



Catholic Response to the AIDS Crisis in Utah

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Topic and Significance

The topic of this project is the response of the Catholic community in Salt Lake City to the AIDS crisis in the 1980's.

Before applying to medical school, I will attend the Public Health graduate program at the University of Utah. While there I will continue researching to contribute new knowledge to diseases such as HIV and also to empower myself and other marginalized communities.

This topic is significant because it allows the medical community to better confront diseases in the future, tapping into our own biases and thus bringing awareness in order to prevent stigma to be assigned to certain diseases.



Introduction

Since AIDS first emerged among gay men and injection drug users, the epidemic was marked by mischaracterization, a subsequent stigma against the people who contracted it, and a lack of response from the authorities.

The situation in Salt Lake City and the state of Utah was no exception, with the major source of aid for people with AIDS coming from an unlikely ally, the Catholic Church owned Holy Cross Hospital.

The Sisters of the Holy Cross mission statement reads “compassion moves us to reflect on the signs of the times, discern needs, and respond. We stand in solidarity with the poor and the powerless” (<https://www.cscsisters.org/our-mission/>), proved to be essential in the treatment of people maligned by both the Mormon Church and the Catholic Hierarchy.

Religious reform, exposure to marginalized communities, and their more pastoral approach in turn allowed them to care for the sick with dignity, and for those who died, a place to die with respect.



Sources

Primary

This project relies on oral histories conducted by Dr. Elizabeth Clement. The oral histories can be found at the Marriott Library's special collections.

These include:

- 3 nuns that worked at Holy Cross Hospital
- 3 Volunteer/Activists
- 4 Medical personnel at Holy Cross Hospital (4)
- Pope Benedict XVI's *On the Pastoral Care of Homosexual Persons*
- Intermountain Catholic Newspaper

Many of PWA's passed away, major setback to hearing what the patients thought specifically, however, secondhand information available.

Secondary

For AIDS history I used - Epstein's *Impure Science*

For conservative Christian responses to AIDS I used Anthony Petro's *After the Wrath of God*

For nun's pastoral approach post Vatican II I used Amy Koelhinger's *The New Nuns*

For how Catholic Hospitals run, I used Barbara Wall's *American Catholic Hospitals: A Century of Changing Markets and Missions*

LDS attitudes towards homosexuality in Utah, I used *Gay Rights and the Mormon Church: Intended Actions, Unintended Consequences*.

LDS President Russell M Nelson's. "*Where Is Wisdom*"



Crisis Introduction

The project starts with the background of the AIDS epidemic. Initially known as the Gay Related Immunodeficiency (GRID), the CDC produced an official name in May 1982, AIDS.

Since it afflicted mainly gay men, the virus became susceptible to having the medical community eager to find causation and a correlation between gay men and AIDS.

There was pressure to assign causation to the disease. This led to a hasty causation-assignment to the disease that subsequently denoted blame, as previous diseases such as cholera, leprosy, etc. were identified with different sanitary/lifestyles throughout American history. (Epstein)

The gay community then bore the stigma of AIDS, as Americans started associating the two together.




Catholic Church's Hierarchy Stance

The Catholic Church formally officially teaches that, “homosexual acts are intrinsically disordered.”¹⁴² “They are contrary to the natural law. They close the sexual act to the gift of life. They do not proceed from a genuine affective and sexual complementarity. Under no circumstances can they be approved.” (*Catechism of the Catholic Church*)

The Catholic Church cast AIDS as a moral, rather than medical crisis, which had the effect of problematizing and delaying both federal and state level responses to the public health crisis. (Petro)

“Sometimes I believe the greatest damage done to persons with AIDS is done by the dishonesty of those health care professionals who refuse to confront the moral dimensions of sexual aberrations or drug abuse” - Cardinal John O’Connor of New York City



Nuns' exposure to marginalized communities

Even while the Catholic hierarchy had a seemingly uncompromising position, Catholic relief to people in marginalized communities actually came from one of its own councils.

The Second Vatican Council (1962-1965) brought upon profound changes in the way the Church was adapting to the 20th century. Changes included working with the marginalized, and most importantly, with non-Catholics.

For example, Sister Evangeline Meyer, SSND, was a religious sister working with the Lawndale section of Chicago's West Side in 1968. Sister Meyer embodied a sentiment in the church that has a lot in common to what the Sisters of the Holy Cross did with Salt Lake City's marginalized.

She developed a "yes, here I am" apostolate in order to reach out to the people she felt the church was ignoring, in order to bring a more pastoral approach. By being more present with their communities, nuns were better able to attend to their needs.

Nuns' responses to the AIDS crisis


It turns out, that what the nuns were doing in the 1960's, is reflected in Salt Lake City in the 1980's.



Sister Linda Bellmore, who served the Salt Lake City community from 1987 to 2003, did not believe AIDS or any other illness was a punishment on deserving sinners. She participated in World AIDS day, and with these experiences, she understood that patients wanted to be remembered for the people they were, and not from the disease they died from.

Sister Bernie, a physician assistant, realized that with actual experience, people were able to start seeing the humanity in the people and that now, 30 years after the epidemic, more and more people can start going home and being accepted by their families.

- Sister Joan Stedman states that 'It wasn't about this person or that person or this person's orientation or that person's orientation. It was about a need that had to be responded to with respect and compassion. And that's what Catholic healthcare has been about from the beginning.'



AIDS Epidemic In Salt Lake City- Introduction

When the AIDS epidemic reached Salt Lake City, not only were the hospitals in the area ill prepared, but also the response of the general community was callous.

This can be attributed to the influence of the Mormon Church's teaching against homosexuality. This made treating patients in Utah not only more hard, but more stigmatized.

Society's predominant view of homosexuality was typified by the *Salt Lake Tribune* editorial board's opinion that it was "a social evil that must be fought." *The Salt Lake Tribune* from 1950-1959 only reported homosexuality in terms of criminality, that is, a negative association between homosexuality and criminals that in turn solidified negative stereotypes to homosexuals, who were the primary contractors of the disease in Utah. (Prince)

This created a crisis in which hospitals were not willing to care for patients with AIDS.



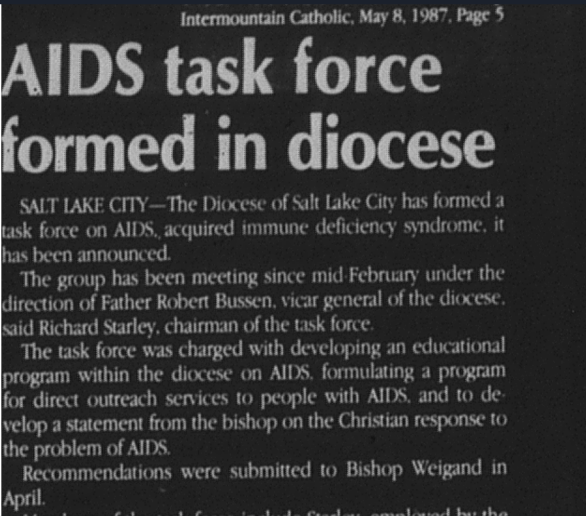
Activists, volunteers' perspective on response to the crisis

- Ben Barr worked as a caregiver to AIDS patients, when speaking about Holy Cross Hospital, he states there was distrust of the Catholic Church on the part of gay people.
- Yet he also saw that there was a hunger for acceptance, especially from faith-based groups, so much that gay men would find it meaningful when the nuns would approach them and treat them like normal human beings.
- Patricia Rickers also volunteered with people with AIDS at the Utah AIDS Foundation. Her perception of Holy Cross was that it was a good hospital and recalls that Sister Elizabeth Vandeburg, both a nurse and a nun, was especially helpful because of the safer sex education demonstrations she had done.
 - Rickers attributes Holy Cross' actions in AIDS treatment to a form of compassionate Catholicism.



Activists, volunteers' perspective on response to the crisis (cont.)

- Richard Starley, a Utah AIDS project volunteer, was not at all surprised that Holy Cross would open its doors either, but took matters even further when he wrote the bishop of Salt Lake City.



- He wrote to the bishop saying he needed to do something about with people with AIDS living in Utah. He confronted the bishop about people living with AIDS and being gay, and the bishop agreed to form a committee, so long as it did not espouse values that were not in line with official Catholic teaching.
- Starley led the creation of the Diocesan Committee on AIDS in 1986. Starley valiantly confronted the bishop about it by asking, “So, why is AIDS any different from cancer? And would you say that to somebody with cancer? Would you say to somebody with cancer, ‘You have cancer because you sinned?’”

Medical Community perspective



- Holy Cross Hospital had an AIDS ward at the hospital, and Dr, Kristen Ries had her own private practice. When her patients needed to be hospitalized, she admitted them to the AIDS ward at HC.
- Dr. Kristen Ries believes that initially no hospital wanted to see patients with AIDS because of the fear of the disease itself, and to a lesser extent a fear for their reputation as a hospital.
 - ‘We started the Med Three, which was an infectious disease unit we called it but it was an AIDS unit. So we had a ten-bed AIDS unit, which was full most of the time.’ - Dr. Kristen Ries
- Physician Assistant Maggie Snyder saw people having to deal with stigma in their communities such as rejection, loss of job, and loss of health insurance as a result of AIDS.
 - Holy Cross created the Continuity of Care program with the aid of Sister Bellmore and was geared to feeding patients, transporting them, and conducting AIDS education.



Medical Community perspective (cont.)

- Psychiatrist Dr. Paula Gibbs reflects that while the Catholic Church was staunch in its teachings' defense, the hospital created the most inviting and compassionate environment.
 - Especially when it came to homosexuality and AIDS, Dr. Gibbs never saw any form of bigotry and discrimination from the nuns. She admits that while it was really difficult to go about distribution of condoms, the nuns wanted to focus on prevention methods.
- Nurse Pam Bruce experienced something like no other by working at a Catholic hospital, a certain spiritual home in which those patients who chose to pray were not alone, they always had people to pray with or just provide some support.
 - 'Whether patients could pay, whether they were black or white or whatever, they would take you in and they would try to figure it out.' - Pam Bruce



Conclusion

The work of the Sisters of the Holy Cross in Salt Lake City led to the dignified caregiving of patients with AIDS, and for those who died a place to die with respect.

Implementing the Second Vatican Council, the Sisters of the Holy Cross were able to better engage with their communities and attend to the needs of Catholics and Non-Catholics alike.

When the AIDS epidemic struck Utah, Holy Cross Hospital was the only one who initially tended for the sick.

The nuns' mission of helping people no matter their position in life, drove them to help the sick in a practical, compassionate, and nonjudgmental way that drew more and more people.

Through these experiences, the Catholic Church and the Salt Lake City community were able to more effectively respond to patients who suffered of AIDS with dignity and respect.