



Presbyterian Mission
World Mission

Saving Lives: One church's response to the AIDS epidemic

***A reflection by the Rev. Ruth Hamilton
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Westminster Presbyterian Church in Washington, D.C., has been a pioneer church in responding to the AIDS epidemic.

Members of the church started **Food and Friends** in the early 1980s. They made and delivered nutritious meals to home-bound people living with HIV and AIDS. Housed in the church for 10 years, the ministry now has its own location from which it continues to serve the chronically ill.

About two decades later, the congregation helped launch a nonprofit called **START** (Syringe, Treatment, Advocacy, Resources and Training), built on the philosophy of “harm reduction” — meeting people where they are to help them prevent harm to themselves and others. This small ministry, directed for several years by member and future elder George Kerr III, had great success as a street ministry, offering testing, referrals and needle exchange when available.

In addition, the city's department of health started sending boxes of condoms to the church. Members set out baskets of condoms at one of the welcome tables with a sign that read “Saving Lives: Condom Distribution.” It is amazing how many are taken each week, by varied ages and genders. The baskets are noticed by everyone who passes — first with surprise to see them in a church, then with a smile and very often a thank you. People are glad to see the church acknowledging their sexual lives and showing care and concern for the health of all.



**Mission Toolkit:
HIV/AIDS**