



outStanding in the field

THE POWER OF POSITIVE PEOPLE

HIV/AIDS Ministry in the Rural South

by Heather Roote Faller

“When I was a little boy, I’d go to church,” the man whispered. “But then I couldn’t go, because God didn’t love me anymore.” At twenty-five years old, he found himself in a wheelchair in the Infectious Diseases Clinic at Duke University Medical Center in Durham, North Carolina, talking with Chaplain Dagney Jochem (M.Div., 1995). Because he had been sexually involved with men, he felt that God no longer loved him. When the man died two days later of AIDS, “I thought to myself, I don’t want one more person to ever have that feeling,” said Jochem. “Or to find out two days before they die that it isn’t true.”

That conversation took place in 1995. Early in 1996, Jochem wrote a grant to start Partners in Caring, a program designed to provide pastoral care services to people in rural areas, many of whom were isolated by location, poverty, and the religion and culture that condemned them for having a disease. As director of Partners in Caring at Duke University Medical Center, this fall Jochem was one of fifteen Purpose Prize finalists honored by Civic Ventures, a San Francisco think tank. The prize recognizes people over the age of sixty who are “defying societal expectations by channeling their creativity and talent to address critical social problems at the local, regional, or national level,” according to the Civic Ventures web site.

Jochem said that her work with “positive people,” or people living with HIV, began in her PTS field education placement at the Hyacinth AIDS Foundation in New Brunswick, New Jersey. She came to seminary in her fifties, from a career in economics. After graduation she did clinical pastoral education at Duke, where she met the young man who inspired Partners in Caring. In rural areas, a big source of social support is the church, but Jochem said that she kept hearing from

her patients, “The clinic is the only place I can come to talk about God—not the church, because they don’t want me there.” Jochem said, “I believed that if given the chance, the church would open its arms and help people that needed helping.”

And the church did. But counter to conventional wisdom, the biggest response came not from mainline churches, which “think right, but aren’t interested in doing things,” according to Jochem, but from Pentecostal churches in the area. “Some of our most participatory churches have theologies that are pretty judgmental.... You never know who is going to say yes,” she said.

As pastors came to the program and learned the facts about HIV and AIDS, they were able to welcome their HIV positive members and their families back to the church. Jochem said that many thought they could catch HIV from the water in the baptismal font, or by drinking from a common cup. “The misconceptions are monumental,” she said.

So are some of the challenges rural clergy face in correcting them. The program, which has now trained hundreds of clergy, requires frank talk about sex and drugs, two topics churches tend to avoid. “Clergy want to address the issues, and keep their jobs, too,” said Jochem. “There’s a real stigma. It helps to have more than one pastor in an area [talking about HIV/AIDS], for their job security. And [it helps that] the people who talk to the clergy are other clergy.”

Peer-to-peer education turned out to be the key to the program’s success. It worked so well with clergy that Jochem soon created another program, Peer Education Training Sites (PETS), to train peer counselors. Some who attend PETS have never revealed their positive HIV status before, but Jochem said the peer support is transformative: “People come in with faces of misery, they come

Prayer of commitment in support
of people living with HIV/AIDS

Lord God, give us the spirit of courage,
so we may be open
in our concern for people
living with HIV/AIDS...

Taken from Choose Hope, Christian Aid, 2001



Photo: Allison Sanders

Dagney Jochem, center, with PETS participants

because we give them lunch, and they leave dancing on the table.”

Just as transformative is the recognition of the value of their experience. “We find out how long people have been living with HIV, and with ten or twenty people in the room, we’ll have one hundred to two hundred years of experience,” said Jochem. “We tell them they have a lot to offer, and to teach.” Asked what he gained from the training, one peer counselor said, “I learned that I still have something to give.”

Jochem says her theology was formed through the example of her parents, who were active in the civil rights movement in Florida where she grew up, and in her Old Testament and church history classes at PTS. “I took church history every semester,” said Jochem, where she learned that in the early church, “there were female images of the divine, and when Christianity started, people were open to community. I learned about the role of women, and of slaves. The early church didn’t exclude.” This understanding guides her work with HIV positive people today. “I don’t think in the Kingdom of God there are those who are left out, so why should we leave people out?” she said. ■