

Illinois Catholic says faith has helped him cope with AIDS, prejudice

WHEATON, Ill. (CNS) — A typed copy of a Scripture passage is taped to the front door of Tom Hogueisson's apartment in a housing complex supported by Wheaton Franciscan Services and designated for people with AIDS.

It is from Chapter 5 of the Gospel of Matthew, Verses 10 to 12. Drawn from the end of the beatitudes, the verses discuss God's promises for persecuted believers.

Hogueisson said it has particular meaning to him. He has been beaten up, he said, because of his homosexuality and having AIDS has isolated him from the community. Doctors discovered he had the disease in 1984, and he was kicked out of the Army, he said.

Later, his activism calling for HIV/AIDS research and adequate health care for those with the disease made him the victim of violent attacks. He feels vulnerable to hate crimes and harassment.

Even at home, the 52-year-old member of St. Michael Parish in Wheaton doesn't feel safe.

There is no security staff on site. "When you live in AIDS housing, you're susceptible to outside violators," he said in an interview with the Catholic Explorer, newspaper of the Joliet Diocese.

He also has suffered a series of health traumas, depression and financial setbacks and must adhere to a strict medical regimen.

But through it all Hogueisson remains optimistic and finds his Catholic faith is a good part of the reason for his outlook.

“I’ve been a Catholic all my life,” said the man, who grew up one of five children in Blue Island. “My family is very traditional, devout practicing Catholics. They’ve always been very supportive. I never experienced negativism from the family.”

He was a Chicago public school science teacher until a minor stroke and other complications of his disease robbed him of his ability to work full time. But while he was a teacher, he wrote an AIDS prevention curriculum, which he presented at schools throughout the city.

Hogueisson’s faith in God is what motivates him to be an activist and work on behalf of others, he said. He has organized and participated in countless demonstrations.

He has lost a lot of friends to the disease. In the summer of 1990, “I lost 10 friends in 30 days,” he said. The losses have made him acutely aware of his own mortality.

Nearly 40 million adults and children are living with HIV, the virus that causes AIDS, and new infections are on the rise in many countries, according to a recent report by the Joint U.N. Program on HIV/AIDS and the World Health Organization. This year 4.3 million people have contracted the virus and 2.9 million people died of AIDS-related illnesses, the report said.

Around the world communities planned events to mark World AIDS Day Dec. 1.

Hogueisson said he relies on his faith for support and comfort in his own battle with the disease.

As he spoke to the Catholic Explorer, a medal of St. Jude, the patron of hopeless and impossible causes, dangled from his neck. A book of meditations titled “The Color of Light” graced an end table next to the chair where he regularly sits to recite the rosary.

“I find a great deal of comfort in these prayers. I know that my prayers are answered. I have a great devotion to the Blessed Mother,” he said.

Hogueisson’s faith is also invigorated by the example of the Franciscan nuns who live in a convent on the campus of Wheaton Franciscan Services.

He has “admiration and respect” for “these women who really respond to the world with the Franciscan” charism, he said. “Watching them makes you feel good to be Catholic.”