

## AIDS Dialogue Focuses on Spiritual Strength

By DONNA PARTEN

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How can Buddhism and Christianity offer hope to AIDS sufferers and their families? This was the subject of a dialogue between the Rev. Stephen Pieters, former field director for AIDS Ministry of the Universal Fellowship of Metropolitan Community Churches, Los Angeles, and Greg Martin, SGI-USA vice general director, at the 5th AIDS Interfaith Network conference today.

Mr. Martin and the Rev. Pieters, himself a person with AIDS (PWA), began their dialogue weeks before the conference to prepare for their innovative keynote presentation, "An Interfaith Dialogue." Addressing the conference theme, "Tools for Survival — A Virus on the Run," the Rev. Pieters said, "As the demographics shift and as the prognosis for PWAs changes, so must the spiritual tools for survival."

The Rev. Pieters shared his experiences as a PWA and in his ministry, while Mr. Martin underscored his points with the Buddhist perspective. Their dialogue ranged across such profound and challenging issues as personal strength, spiritual transformation, compassion, respect for human life and victory in illness and death. Each remarked on the similarities in their beliefs. For example, both stressed the importance of not judging those who are sick, who die or who survive.

"Death," the Rev. Pieters emphasized, "is not a failure. It doesn't mean that you blew it."

"To die with regrets is hell," agreed Mr. Martin. "To die without regrets is to die beautifully."

As treatment for HIV/AIDS improves, survivors and their families need tools, Mr. Martin continued. "Strength comes from purpose," he said. "One of the great roles faith can play is to inspire us with meaning: 'Now you have something to do.' There are not strong people and weak people. Each of us is strong in some areas and weak in others. Knowing there are options, that there are tools for winning, even in death, empowers us. For Buddhists, one tool is the recognition that we can achieve Buddhahood as we are — ill or well, gay or straight, and regardless of our external situation.

"It is possible to do more than simply survive. It's important what we do with the life we have, including confronting our feelings about life and death and opening ourselves ultimately to a true understanding of the meaning of life," Mr. Martin said.

Faith can also help loved ones by guiding them through the most important acts of compassion: listening and praying, he continued.

Alluding to the five cycles of grief articulated by Dr. Elizabeth Kubler-Ross in her famous book, *On Death and Dying*, Mr. Martin said, "I would add a sixth stage — the stage of victory."

SGI-USA members in Sacramento have been part of the AIDS Interfaith Network for more than two years, even hosting one of the group's monthly meetings at the local community center. Roxanne Rae, conference chair and SGI-USA Culture Department member, has played an especially active role in AIN. "Because a major goal of AIN is education, my work with them supports my goals in the community," she said. "I can best develop my own life and uphold the SGI charter by active participation in AIN toward the issues affecting families with a member who has HIV/AIDS."

Sister Mary Redempta, of Sisters of Mercy for the [HIV/ AIDS] Affected Community, was very moved by the dialogue. "I was taken that both of them were saying things that I could take to my community of PWAs and their families.... In this day and age, we can no longer stand apart. We need to understand each other and be hospitable. If we want to cooperate and work together, we must sit down and talk first."

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