

Devotional Guide

DIRECTING PRAYER AND SCRIPTURE TOWARD THE HIV/AIDS EPIDEMIC IN AMERICA



Many people ask us how they can become involved in HIV and AIDS ministry in their church or community. They have already found a place in their hearts for those people who are living with HIV and AIDS, yet they wonder how to translate that concern and compassion into action.

Most people feel inadequate, tentative and just don't know how to start. Much of the good work that has come at the hands of Christians has started with prayer. This guide is intended to help Christians focus prayer on specific issues that can bring direction to serving those brothers and sisters in our own communities who are living with HIV and AIDS. Yes, you can make a difference. Your prayers matter. Your words matter.

We suggest that within each community there are HIV organizations that are already engaged in the important work of serving people with HIV. We also believe that in most cases these organizations are in need of assistance and that Christians are uniquely qualified to serve others.

Often it is hard for us to imagine working alongside others who don't necessarily share our beliefs or who are perhaps uncomfortable with Christians as partners in the first place. Rick Rusaw and Eric Swanson in their wonderful book, *The Externally Focused Church*, note... "Honest, compassionate service can restore credibility to the crucial message we have to share." And we must enter into these partnerships with humility, not with haughty self-righteousness that can drive others away from us, from the church or from Christ.

We hope this guide can be a first step toward service.



Why does Central Baptist Church have a ministry like Samaritan Ministry?

Several years ago, our church began an educational program about HIV and AIDS. The purpose of this program was to dispel some of the fear and ignorance that surrounds this disease. We wanted to be prepared as a church if HIV affected one of our families. What we discovered was that many, many people in this community are already dealing with HIV and AIDS, and so are some of our church members. What we discovered is that our friends and neighbors need us and that they need to be reminded that God cares about and loves his children.

Our Mission:

"Our church should be a beacon of light and hope, by way of Christ, to anyone who suffers from or has family or friends who suffer from this disease."

Day 1 – A Call to Service

Then Jesus said, "Yes, now go and do the same." (Luke 10:37b)

This is the statement that Jesus made at the end of the story of the Good Samaritan. Often overlooked, this directive of Jesus is a clear call to service as it answers the question, "Who is my neighbor?" Absent from this best known illustration of our Lord is the interview. The hated Samaritan doesn't ask any questions or make any judgments to decide the worthiness of the man in need. To the Samaritan, the wounded man is a human being worth being cared for. The only question HIV/AIDS asks is, "Are you human?"

Prayer: Lord, we ask you today to open our hearts to an epidemic that exists right here in our own community. It is as much an epidemic of indifference as it is one that involves a deadly virus. We humbly ask that you drop this veil from our eyes so we may see, act and love as you have commanded us. Allow us to have the same simple love demonstrated by that stranger who saw the humanity in his fellow man and was moved toward compassion, mercy and service.

Day 2 – Confession

⁵Finally, I confessed all my sins to you and stopped trying to hide them. I said to myself, "I will confess my rebellion to the LORD." And you forgave me! All my guilt is gone. ⁶Therefore, let all the godly confess their rebellion to you while there is time, that they may not drown in the floodwaters of judgment. (Psalm 32:5 &6)

As Christians begin to thoughtfully and prayerfully come to terms with their responsibility to serve those living with HIV/AIDS, one critical roadblock remains. Instead of being the "beacon of light and hope, by way of Christ" in this epidemic, the Church has been a bastion of judgment and stigma. It has not only sinned in its failure to act, it has been responsible for much alienation and suffering for those affected by HIV and AIDS. Clearly, the church has gotten it wrong on AIDS.

Prayer: Lord, we publicly confess and acknowledge that we have too often contributed to stigmatization and discrimination and that our churches have not always been welcome places for people living with HIV/AIDS. We therefore commit ourselves to a faithful and courageous response in breaking the silence, speaking openly and truthfully about human sexuality and HIV/AIDS. We confess that the church has rejected when it should have embraced and judged when it should have shown love and compassion.

Day 3 – A Change in Behavior

The godly think before speaking; the wicked spout evil words. (Proverbs 15:28)

As we begin to change our heart and to see the suffering of HIV/AIDS with a new view, the first challenge for us can be to change our own behavior. Here, our hateful words and our willingness to perpetuate myths and misunderstandings concerning HIV and those who are infected must be stopped. We need to change the conversation, alter the context and begin to challenge the negative and judgmental attitudes that still exist toward people who are living with HIV and AIDS.

Prayer: May the words of my mouth and the thoughts of my heart be pleasing to you, O LORD, my rock and my redeemer. (Psalm 19:13)

Day 4 – Commitment

So you see, it isn't enough just to have faith. Faith that doesn't show itself by good deeds is no faith at all – it is dead and useless. (James 2:17)

Here's the hard part... action. How can we translate this new awareness and commitment to action? What kind of commitment are we willing to make with our time, talents and energy to change the lives of people? Can we make a difference? For many, the first step is to learn more about HIV because knowledge is the first step toward reducing prejudice and stigma. The second bold step in our commitment is to call one of the local organizations already serving the HIV/AIDS population and offer to help.

Prayer: Lord, make me an instrument of your peace. Place in my path opportunities to serve so that I might make a difference in the lives of those who live each day with this virus – the source of illness and ill will. Lord, when the opportunity presents itself, give me the will and confidence to be the presence of Christ in my community. Let me serve.

Day 5 – Courage

God arms me with strength. He has made my way safe. (Psalm 18:32)

It takes courage to begin to talk about HIV/AIDS. Period. This is a conversation most people don't want to have, and that is certainly the case in the church setting. It takes courage to speak against hatred and prejudice and to speak up for people living with HIV/AIDS. But when our efforts, words and deeds are clearly focused on service, God's love and the message in John 3:16, we can truly ask, "What can we say about such wonderful things as these? If God is for us, who can ever be against us?" (Romans 8:31). Courageous leaders, lay and clergy, must step forward. With this virus, fearful silence kills.

Prayer: Our Father, we know that we can do all things because of your strength. We pray today for the strength, discernment and courage to speak up for those members of our community who may not have a voice. Help us to speak against the ugly and demeaning rhetoric that is all too often part of the Christian vocabulary when it comes to HIV and AIDS. May faithful people see in me an open hearth and an unconditional love that spills out sufficiently to cover all of God's creation.

Day 6 - Community

Be careful how you live among your unbelieving neighbors. Even if they accuse you of doing wrong, they will see your honorable behavior, and they will believe and give honor to God when he comes to judge the world. (1 Peter 2:12)

This is a simple and basic message from Peter, but one that is often overlooked. Our work as Christians ALWAYS occurs within the community in which we live. Too often we try to isolate ourselves away from the community. With this fight against HIV/AIDS, our allies may be surprising and will often be members of the secular community. After all, churches have been, for the most part, uninvolved. We must be willing to partner with Health Departments, secular not-for-profits, and other non-religious groups in the fight against this virus. This fight will require the whole community.

Prayer: Father, please help me to understand that my role in this community demands that I love my community. It demands that I embrace the entire community as part of your Kingdom. Help me to be humble in my walk with you. Help me see in others the talents that you have given them that might make them great partners with us in this work. Let my presence at the table be your presence, my words be your words. Let my work with others be a model of humility and respect.

Day 7 – A Search for Christ

37 "Then these righteous ones will reply, 'Lord, when did we ever see you hungry and feed you? Or thirsty and give you something to drink? 38 Or a stranger and show you hospitality? Or naked and give you clothing? 39 When did we ever see you sick or in prison, and visit you?' 40 And the King will tell them, 'I assure you, when you did it to one of the least of these my brothers and sisters, you were doing it to me! (Matthew 25:37-40)

Clearly our treatment of others matters to our Lord. Over and over again we are admonished to serve, to do so willingly, passionately, humbly and without judgment. Most Christians understand that it is important that others see Christ in us through our kindnesses and words. But, we often miss the opportunity to see Christ in others. As Jesus tells about the final judgment in this section of Matthew's Gospel, it is clear that each of those people we touch, or fail to touch, should represent to us the face of Jesus. Can we see His face in our friends and neighbors who suffer with HIV and AIDS?

Prayer: Lord, today I thank you for giving me the opportunity, as a believer, to work in your Kingdom. I thank you for those times that I have been a worthy disciple of yours so that others would see your heart in my words and actions. Today I pray that I would be so humble that I could be able to see you in the people that I serve; to have the knowledge that your spirit lives and works in our world, and that any time I come in contact with those in need, those who are hungry, those neighbors who are unloved and untouched by a mean-spirited world, that I would realize that in my service, I serve you.

Where can I get more information about HIV and AIDS?

- Samaritan Ministry offers *The HIV Resource for Churches* Kit, plus other curriculum, outlines, ministry guides and more. www.samaritancentral.org
- *AIDS: Finding Hope and Compassion* (Pamphlet), RBC Ministries, www.rbc.net
- Positively Aware, Journal of the Test Positive Aware Network, www.tpan.com
- *The Externally Focused Church* (2004) by Rusaw & Swanson
- Two books by Donald Messer: *Breaking the Conspiracy of Silence* (2004) and *52 Ways to Create an AIDS Free World* (2009)
- Cooperative Baptist Fellowship HIV/AIDS Ministry, www.thefellowship.info/AIDS
- United Methodist HIV/AIDS Ministry, www.umglobalaidsfund.org
- Centers for Disease Control HIV/AIDS Information, www.cdc.gov/hiv
- Complete HIV/AIDS Resource, www.TheBody.com
- Rick & Kay Warren's HIV/AIDS Newsletter, www.hivandthechurch.com
- Comprehensive resource for HIV information, www.stophiv.us



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