early Church is assured a place where real solutions to any need, including the needs of the sick, are addressed and met. The Church is the safest place in a dangerous world. Tragically, people living with HIV&AIDS and their families and friends often feel that culture is safer and the community of faith is more dangerous.

Let today’s prayer be: “Jesus, Lord of the Church and Lord of my life. Let my church be a place where we welcome the well and the sick, and everyone without exception experiences the safety of a community completely devoted to the Gospel, grace, and your will and work. Let us praise God and enjoy the favor of all people. And Lord, add to our number daily those who are being saved. Amen.”

Now, take a few moments to break down the text of **Acts 2:42–47**, listing:

1. Practical things people in the church did with each other;
2. Real solutions for needs in the church that people did for each other; and ...
3. The results of a Gospel that has real solutions for the needs of all.

THOSE WHO ARE NEWLY INFECTED

As mentioned in our introduction, “**Getting to Zero!**” is primarily being used to express a heart-felt goal that there are **NO NEW HIV INFECTIONS, NO NEW HIV&AIDS-RELATED DEATHS and NO STIGMA and DISCRIMINATION against people living with HIV&AIDS by the year 2015.**

For this goal, the Church offers a moral imperative: “Do you not know that your bodies are temples of the Holy Spirit, who is in you, whom you have received from God? You are not your own; you were bought at a price. Therefore honor God with your bodies,” **1 Corinthians 6:19-20 (NIV)**. In accordance with the imperative, the church encourages a real solution: **abstinence**.

Abstaining from all high-risk behaviors linked to the spread of HIV&AIDS practically accomplishes the goal of “**Getting to Zero!**” and it’s all about **STOP**:

- S: Save Sex for Marriage.** Abstinence before marriage, while a difficult ideal that goes against culture, IS a viable and proven method of stopping HIV transmission.
- T: Teach Men and Boys to Respect Women and Children.** By teaching men and boys to view women and children as respected equals created in the image of God, the church is working to reduce gender violence, sexual abuse, and the spread of HIV.
- O: Offer Treatment through Churches.** The church offers more than clean needles and condoms, it offers freedom from addiction and care for the addict.
- P: Partner with One Person for Life.** When two HIV negative people partner together faithfully in marriage for life, the risk of sexual transmission of HIV is virtually non-existent.

There is hopeful future. “**Getting to Zero!**” is an achievable goal! Though there is neither vaccination nor cure, we can encourage behavior that STOPS infections and a way of living with HIV&AIDS that effectively provides a “functional cure!”

At the end of this series, pray, “Father. Help me honor you with my body, treating it as a temple of the Holy Spirit and encouraging others, whether living with HIV&AIDS or not, to do the same. And help me further get involved to love and serve anyone living with HIV&AIDS and their families and friends as you guide. Amen.”

Take a moment now to consider how you will be involved in reaching the “**Getting to Zero!**” goal:

1. Pray for people living with HIV&AIDS and their families and friends;
2. Learn more about HIV&AIDS at **www.hivaidsinitiative.com** and sites like it;
3. Connect and become friends with a person living with HIV&AIDS;
4. Start or join a ministry to people living with HIV&AIDS in your church; and ...
5. Let God speak to you about other ways to love and serve.