

Raising Awareness about HIV/AIDS at Your Seminary or College by the Rev. Emily Rose Proctor

Have you been Inspired by World AIDS Day or a personal experience and wondering how you could raise awareness about HIV and AIDS on your seminary or college campus next year? Here are some ideas, many of them based on what I tried, when a seminary student at Columbia Theological Seminary (CTS) in Decatur, GA.

1) AIDS Walk – there is an annual one in Atlanta, so it wasn't that difficult to get a team together from the seminary. Check your area to see if there are existing walks or other fundraisers for local AIDS-related nonprofits. See: <http://www.aidswalk.org/>

2) World AIDS Day Service– I always asked the powers-that-be if I could lead the regular worship service on December 1, but if it was already assigned, I found out who was responsible for chapel that week and tried to convince them to work World AIDS Day themes into all or part of the service closest to or on Dec. 1. People were pretty open to this, especially if I was willing to help by writing a prayer, or preaching. You could also do a separate service, a service of remembrance, etc. but I found these to be less well attended. I recommend trying to work HIV and AIDS into existing structures and events.

3) Educational Event – If there is a regular community forum or other avenue for bringing in guest speakers, this is often a relatively easy way to get conversation started. Local HIV and AIDS organizations usually have speakers they will send out, if you don't know anyone personally. Also, we did a panel one year on which we asked current professors to address HIV and AIDS as it related to their field (pastoral care, ethics, bible, etc.). I thought that was a great event and very popular. It can also be a good way to develop relationships with potential faculty partners. There are also lots of documentaries you could show—just make sure you watch them first, so you know what you're inviting people to! Here is one example, newly released and getting excellent reviews: <http://fireintheblood.com/>

4) AIDS Memorial Quilt – We tried to get a section of the AIDS Quilt (it is housed in Atlanta, so this was cheaper for us since we could go pick it up ourselves) to display in Chapel the week of Dec. 1. To get it in time, you have to make the request to The Names Project pretty early in September,

and it's easy to let the date slip up on you. Their website is <http://www.aidsquilt.org/>. It does cost money, but if funding is an issue they may work with you by giving you a reduced rate. Another option (we did this one year) is that if there are people in your community who have lost someone to AIDS-related causes, and never made a quilt panel for them, (the idea below can give you an idea of who those people might be), you can organize a quilt-making workshop. There are instructions on the website for what size to make your square and other guidelines. This was a very healing event at CTS that brought a small but diverse group of people together in a very intimate way. Then, you can dedicate the squares in worship before you send them to Atlanta to be added to the AIDS Memorial Quilt. Later, you can request those specific panels for displays of The Quilt on campus.

5) Break the Silence Campaign – This is a grassroots campaign to solicit people to share their stories about how HIV or AIDS has touched their lives (their own diagnosis, that of a loved one, a mission trip, an encounter in ministry, etc.). I always included a reminder that no confidential information should ever be shared about someone without his or her permission, and that people could also submit stories anonymously. You can put up flyers, make announcements, send emails, etc., but the most effective way is to ask people, personally, if they have a story and then, after they tell you about it, ask them to write it down and e-mail it to you for this collection. The more people you have doing this, the better. I solicited stories from students, professors, and staff. When I did it, it was just me doing the asking and I got about 25 pages worth of material (you'll be surprised how many people have stories). I compiled and edited the stories and printed copies that I made available for people to take on their way into the chapel service on Dec. 1. I also had a resource table set up outside that had lots of HIV and AIDS resources and books for people to peruse. I did this two out of the three years that I coordinated World AIDS Day activities at CTS.

6) Testing – We worked with the local health department (sometimes you can find nonprofits who will do this for free) to provide HIV testing as part of the annual health fair. I have found that testing as part of a health fair is better than HIV testing alone because there is no stigma about going to a health fair. Also, you can do what we did at the General Assembly in 2010 and encourage prominent leaders (professors, the President, Dean, heads of student organizations) to commit ahead of time to getting tested and letting you announce it as a witness to the whole community. You could even do a press release to a local paper or church publication. Here was our press release:

<http://www.pcusa.org/news/2010/6/29/presbyterian-leaders-fight-stigma-get-tested-hiv/>

7) HIV/AIDS policy – I didn't pursue this at Columbia, but fellow PAN leader, Andrew Black did, while he was a student at Louisville Presbyterian Theological Seminary (LPTS). I could put you in touch with Andrew if you want to know more. You'll see the LPTS Policy on HIV/AIDS on page 34 of their Employee Handbook: <http://www.lpts.edu/docs/guides-policies-handbooks/employee-handbook.pdf?sfvrsn=0> Developing an institutional policy could serve to protect students, faculty, and staff, as well as be a vehicle for raising awareness, generally.

8) Institutionalize it – The best way to keep the seminary community engaging in HIV and AIDS prevention and awareness is to find a way to institutionalize it. The Interdenominational Theological Seminary (ITC) integrates HIV into a number of its core and required classes. Dubuque Theological Seminary has a chaplain who has become an HIV advocate and makes sure there is a WAD service there each year. Louisville has a policy. I wasn't able to do this at CTS, which is probably why not much is happening now. So I would say, either identify a couple of professors who are willing to be advocates or make it part of the tradition of one or more student groups. It could be a really good opportunity to bring several groups together--if you can get the African-American student group and the LGBT support group working together on this--what a witness that would be! Also, international students, people passionate about global mission, or urban ministry all make good partners.

Please let us know what you're doing and how we can support your efforts to raise awareness wherever you are! If you wrote a prayer, liturgy, or sermon about HIV, please send it to us so we can consider including it in next year's World AIDS Day resources!

Sincerely,

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Presbyterian AIDS Network (PAN), a network of the Presbyterian Health, Education and Welfare Association (PHEWA)

