

By Steve Finnie Delivered by Ann Kader

Opening video/music

Angels in America (main title) – from YOUTUBE 2.17 minutes.

Welcome + Introduction

Today's service is one to mark World AIDS Day, which since 1988 has been observed on 1 December each year.

The service was written by Steve, and he asked the congregation to deliver it for him.

The service will be in three parts and includes a prayer, a short bible reading from the New Testament, and some appropriate music.

World AIDS Day is one of 11 official global health days and campaigns marked by the World Health Organization. It's probably the most publicised and well known of the 11.

World AIDS Day was established to raise awareness about HIV and AIDS, to combat the stigma associated with this disease, support those living with it, and honour and memorialize those who have died.

HIV stands for human immune-o-deficiency virus, and AIDS stands for acquired immune-o-deficiency syndrome.

World AIDS Day is also a day to celebrate victories against HIV, such as increased access to treatment and prevention. It's in summary a pivotal day for awareness and action.

Most of the congregation who attend our church in person and online were alive in the early 1980s when HIV/AIDS emerged as a global health crisis.

It is estimated that around 44 million people have died from AIDS-related illnesses since the start of the epidemic in the 1980s. A worrying trend is that many people in Britain mistakenly label HIV/AIDS as a disease that no longer poses a threat.

This is not true.

In Britain about 107,000 people are living with HIV, that's about one in 600 people.

It does not pose the risks it once did, a bit like Covid-19, and this is due to treatment and medical advances like anti-retroviral drugs. This means those who are HIV positive if treated correctly can lead full and healthy lives.

However, often this treatment is only available in first world countries.

In some parts of the world, primarily sub-Saharan Africa the disease continues to spread and kill.

There are also approximately 41 million people worldwide currently living with HIV of which 53 per cent are women and girls.

In 2024 around 630,000 died of an AIDS related illness and 1.3 million people became newly infected with HIV.

The epicentre and top three nations for HIV/AIDS infection rates are Eswatini, or what we used to call Swaziland, South-Africa, and Lesotho. In this region there are about 25 million people living with HIV, which is over two-thirds of global HIV cases.

It is the most affected region on the planet and has had devastating social and economic consequences.

It's even created a new term – AIDS orphan. This is a child under the age of 18 who has lost one or both parents to AIDS. An estimated 13 million children have lost one or both parents to AIDS since the beginning of the pandemic.

The opening music we heard was from the TV miniseries adaptation of the play called ANGELS IN AMERICA by Tony Kushner. It's about AIDS in the USA in the early 1980s detailing the horrors of those early days.

We also have some red ribbons for you to wear if you want. The AIDS red ribbon is a globally recognized symbol of support for those suffering from HIV/AIDS and was created in 1991.

A small donation would be appreciated but is not essential and this will go the National AIDS trust who sent Steve the ribbons for the service. Feel free to take one after the service.

We start our service as usual with the lighting of our chalice as a symbol of our free religious faith.

Chalice is lit

Hymn 1 Purple hymnbook Hymn 128 – Our world is one world.

Our world is one world:
what touches one affects us all –
the seas that wash us round about,
the clouds that cover us,
the rains that fall.

Our world is one world:
the thoughts we think affect us all –
the way we build our attitudes,
with love or hate, we make
a bridge or wall.

Our world is one world:
Its ways of wealth affect us all –
The way we spend, the way we share,
Who are the rich or poor,
Who stand or fall?

Our world is one world:
just like a ship that bears us all –

where fear and greed make many holes,
but where our hearts can hear
a different call.

Tune: 'Chernobyl' Cecily Taylor b.1930 Arr. Richard Graves, 1926 – 2002

Words Cecily Taylor b. 1930

*Words & music □ 1988 Stainer & Bell Ltd, 23 Gruneison Road, London N3 1DZ
www.stainer.co.uk*

Prayer: We now have a short prayer:

Divine Spirit

In this sacred moment we gather our hearts in unity as we lift our voices in prayer.

We think of the trials faced by those who bear the heavy burden of living with HIV/AIDS.

We hold in our hearts those who face the physical challenges of their condition, but also the emotional and spiritual toll it must take on their lives.

In moments of despair and weakness may they receive strength, courage, and solace.

May their caregivers, families and friends continue to be warriors and offer love, compassion, understanding, and support so that no one walks this terrible path alone.

May there be breakthroughs in research and treatment and may those who seek care find it readily available and accessible.

We pray for a world where stigma and discrimination dissipate, replaced by understanding and acceptance and where every individual is treated with dignity and respect, regardless of their health status. Amen.

Part A

HIV/AIDS emerged in the early 1980s.

On July 3rd, 1981, the New York Times ran a story on a rare type of pneumonia and skin cancer called Kaposi's sarcoma and the main demographic affected by this disease seemed to be young previously healthy gay men.

It was seen in major cities across the US, but primarily New York, San Francisco, and Los Angeles where all three had large gay communities.

It was initially called GRID, or Gay Related Immune Deficiency disorder and in the press sometimes gay pneumonia or gay cancer.

It wreaked havoc with the human immune system and was one of the most fatal diseases ever seen up to that point.

Ronald Reagan became president in the 1980s, matching the AIDS timeline.

This was the decade when the Christian Right ruled. They were initially termed the Moral Majority and became the new powerhouse, one that under its leader Jerry Falwell propelled hardliner and arch-conservative Ronald Reagan into power. They remain major power players in America even today, influencing both foreign and domestic policies, and are major supporters and sponsors of President Trump.

As a result of this neo-conservatism of the 1980s, AIDS sufferers were met through a lens of stigma, fear, and condemnation, not compassion and support. The victims according to playwright William Hoffman were viewed with a mixture of fear, hatred, and indifference.

Some evangelical Christians were quite vocal in their condemnation stating it was God's wrath against homosexuals, sexual promiscuity and for disobeying His laws. AIDS was in their view a consequence of immoral behaviour and reinforced opposition to gay rights and sexual liberation.

It was used to mobilize conservative American Christian voters into a powerful voting lobby that kept the Republicans in the White House throughout the 1980s.

This attitude of, well they deserve it, is not a Christian attitude to have.

It should be remembered that Jesus embraced the marginalized in society and one of his most famous sayings is from John chapter eight verse seven where he states:

'Let him who is without sin among you be the first to cast a stone at her.'

The Judaism of Jesus was like an extremely exclusive club where if you ticked all the right boxes, you were in.

If you didn't fit all the boxes, for example were a woman, a non-Jew, or disabled, it meant you were not welcome, and both excluded and marginalized from society as a result. Jesus fought this and said no, everyone is welcome, and it's a message that many Christians forgot in the early 1980s and often seem to forget today.

Jesus as a radically inclusive preacher can be seen in his interaction with lepers.

Lepers were considered unclean and touching them made others ritually unclean.

In Matthew Chapter eight verse three Jesus healed a man with leprosy.

'When Jesus came down from the mountainside, large crowds followed him.

A man with leprosy came and knelt before him and said, Lord if you are willing, you can make me clean.

Jesus reached out his hand and touched the man. I am willing, he said.

Be clean.

Immediately he was cleansed of his leprosy.

Then Jesus said to him, see that you don't tell anyone.

But go, show yourself to the priest and offer the gift Moses commanded as a testimony to them.'

Jesus showed this most marginalized of marginalized group compassion, and their physical healing was always accompanied by kindness and dignity, recognizing their worth in a society where they had none.

In the early 1980s there were many misconceptions as to how HIV/AIDS was transmitted. Victims were often treated like modern day lepers, abandoned by family, friends, even former lovers.

When in 1982 it was discovered that HIV/AIDS could be spread via blood as well as sexual contact there was hysteria.

Social isolation and prejudice often hindered victims access to healthcare and support. Some medical personnel refused to work with AIDS patients or even go in the same room as them and there were reports of patients having meals left outside their rooms.

Ruth Coker BURKS became involved in caring for people with HIV/AIDS in those early terrible years. This was not a planned career path and was completely unintentional. She was driven by a sense of compassion and justice. Whilst visiting a friend in hospital she accidentally noticed a door marked biohazard.

There was a young man with AIDS in that room and none of the nurses wanted to go in.

He was called Jimmy, and he was calling for his mother. In his delirium he thought Ruth was his mother, and she sat with him for 13 hours until he died.

He was the first of many, and she stepped into help these dying, mainly young men, providing comfort in their last days or hours. Most had been abandoned, but she ensured they did not die alone, and she became known as the AIDS Angel. Ruth herself was ostracised by her community and church; the Ku Klux Klan even burnt a cross on her lawn. Her book about these days is called 'All the Young Men' and details her heartbreaking days as an AIDS carer.

In 1983 it became known that intravenous drug users were another high-risk category due to the sharing of needles, as well as heterosexual sex-workers, and Haitians.

Haitians turned out to be a high-risk group due to their high poverty rate, limited access to healthcare and education, as well as gender inequalities.

These factors are the same reason sub-Saharan Africa and other third world regions have such a high HIV rate today.

The Centre for Disease Control in America soon ruled out that HIV/AIDS could be transmitted via casual contact such as food, water, air, or environmental surfaces and in 1985 the screening of the US blood supply began after a test was developed to trace HIV antibodies.

As awareness of HIV/AIDS grew, so did activism particularly amongst the most high-risk communities. This included ACT UP, the AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power which fought for better research, treatment, and awareness.

Some celebrities became advocates having lost friends to the disease.

Actress Elizabeth Taylor became a passionate advocate for HIV/AIDS sufferers until her death in 2011. She lobbied American politicians including President Reagan and Congress and asked for both testing and funding towards a cure.

In 1985 she co-founded AMFAR, the American Foundation for AIDS Research as well as in 1991 the Elizabeth Taylor AIDS Foundation.

Sir Elton John also became an advocate founding the Elton John AIDS Foundation in 1992 which has raised over 600 million US dollars. Sir Elton launched his AIDS foundation in honour of an American teenager called Ryan White. White became a national symbol for AIDS awareness. A haemophiliac who contacted HIV through a contaminated blood treatment he was barred from his local school due to his HIV status.

The subsequent legal battle caused headlines across America and the world, and he became an accidental spokesperson for people living with this disease. Just months after his death, the US Congress passed the Ryan White Care Act in 1990 which provided billions of US dollars in funding for people living with HIV/AIDS.

But it was Princess Diana who was to probably have the largest impact on the public's perception of HIV/AIDS patients in Britain and around the world. She visited patients, shook hands WITHOUT gloves. Gay, straight, HIV positive babies, she met and hugged them all. This was a time when many people thought that casual contact spread the disease. Princess Diana opened Britain's first dedicated HIV/AIDS unit at the London Middlesex Hospital in 1987, and her work with HIV/AIDS patients reduced fear and prejudice. Her work with HIV/AIDS patients is one of her greatest legacies.

Hymn 2 Purple Hymn book – Number 84 Justice for Persons

Justice for person and for different nations,
respect the diverse species in our care,
community of life in earth sustaining,
love for this planet which we all must share.

Compassion is the strength of love and sympathy
letting us share another being's pain;
creature or human, loving friend or stranger,
love for each other is the whole world's gain.

Wisdom is insight clear, precise and thoughtful,
searching for truth and human love refined;
guidance from past, made ready for the future
by the best reasoning of the human mind.

Integrity, with honour and uprightness:
these are the qualities which form and make
women and men, the people for tomorrow,
those who serve others for another's sake.

Justice, compassion, wisdom and integrity,
these are the virtues which our poor world needs.
They'll flower tomorrow, fruit in glorious splendour,
If we today go out and plant the seeds.

Words □ *Andrew M. Hill. Used by permission.*

Music: 'Georgina' □ *David Dawson 2009. Used by permission.*

Part B

TAMMY FAYE MESSNER was in the 1980s the undisputed First Lady of Christian broadcasting.

She is better known under her first husband's surname, Tammy Faye BAKKER (pronounced BAKER). Tammy Faye was an American televangelist superstar, who along with her then first husband Jim, founded the Praise the Lord television ministry.

Her effervescent and glamorous personality, enthusiastic singing voice, and signature heavy makeup made her a beloved figure in America and across the world.

They expanded their network to include theme parks, hotels and products sold through a telemarketing programme, but were brought down by a financial misconduct and sex scandal that led to their career and reputational ruin.

Tammy Faye was an unlikely ally of AIDS sufferers and the gay community, and it was a stance that made her enemies; her moral views diverged from mainstream evangelicals. Tammy Faye did the unimaginable at the time and in 1985 interviewed an openly gay pastor called Steve Pieters who was HIV positive. In an almost revolutionary act, an evangelical conservative Christian leader showed a gay man living with HIV love, respect, and compassion.

The interview generated severe criticism and backlash from conservative hardliners as many Americans were neither ready, nor capable of loving their gay HIV or AIDS infected neighbours. It was one of the reasons she was brought down by other evangelicals.

Tammy Faye was an example of compassion and acceptance to all people, endearing her to millions. She had a profound commitment to love and acceptance reminding us of the dignity inherent in every person. She said that she wanted people to see that there is a lovely side to this thing we call life.

Her legacy continues to inspire people around the world to embrace compassion and understanding in their own lives.

Tammy Faye died in 2007 of cancer.

In 2021 a movie about her life was released, called *The Eyes of Tammy Faye*.

It won the actress who played her, Jessica Chastain, an Oscar for her portrayal.

Her story has also been immortalised in a Broadway play and she remains a cult figure amongst the gay community.

She is particularly adored by drag queens, even being interviewed by drag superstar RuPaul.

Amazingly the HIV positive pastor she interviewed in 1985 outlived her, dying in 2023 at the age of 70 and we have a short clip about him which includes him speaking to Tammy Faye.

[YOUTUBE clip about the Reverend Stephen PIETERS, HIV survivor and gay activist \(2.28 minutes\)](#)

We normally see a disease as just that, a disease, until someone we know, or love is affected by it.

One of the first famous people to die of AIDS was actor Rock Hudson in 1985. It put a human face on the disease. His death shocked the world and made front pages across the globe.

Have you ever watched one of his movies from the 1960s like the romantic comedy Pillow Talk with Doris Day?

They made several movies together, had a wonderful and genuine on-screen chemistry, and remained lifelong friends.

Hudson at his peak was truly a sight to behold. Six foot four, stunningly handsome, he was an A-List Hollywood heart throb, exuding a masculinity that was the opposite of what society at that time considered a gay man to both look and behave like. Closeted in public, most of Hollywood knew his double life.

To come out as gay meant career suicide, and even up to the late 1990s, early 2000s, many Hollywood celebrities would not publicly acknowledge themselves as gay.

His death in 1985 helped to humanize the AIDS crisis and pushed it into the mainstream conversation.

Millions of dollars were made in private contributions following his death to AIDS research and care for victims and the US Congress set aside over 200 million dollars to develop a cure.

The death of such a high-profile actor meant that the Hollywood elite now felt more comfortable becoming involved in this cause, leading to increased fundraising as well as the wearing of the AIDS red ribbon at awards ceremonies being the norm.

Even President Regan a former actor himself and who knew Hudson personally paid tribute.

The World Health Organization declared AIDS a global emergency in 1986, and it was by now clear that this disease could affect anyone regardless of sexual orientation, gender, or socio-economic status.

As we went through the mid to late 1980s public health campaigns became the norm.

Remember those public health AIDS adverts on our screens in the late 1980s?

These were amongst the most chilling health campaigns ever broadcast on British TV.

AIDS – don't die of ignorance was also a leaflet mailed to every household in the UK, over 23 million copies. They were aimed to shock us into awareness.

If you want to watch a TV series about the early years of AIDS in 1980s Britain, then watch IT'S A SIN. You can find it on the Channel Four APP.

The 1980s were just an apocalypse of a decade really from start to finish.

We had the threat of nuclear oblivion with the Soviet Union, which nearly happened in 1983, the environmental catastrophes of Chernobyl, the ozone layer hole, the destruction of the Amazon rainforest.

And then AIDS came along. It was quite a decade to live through.

In America much of the religious right opposed public health campaigns that promoted safe sex with the use of condoms, sex education, and needle exchange stating this encouraged immoral behaviour. They wanted abstinence only education and the promotion of traditional family values. Some explicitly refused to support funding for AIDS research or health care for people with HIV/AIDS.

The Catholic Church also taught that abstinence before marriage and fidelity within marriage were the most effective and morally sound way to prevent HIV.

Previously advertising condoms was largely banned on British TV, but in 1987 Britain's first TV condom advert was shown.

The use of condoms was promoted as standard, and the buying of them, previously marked by social awkwardness was now to be considered normal and nothing to be embarrassed about.

We are now going to hear a piece of music played by American pianist and singer Liberace who died of AIDS in 1987.

His fame came not just from his amazing piano skills, but his over-the-top performances, and amazing costumes.

He said I don't give concerts – I put on a show.

He has been immortalised in a 2012 movie called Behind the Candelabra where he was portrayed by Michael Douglas. It's a wonderful movie to watch which received critical acclaim. Douglas won several acting awards for his portrayal including the Primetime Emmy, Golden Globe, and Screen Actors Guild Award.

Music: [YOUTUBE clip – LIBERACE – Love is Blue \(2.32 minutes\).](#)

Part C

A collaborative art project created to honour and remember those who had died of AIDS is called The AIDS Memorial Quilt.

Each panel is made by family, friends, and loved ones. It was started in 1987 and was a way of humanizing the statistics of the epidemic.

It really began as a protest to raise awareness.

As of 2025 the quilt contains over 50,000 panels. The National AIDS Memorial in San Francisco now curates and preserves the quilt.

Recently at the TATE museum in London there was a display called the UK AIDS MEMORIAL QUILT which was displayed in June 2025.

One of the names on the quilt is Freddie Mercury who died from AIDS in 1991.

The singer and lead vocalist of QUEEN, his performance at Live Aid in 1985 is considered one of the greatest performances in rock history.

Ballet legend Rudolf Nureyev also died of AIDS in 1993. He was widely regarded as one of the greatest ballet dancers of all time, a revolutionary figure in the world of dance.

As a result of these and so many other deaths, the demonization of AIDS victims was no longer considered acceptable. The mood had changed, and the previous lack of sympathy prompted secular society and more moderate and progressive Christian groups to change course. More compassionate approaches now focused on care and treatment.

The political mood had changed as well. People were sick of the arch conservatism of the 80s.

Clinton and the Democrats were in power in America, and Thatcher had been given the boot, although not the Conservatives until 1997.

A new more caring age perhaps?

In 1993 a landmark movie called Philadelphia starring Tom Hanks was released. It is one of the first mainstream Hollywood movies to address HIV/AIDS. Hanks plays Andrew Beckett, a talented corporate lawyer who is secretly living with AIDS. His firm sack him on learning about his illness and the movie tells the story of his fight for justice with Denzel Washington playing his lawyer.

It won Hanks an Academy Award for Best Actor, and the movie received widespread critical acclaim.

Other movies made about the AIDS crisis in America include one called 'The Normal Heart.' Another one is called: 'And the Band Played On', focusing on the early years of the epidemic and the systemic failures that allowed the disease to spread largely unchecked.

One of the best though is called The Dallas Buyer's Club released in 2013. It's about a rodeo cowboy with AIDS in the 1980s who became a provider of unapproved alternative treatments smuggling them in from Mexico and other countries. It details

the desperation of people seeking treatment in the 1980s before any effective HIV therapy existed. The main character played by Matthew McConaughey won the Academy Award for Best Actor.

The medical breakthrough against HIV/AIDS came in the mid-1990s. The first anti-retroviral drug called AZT was approved in America in 1987. It provided some benefit but had limited results and caused serious side effects.

In 1996 came the introduction of the HAART treatment. This stands for Highly Active Anti-Retroviral Therapy and used a combination of anti-retroviral drugs which dramatically reduced HIV related deaths.

By the late 1990s and early 2000s HIV deaths dropped for those with access to these drugs. HIV was turned from a fatal disease into a manageable chronic condition.

The drugs mean the virus is suppressed to undetectable levels meaning it can no longer damage the immune system, and HIV cannot be sexually transmitted by an infected person. The patient is classed as HIV undetectable. The virus is still present in the body but is at such low levels that it does not show up on typical tests.

Undetectable = Un-transmittable, which means the virus cannot be transmitted to others.

There are now also drugs which can be given as an emergency treatment within 72 hours of exposure to someone with HIV.

There is also a recent development, a medication called PREP. This is a medication given to HIV negative people to prevent them getting HIV. It is usually given to and taken by people who are at high risk of exposure.

Recently in the news, it was announced that an injection to prevent HIV is being offered to patients on the NHS in England and Wales. Experts hope this will help meet the ambition of ending new HIV cases by 2030 in the UK.

It is slightly worrying that many people in the UK don't take HIV seriously anymore. Complacency is an appropriate word, even in high-risk groups. Safe sex and the use of condoms should be the norm especially if travelling abroad, as well as regular testing and treatment if required.

Many people in Britain who are sexually active don't know their HIV status and may be unaware they are passing on the virus. This is because some don't display HIV symptoms immediately which leads to a late diagnosis and potentially infecting someone in that period.

As of 2025, HIV/AIDS charities and global health campaigns are mainly targeting the highest risk areas of the world, which is as stated earlier, is primarily sub-Saharan Africa.

Poverty is strongly linked to HIV transmission. Limited access to healthcare means people can't afford HIV testing, condoms, or medication. Lack of education, especially for girls means poor access to sex education. And poverty means women are often forced into the sex industry which carries HIV risks.

The ultimate aim of course is a vaccine which would end new cases worldwide, not just in first world countries.

Closing words

Our closing words are from Pope Francis who died in 2025. In a 2017 address he said: 'We need to overcome fear and prejudice to ensure that all people living with HIV/AIDS receive the care and respect they deserve. The Church calls for solidarity with those affected and condemns any form of discrimination and exclusion.'

Thank you for listening.

Chalice is extinguished

Closing music

Freddie Mercury and Montserrat Caballe singing Barcelona (YOUTUBE clip – 4.28 minutes).

Notices