

Letter From Winthrop University

by *Luther M. Boggs, Jr.*

On Campus With the National AIDS Quilt



It was a sleepy Sunday afternoon when a section of the national AIDS quilt visited Winthrop University. The sun, slipping low into the tops of the pines, shown red across the sparsely populated campus. With many students still enjoying the waning hours of another weekend spent elsewhere, Rock Hill, South Carolina, was not up to its normal weekday bustle. The lobby of Dinkins Student Center was nearly empty when the faithful began to trickle in.

By the time I arrived, an orderly mob of six or seven students was gathered around a table near the center of the room. Behind the table, an earnest young woman was passing out red ribbons. Take a ribbon, she said, take a pin. Had the assembled not been so willing, so eager to accept, she might easily have been hocking samples of the latest celebrity fragrance—Elizabeth Taylor's True Devotion?—at a department store makeup counter in nearby Charlotte. Two others were handing out small white candles collared with the nifty little cardboard wax guards that never quite seem to work. I politely declined, figuring I would do my candle-holding and wax-monitoring on Christmas Eve.

Beyond the ribbon girl were the early arrivals. Some sat on the floor, others on the several chairs. Some chatted quietly with one another about this or that or, more likely, nothing at all. Others, solemn and reflective, sat quietly, gazing across the floor toward a bright and busy expanse of color, a hallowed patchwork of large fabric squares—the AIDS quilt.

Someone handed me a program. "An Ecumenical Prayer Service," it read, "REMEMBERING THE COMMON THREAD." The title was gathered to one side to leave room for an illustration: two figures of indeterminate gender

embracing below a quilt sewn together with, yes, a common thread. The service, the bulletin continued, was "for all of us touched by the AIDS Crisis"—the word "crisis" matter-of-factly capitalized and neatly assimilated into the two-word, single entity "AIDS Crisis."

And what did that mean, "for all of us touched by the AIDS Crisis"? That all of us had, in fact, been touched by AIDS? That all of us should have been touched by AIDS? That those not certain they had been touched by AIDS should retire to the adjoining game room for Ping-Pong or Pole Position and leave the praying and singing and wax control to more qualified souls? I wasn't sure; I wasn't even sure what "touched by" meant.

The proud sponsor of the affair was an umbrella organization called Winthrop Cooperative Campus Ministries. In search of some explanation, I turned to the back page of the bulletin: "Winthrop Cooperative Campus Ministries is a cooperative effort by several different denominations at Winthrop University to serve the Winthrop student body, faculty and staff through a variety of enriching opportunities." Beyond a general declaration of geography, the statement was more or less, well, vague. The group's purpose—to serve the community—was clear enough, but the rest was a muddle. I wondered how it served and to what end. "Through a variety of enriching opportunities," I read again. This prayer service, I concluded, was an opportunity for enrichment.

Seven campus ministries were listed as affiliates. The usual mainline suspects—the Presbyterian and United Methodist clubs, the Catholic league and a combined group of Lutherans and Episcopalians—had signed on, as had the African Methodist Episcopal bunch and something called the Reformed University Fellowship. In a mild surprise, the Baptists topped the list.

Outside, beyond the crisscrossed concrete walkways, past the dogwood trees and magnolias, the hour was sounding from the bell tower. Six o'clock. Inside, 25 or 30 students huddled for the service. Still engrossed in the bulletin, I scarcely noticed as a clergyman called the assembled to order and said something about the tragic beauty of the AIDS quilt. The section laid out on the floor behind him, behind the velvet rope

barriers otherwise used to corral patrons at busy banks and museums, was on tour. This would be a brief stop: one night only. The wonder was that it had stopped here at all.

After an opening hymn, a pastor came forward to lead a responsive reading. "We gather this evening to remember," he said, "longing for the Caring One who calls us from darkness into the light of love." "Caring One"? "Light of love"? Why not, among Christians, "God" and "salvation"? I found out soon enough. The reading continued. "We gather to be drawn together, embraced by [the] nurturing arms of all who sojourn along this path we call life." The vigil, then, was less about petitioning God and more about gathering people together to heal each other—a curious focus for an occasion, however ecumenical, billed as a prayer service. Not Thy will, Lord, but mine.

Self-flattery quickly yielded to self-loathing: "We gather this evening in sadness . . . remembering [those] who have died of AIDS and acknowledging the indifference of our church, our society and the slowness of our human response." Public indifference to AIDS in America? About whom were they talking? After all, Ronald Reagan—the Evil Executive many in the AIDS lobby still seem to think invented the disease—had long since retired to California. If not Reagan, I thought, then whom? Perhaps the new demon on the block, Rush Limbaugh.

As I recall recent history, neither churches nor society at large has been indifferent to the plight of those with AIDS. The names of AIDS victims have been etched across the national heart. From Ryan White to Kimberly Bergalis, from Rock Hudson to Magic Johnson, we have prayed for the living and mourned the loss of the dead. And we the people, the taxpayers, have spent billions on the quest for a cure. In Bill Clinton's America, the federal government will spend \$1.3 billion on AIDS research in this year alone. Indifference? Not even close.

The stars have certainly done their part. Nearly all of them—from rock gods to jocks, from Hollywood nymphs to game-show hosts—have kept the faith, sporting their red ribbons at every Academy Awards show, every Emmy

Awards, every MTV Music Video Awards, every benefit, tribute, dog show, and peep show since Reagan left. No indifference here. (Perhaps no difference either, but that is another story.)

And what of those gathered that Sunday afternoon, the kids with mile-long faces staring blankly at the giant panels of the AIDS quilt, addressing themselves to the "Caring One" and holding little candles? Were they, like other Americans, shamefully indifferent? Or were they unlike the rest, somehow different, caring in spite of themselves, soldiers at the vanguard of a compassion revolution? I really couldn't say.

The reading continued. "We gather this evening in compassionate support . . . embracing those living with the HIV virus and those who love and care for them." With these words, the faithful embraced not only the afflicted, but also the homosexuality of so many AIDS casualties. The scourge of AIDS gave way to the evils of homophobia, intolerance, and bigotry—maladies that nowadays are said to plague all those who reject even one plank of the radical gay agenda. The struggle for gay legitimacy was joined.

Another minister came forward to lead a "Litany of Remembrance" of those "whom we have loved and who have died of AIDS . . . our lovers and spouses with whom we shared so intimately . . . our children . . . our fathers and mothers, brothers and sisters, uncles, aunts, and cousins . . . [and] our friends." It was now class participation time. "We recall by name all those whom we lost to AIDS." The assembled, the bulletin noted parenthetically, should, "as you feel prompted, recall aloud the first name of your loved ones who have died." Six or eight people spoke up. All of the departed, however, seemed to have had masculine names, leaving out—for now—the mothers, sisters, and aunts. Oh, well.

Some who spoke probably recalled relatives and friends. No doubt others had to rely on the names of friends of friends or cousins of friends or friends of cousins. Some could not think of a single person who had died of AIDS. Among these, I could not even recall the name of someone who had known someone who had died of AIDS. I did recall a dear friend who several years ago was terribly ill and had had himself tested for AIDS. But he did not—thank God—have the virus. Even as I counted

my blessings and stayed quiet, I couldn't help feeling I was somehow letting everyone down.

Another prayer began. "Loving God, Mother and Father of us all, remember the gift of life you shared with us through our loved ones who have died." It seemed odd that a prayer so fuzzy in addressing God should beseech the Almighty to remember, but perhaps the message wasn't intended for Him. After all, the next line—"Send your good spirit to hover around us, gently touching our pain"—sounded like a prayer to the ghost of some long-dead Arkansas Indian chief. Perhaps it was.

At last it was time for the closing hymn, "Weave Us Together." The first verse, saluting multiculturalism, seemed not to fit the program. The second verse, trumpeting the equality of sexual lifestyles, fit perfectly: "We are different instruments, playing our own melodies, each one tuning to a different key." As if praying to the dead Indian hadn't been enough, the third verse betrayed still more theological confusion. "Now the God in me, greets the God in thee, in one great family"—a succinct distillation not of Christianity, but of Brady Bunch pantheism. Amidst such ecumenicism, Christ had not once been mentioned.

About the candles. As a child, I always looked forward to the lighting of the candles on Christmas Eve. With only the moon outside and the lights inside the church turned down low, I would watch with great anticipation as the light was passed from the Christ candle down each aisle to each pew and finally, in turn, to each parishioner. When those

candles were lifted the sanctuary was filled with light, a symbol, our pastor said, of the gospel of Christ illuminating the world.

There was plenty of light that afternoon around the AIDS quilt at the Winthrop University student center. No one bothered to draw the blinds on the setting sun or cut the florescent light tubes overhead, but they lit the candles anyway.

Nothing happened.

Luther M. Boggs, Jr., writes from Atlanta, Georgia.

Letter From Colorado

by Edward L. Lederman

Back to Basics



The day after last year's election that torpedoed our nation's most advanced experiment in "Outcome Based Education" (OBE), a pleasant-faced teacher appeared on the evening news. "Shocked and depressed," she said she was. "I've been teaching for over 15 years, giving the kids the best education possible. And to have them win like this. It's a slap; it's like saying I don't know what I'm doing." Earlier that day many students had returned home from school

LIBERAL ARTS

FREEDOM I.Q. TEST

"Civilized Publications" in Philadelphia recently announced the release of a book entitled *Are You Still a Slave?* by "notoriously controversial" author Shahrazad Ali. Ali, who claims this follow-up to her *Blackman's Guide to Understanding the Black woman* is "another self-help book designed to uplift and help the entire Black community," structures her new book around a 50-question "Freedom I.Q. Test."

Ali says that *Are You Still a Slave?* simply determines if blacks "experience slavery flashbacks which influence behavior and control thinking in the form of Post-traumatic Stress Disorder." According to Civilized Publications' press release, the book represents a "high-tech move towards 'interactive literature.'" The quiz is "conveniently 'True or False.' [sic] with the top score being 100 and you get two chances to pass [sic]. Score definitions and psychological interpretation are included, and each book comes hermetically sealed in plastic for 'privacy.'"