

Effort aims to educate churches about AIDS

By Lee Strong
Staff writer

ROCHESTER — For the past six years, Jonathan Leach has sung gospel music for the glory of God.

Now he is singing for life — his own and those of others.

Leach was diagnosed in 1990 as HIV-positive, that is, carrying in his blood the virus that causes AIDS. Eventually, he may develop and die of AIDS, acquired immune deficiency syndrome.

Leach's diagnosis — and a long-term concern about people who are infected with the AIDS virus — led him to organize a benefit concert Oct. 25 at Bethel Full Gospel Church, 321 East Ave.

The concert will feature performances by Leach and a number of area church choirs — including the Corpus Christi Gospel group. In addition, Dr. Michael Keefer, director of the AIDS Treatment Center at Strong Memorial Hospital, will conduct an update on AIDS information.

Leach said proceeds from the concert will go to the treatment center, but that organizers' hopes go beyond fundraising.

The effort is intended to inform church people about AIDS, explained Leach, HIV facilitator at the Jordan Health Center.

"I feel like the churches, per se, do nothing when it comes to AIDS and HIV," he asserted. "Some do, but I feel it's not enough."

In preparation for the concert, Leach presented information sessions Sept. 9 and 17 for pastors and church representatives.

"We decided to call the pastors together and educate them so they can educate the people," Leach explained.

Yet only 22 of the 375 churches contacted in the greater Rochester area sent pastors or representatives to the sessions, Leach reported. None of the Catholic parishes contacted did so, he added.

As a result, Leach has scheduled an additional session for 7 p.m. on Oct. 8 at Bethel Full Gospel Church. "I'm not giving up," he declared.



Phillip Archer/Photo intern

Jonathan Leach is organizing a concert intended to raise AIDS awareness in the religious community and to raise funds for the AIDS treatment center at Strong Memorial Hospital. The concert is scheduled for Oct. 25 at Rochester's Bethel Full Gospel Church.

Giving up would not be typical of Leach. When he learned in 1990 that he was HIV-positive, "it took me two months to tell anyone," Leach recalled.

He said he was surprised by the response when he did begin to tell people.

"I'll never forget when I told my parents," he remarked. "My father said, 'We're in this together.'"

Likewise Leach found support from his pastor at Bethel Full Gospel, the Rev. Ron Domino, and his friends.

Leach said the acceptance and support he received were a blessing — one many people with AIDS do not share.

Many people with AIDS are afraid to tell anyone they have the disease, he noted.

This is especially true in churches, Leach added. "These people (with AIDS)

in churches, they die, or they go away, because they're afraid to tell their pastors because they will be condemned, judged," he said.

Leach recently decided to work on educating members of church staffs about AIDS and ministry to people with the illness. That ministry could include visits to patients, homilies on the topic, financial support or gifts of food for individuals who are isolated from friends and family, he said.

"I want them to die knowing God loves them, and God forgives them," he said.

That desire led to the formation of the Friends Who Care committee in July of this year. The committee — which currently has 12 members — grew out of a group of friends who gathered at Leach's home for dinner.

Joanne Wallenbeck, a parishioner at Holy Name of Jesus Parish, was among those who joined the committee.

She observed that churches should reach out more to people with AIDS because such people have an immediate spiritual need.

"If you feel you are dying, you need that faith in God to know that when your time comes, you are loved and forgiven," Wallenbeck said. "The church is there to save sinners, not condemn them."

Leach noted that his involvement with AIDS counseling predates his diagnosis. He is a graduate of Teen Challenge, a program of the Assembly of God Church that provides a Christian drug and alcohol rehabilitation. The program helped him leave behind a life of drugs and promiscuity with which he had been involved as a teenager.

Once he completed Teen Challenge, Leach continued to work with the program as a counselor and choir leader. Through his work there, he met a number of teenagers who were HIV-positive.

During his involvement with Teen Challenge, Leach also recognized his ability to sing.

"I got into it as a way to minister to people," he explained. In addition, he said, "It's my way to communicate with God."

Now that he knows he is HIV-positive, Leach said, his singing has taken on a new emphasis.

"Before, I just sang," he said. "Now I sing with a purpose. I want to reach as many people as I can."

Catholic Family Center joins call for national health-care system

ROCHESTER — Catholic Family Center has joined a number of other national and local groups in sponsoring an Emergency Drive for Health Care, and is soliciting parishioners in Monroe and Livingston counties to support a national health-care system.

At Sunday Masses, parishioners will receive ballots asking them to check one of two boxes representing either the current system of private health care or a national system.

One box is entitled "More of the Same," and reads: "The current system which denies (health insurance) coverage to millions and wastes billions each year in red tape."

The other box is marked "A Healthy America," and calls for "(i)mmediate action by the President and Congress to bring skyrocketing health care costs under control with one national health and long-term care plan that provides comprehensive, high quality care for all Americans."

The ballots were created through the efforts of three national lobbying groups — Citizen Action, Families USA and Jobs with Justice, according to Suzanne Lotta, assistant to the president of Communication Workers of America Local 1170, one of the organizations sponsoring the drive.

The nationwide Emergency Drive for Health Care was organized by a number of labor unions, lobbying organizations and such social-justice groups as CFC. Sponsoring groups sent delegations to a "solidarity" march in Washington, D.C., Aug. 31, to express support for measures including the establishment of a national

health care system, commented Anita Maruggi, program coordinator for CFC's Department of Justice and Peace.

Maruggi said CFC supported the drive because of its concern over the growing numbers of U.S. citizens who lack adequate health insurance.

"Today we're seeing more and more people without (health) benefits in their jobs," Maruggi said. "People without jobs can't get benefits unless they're really poor and get Medicaid."

She said more than 4,000 ballots had already been sent out to parishes as of last week and that more were to be distributed.

Lotta said workers from her office will either pick up the ballots from parishes or that parishes may send them to her by Oct. 2, the date of a 5:30 p.m. rally for national health care. The rally is slated to take place in front of the Rochester Chamber of Commerce, 55 St. Paul St.

Some of the ballots will be collected by ambulances sent by organizers from Washington, Lotta said. The ambulance "crews" will consist of speakers who will give presentations on national health care at area pickup points, Maruggi said.

Lotta also said the collected ballots would be sorted by the congressional districts indicated by addresses on the ballots, and sent to political leaders in Washington.

CFC announced its support for the drive in an "Action Alert" memo that quoted the U.S. bishops' 1981 pastoral letter on health care. That letter stated: "Every person has a ... right to adequate health care."

— Rob Cullivan

Correction

During final production of last week's paper, two sentences in a news item about Father Norbert Nolan's farewell Mass in Mt. Morris inadvertently were garbled into one incorrect sentence.

As a result, the news item erroneously reported that a diocesan statement had defined the nature of "concerns" about the priest's actions.

In fact, the Diocese of Rochester has never provided any information about the nature of those concerns.

As previously reported in the *Catholic Courier* of Sept. 12, parishioner Ed Palermo, a supporter of Father Nolan, indicated to reporters that allegations of alcohol abuse had led to the pastor's removal from St. Patrick's. Palermo said those allegations were unsubstantiated.

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