Interview with the Reverend Vincent Schwahn

Interviewed by Rena F. Levin

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at St. Paul's on the Hill Episcopal Church, St. Paul

RL: How do other people describe you?

VS: I think people describe me as happy, friendly, sometimes a little flighty, busy. That would be some of the adjectives.

RL: How true would you say that stuff is?

VS: That's pretty close. I think I am all of those things at different times. That's true.

RL: When did you first become aware of AIDS?

VS: I became aware of AIDS when I lived in Mexico in 1984, and people were just beginning to talk about people who have this illness. That's when I met the first persons who were sick and knew of a group that was doing AIDS activism in Guadalajara, Mexico, and I became involved lightly with some of their work and activities.

RL: What were some of those activities?

VS: By that time people understood more what some of the symptoms were, and how people got the disease. There was a group that went to the gay bars and handed out condoms on a regular basis, and they also had some public rallies, and people in Guadalajara were just beginning to sort of come out and talk publicly about being HIV positive. At that time a lot of people were dying of this sort of unknown disease—a number of people I've heard of who no doubt died of AIDS, but no one knew that it was that, or if the person knew, they never told anyone.

RL: What did AIDS mean to you at that point?

VS: Well, I took it very personally being a gay man and having been in and continuing to be in a relationship. It
affected me very personally because I knew that I was part of that sort of high-risk group and that I would have been susceptible, and I really did change my sexual practices. Shortly, really shortly after, I met the first person who had been infected and that really changed my own attitude towards safe sex.

**RL:** How did this affect your decision to be join the ministry?

**FS:** Well, I always wanted to be a priest.

**RL:** Always?

**VS:** [Chuckle] I think I realized that I had something to offer as a religious person, as a Christian, but also as a man who was gay. I think this set me aside in some ways because most people, when they look at religious leaders, think they're asexual or, you know, there's no relationship with that. And also the churches have really struggled with the fact that whether gay people were going to be permitted to be part of their leadership and ministry, and many churches have decided that that isn't going to be solved. So I think that there is a correlation between AIDS, and between activism, between one's own sexual preference and leadership as it is in the church.

**RL:** So, what does AIDS mean to you now?

**VS:** Psheew, it's been more than ten years now. I think AIDS brings a lot of sadness to me. I've seen a lot of people die, a lot of friends die. I've gone through a lot of phases; phases of anger, phases of frustration, phases of sadness. I think there's a constant sort of underlying sadness that I just live with. Knowing that people are dying every day. Knowing that people that I have really cared about and loved have died. Seeing peoples' lives cut short. So AIDS still brings a lot of sadness to me at this point in my life.

**RL:** Would you say that it first started impacting your life when you were in Mexico?

**VS:** Yes, it did. Again I think for many people, AIDS begins to impact your life when you have a personal contact with it, not just reading about it or hearing about somebody, but it's
when you know someone. It's when you meet someone. Then you see the real face of AIDS, and then you begin to look at yourself. So when you have that personal contact it makes all the difference.

RL: So what would you say was the defining moment in your consciousness? If there was one.

VS: [Pause] The defining moment of understanding AIDS? Well. I would say probably the first person that I got to know well, Perry [Tilleraas], who was in my parish when I came back to Minnesota. That probably was the defining moment because that was the person that I spent more time with, and from that point on I've kept sort of constantly running into people who had AIDS and who were HIV-infected. So I would say that would have been the defining moment for me, when I made a friend.

RL: How would you say that your work with AIDS fit into your larger commitments?

VS: AIDS for the last ten years has permeated my life on all levels. On a personal level in terms of my relationship, on a social level in terms of my friendships with people who I know are HIV positive, have AIDS, or have died of AIDS, and on a professional level in terms of my work. I don't think that there's any aspect of my life that hasn't been touched by AIDS.

RL: Your work with the Episcopalian AIDS Ministry--can you elaborate on that?

VS: I was the coordinator of AIDS Ministry for the Episcopal Diocese for three years, from August of 1991 to October of 1993. AIDS ministry in the diocese is an outreach ministry to people who are living with AIDS. We have different programs. We have a program for families. We have a meal once a month. I did a lot of contacts with people who sort of were on the edge of their relationships to churches. I've spent times by peoples' bedsides, visiting families, helping families cope with AIDS when they first find out that their

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1Perry Tilleraas was one of the early Minnesota AIDS activists. He wrote *The Circle of Love* and *The Color of Light*, two books on AIDS and recovery. He died of AIDS in 1990.
son or daughter is HIV-infected. I've dealt with a lot of different communities. We have a sort of very active outreach to Native Americans, African Americans, to Hispanics. So we try to be very present to all of the communities that are affected by the virus.

**RL:** Were you raised Episcopalian, or is there something that attracted you to the church?

**VS:** I was raised Roman Catholic, but I had a Presbyterian grandmother on one side and a Roman Catholic grandparents on the other side, and I sort of had to confront the fact that I wanted to be a priest. I studied in a Roman Catholic seminary for seven years and had to confront the fact that I was a gay man and couldn't be celibate—which was what the Roman Catholic church expected of me if I was going to be a priest in a Catholic church—and found the Episcopal church to be a place where I could find a spiritual home, where I could still keep my piety, my traditions, and yet at the same time where I would be welcome as the person that I am.

**RL:** So how would you define your faith if you could?

**VS:** My faith is very Christo-centric, if I spoke from a theological point of view. I believe in Jesus Christ. I accept Jesus Christ as my savior. I believe in the power that he came to bring to people to save them from sort of the negative, evil, dark, whatever, sort of powers in the world. I find my faith is what gives meaning to every aspect of my life. It's what helps me get through difficult times. I think if I didn't have a strong faith I would have given up somewhere along the line in terms of dealing with AIDS. When you have to confront death on a regular basis, you either have to strengthen your faith or your faith gets really sort of shaken up, and you kind of have to make a decision about which direction you're going to go in. Some people have a loss of faith, and I don't blame them. I think my faith has been strengthened.

**RL:** So your faith, the role that it plays in your life, would be what?

**VS:** My faith is really the center of the way I see the world. It's the way my world is colored. When I do spiritual direction with young men with AIDS, I try to tell them that we wear glasses that color the way we see the
world, and faith is one of those glasses that we wear. So everything that we see, every aspect of our life, is colored or tinted by the fact that we're believers, and absolutely nothing that we think, or talk, or do is the same, because we're wearing those glasses, and that's what my faith has been. So it permeates every aspect of my life.

RL: What role does anger play in your response to AIDS?

VS: I think anger is important. I think it's a natural response at one level. The anger was around the fact that organizations and many institutions were not responding quickly enough to AIDS. Then on another level, a number of institutions, because of homophobia, refused to deal with the issue of safe sex, especially religious institutions, which has been problematic. There's been anger around that. There's anger at AIDS, and I think sometimes a lot of people who are angry, who are involved in AIDS work, want to point their anger just at institutions or at people or whatever, and it's just a way they deal with their anger. But the truth is that I think sometimes we need to realize that we're just angry at AIDS. We're angry at the fact that people are dying of the disease that we don't know how to cure, and in some ways it's better to focus your anger really where the source is. It's not the church's fault that we have AIDS. It's not the government's fault that we have AIDS. It may be their fault that we have it to the amount that we have it. It's AIDS' fault that we have AIDS. It's a disease.

RL: How would you respond to some people that say that it's a result of sin?

VS: If it were a result of sin then we would see a stronger relationship between all of the things that people do. For example, if people want to say it's because people are involved in homosexual relationships, well, then all the women who are involved in lesbian relationships would also have the same infection rate if that were the result. And then the other issue would be of course children. Why would children be infected? You know there's a even a story in the scriptures that say there is no relationship between illness and sin. There is no relationship. And, you know, Jesus talks about that, when he heals a blind man who was blind from birth and everyone said, "Oh, he's the sinner because he was blind from birth--go see his parents." Jesus said no, it wasn't because of that. It wasn't because of sin. It was
because of illness. So personally I don't believe in that.

**RL:** Do you think that there's a purpose to illness?

**VS:** I think there's a purpose to illness. I think that there's a way to create meaning out of illness. That I've seen many, many times over. Sometimes illness seems purposeless and it's purposeless, but the truth is that all of us are born on earth and we're all going to die. Illness will affect all of us at one point or another, if there isn't something else that kills us. Illness is a part of the human experience. AIDS just forces us to meet that at a very basic level a lot earlier. But it's something that all of us have to come to grips with at one point or another. It's a truth of life.

**RL:** How do you describe your community? How do you participate in or find community?

**VS:** Well, there are lots of communities. You know there's my family and my immediate community, which are people who are closest to me who I get a lot of personal support from. There's my religious community who I serve and am a servant of and care about greatly. There is a community of friends who surround me and who I spend time with, who I have a history with—not only here but in New York and Mexico and other places where I've lived. And there's the gay community which I am a part of. I may not always be a very visible part of it, but because of who I am I'm always in a sense connected to it. So I think all of us go in and have different communities. There's the AIDS community. I'm not part of the infected AIDS community, but I'm part of the AIDS community because of the work that I have done with the AIDS community. So all of those communities sort of interact in some ways with each other.

**RL:** How do these communities support you? You said "support" with your family, but do all of them?

**VS:** I think they support me in that these communities believe in the things that I believe in and are concerned about the things that I'm concerned in personally. So the communities are important because we have something in common, something that we share, a goal that we all sort of work towards. So that's how communities work. I mean in general there's something they're all sort of striving for.
So that's how those communities support me.

RL: How would you say the AIDS community supports you?

VS: Well, the AIDS community is a two-edged sword. The AIDS community supports me in the sense that all of us are working against this virus trying to eliminate it or at least make it livable. But there's another side, there's a negative side to the AIDS community which is the fact that the AIDS community has been very divided. The fact that there's only so much money available for services and that many little communities within the AIDS community fight against each other because of the way money is given out and so there's a very small portion of the pie for everyone. There's a high level of competition among all of the little AIDS organizations and groups. And I think that's one of the greatest evils of the AIDS community. I think there is an evil in the AIDS community because of the lack of cooperation and sort of the fighting between and amongst those communities. People who have very serious needs are not getting those needs met, and it's the AIDS community's fault that they haven't been able to be more cooperative. And there are other AIDS communities in other cities that have done a better job. Looking back now, no longer being officially the coordinator of AIDS Ministry and taking a step back, I can say that that is one of the weaknesses of the AIDS community in the Twin Cities. That has been for me less visible in places like New York or Seattle.

RL: Why do you think that is?

VS: Size makes a difference. Our history is different. The history has been tense from the beginning. From the beginning there were separate groups that had their focus or interest around AIDS. From the beginning there were two groups that sort of split off, and then from there there were a number of other groups. So there is a whole history to it and a whole reason to it. You know, if you wanted to say "Well, should it be this way or shouldn't it be this way," you can find the reason why, in the sense of the historical. But what people have not been able to do is to sort of come together and say we have to leave the past, we need to create and forge a new future. We need to create a new system that is going to be better for the AIDS community for the next ten years.
RL: What were those two groups that you mentioned, and how did they get started?

VS: Well, the Aliveness Project and the Minnesota AIDS Project are the two groups. And they originally got started—-I don't know the whole story because I wasn't really part of that story at that time--but I believe that started by a group of gay men who had sort of a common understanding at the beginning. And then there was a philosophical change. One group wanted to focus more on social work and the sort of social needs of people who were infected, and the other group wanted to focus more on a sort of an activism and on empowering those who were infected by the virus. So one group ended up focusing on helping people with AIDS and reaching out which is MAP in a sense historically, and the other group was the Aliveness Project, which wanted to empower people who had AIDS to create their own systems of support, their own means of healing, alternative medicines, alternative ideas. So that's how those two groups sort of began to separate and that's still part of our history.

RL: Are they really that different or are helping and empowering part of the same whole?

VS: No, I think they really are that different. I think Aliveness never got off the ground in the same way that MAP did. I think MAP is a much bigger organization and an umbrella organization in some ways. In terms of the amount of money that gets funded into the organizations, MAP certainly receives much more money than Aliveness does. I think they are very different. And I think their history has been different. I wouldn't say one is necessarily better than the other, but I think that it's part of the history, and there's certainly much more available to help than to empower. To empower is really a political thing and probably even a bit scandalous in some ways. So it's understandable that more money would be available to help than it would be to empower.

RL: Why do you stay in this work?

VS: Officially really I've left it, and unofficially I haven't. I'm no longer a coordinator of AIDS Ministry for the diocese, but I continue to work with the Hispanic community and those who are infected with the virus. I
continue to network with different people, and people continue to call me when I have special cases. We have a priest in this diocese who is infected, who is dying right now and probably won't last more than five or six weeks, and so right now I'm doing a lot of spiritual sort of care for him. I've been visiting him on a regular basis. I guess I have a sensitivity to AIDS because it's been a part of my life for the last ten years. I will always continue to have that sensitivity. I don't think I'm going to be as actively involved, just because it's time for me to sort of heal from some of the pain and sadness. But it's something that I can't separate from my life.

RL: So how long do you think you'll sustain your commitment on any level? Because I see it's changed.

VS: It has changed. I think the sort of job commitment, or that being sort of an essential part of my work, is quickly diminishing. I think it will always be a part of my life as long as AIDS exists. There will always be someone [with AIDS] who I know, either a friend or a Christian or whatever. I really believe that AIDS is here to stay at least for a while, and I believe that it will just be an integral part of our lives. It's inescapable. So anywhere I am, anything that I do, it will still continue to affect my life.

RL: Since you see AIDS as a permanent fixture, do you think it will then affect more people? Or do you think that its impact will still be limited?

VS: I guess it depends. I think the statistics show that there is still a pretty much constant but slow growth of cases. My concern is that people get used to it. I hope people never get used to AIDS. It's a horrendous disease and it's a merciless disease, and I think that would be unfortunate if we got used to it just like we got used to heart disease or cancer or anything else. It's like, "Oh, well, it's just sort of the way things are." The fact that we're able to prolong life a lot more in some ways has allowed us to get more used to it, because now people are allowed to live longer. So now we see people who are around for ten, twelve, fifteen years. We know that they are infected with the virus, and so we just sort of sit back and sort of take it as it comes. But I would hope that there would always be that sort of rough edge that would make people feel uncomfortable about just sort of letting AIDS be.
RL: So as far as your commitment in the future, that's part of it. Is that a reason why you think you will be somewhat committed in the future—you don't want to get used to AIDS?

VS: One, I think, because I don't want to get used to it. Two, because I've seen so many people die and they're a part of me. If you want to be philosophical about it, I can continue to be the voices of people who are no longer here. I think that's really important. I think we need to be the voices. I think we need to continue to keep alive the remembrance of those who have died. Those who have died of AIDS no longer have a voice. Those of us who are living have to be their voice.

RL: How do you feel you can be a voice if you just met somebody who's already been diagnosed?

VS: I think I can offer understanding from the inside out, not the outside in. I can be a comfort as a friend, someone who is willing to walk with another person who is living with the virus. I think I have a sensitivity at this point that's very different than, say, the very first person that I met when I didn't know what if he coughed? Or what if, you know, I shared his food or he shared my food—you know, all of those kind of silly things. I'm in some ways very comfortable with all of that. I'm not afraid to hug someone or touch someone. So I think I offer that kind of sensitivity, I guess, to someone who is living with the virus, where other persons might not still be at that point.

RL: How do you define happiness? Where do you find it?

VS: I don't know if there's anything really such as happiness. I don't think happiness really exists. I think there's contentment and there's peace, and I think there's wholeness. Happiness sounds too sort of gleeful to me, and in a life where we know that we have to suffer and struggle I don't think we're ever completely happy. Sometimes I think we work too hard to be happy when we know that it's not going to be that way. Today we may be happy, tomorrow we're not because something else is going to happen. Maybe contentment would be better. Maybe wholeness would be better. I don't think there is any state of perfection that we sort of attain when we're completely happy. I don't even know if that's what it's going to be like when we die and move on. Nobody
knows what's on the other side. So I think happiness is unattainable.

**RL:** If you prefer to use the word contentment, when are you content?

**VS:** I guess I'm content when I feel that I have a complete balance in my life. That I've dealt with my spirit, my body and my soul. I really do believe very strongly in the fact that to be whole and holy our understanding of holiness is to be able to have a complete balance of those aspects of our lives. If our physical life is out of wack, our spiritual life is going to be affected by it, or emotional or psychological life. That's one thing I think we've learned fortunately from the sciences and I think that's a good wisdom. I think we've learned it from nature, too, because nature really teaches us to look for that sort of equilibrium. So those are philosophical or spiritual principles that help us to be more whole and more holy. That's why I'd say instead of looking for happiness I'd rather look for holiness, and look for it in terms of balancing out those aspects of my life.

**RL:** You made a distinction between the soul and your spirit. Can you elaborate?

**VS:** Well, frequently there's sort of a distinction between body, mind, soul, and spirit. I'm not sure if I can make the complete distinction. Some people call it the same thing. I haven't really thought about it.

**RL:** What's your vision of America?

**VS:** America's an experiment in some ways that's completely unique. Because almost every other country has a strong, long history, hundreds, thousands of years of basically the same culture, same ideas, same language, all of those things in common. America--I guess Canada might be part of that too, even less so--is the experiment of bringing people from all over the world together into one place. My vision of America is to be able to do that appropriately with really allowing that vision of unity of many peoples to take place. That vision has always been both our blessing and our curse, because it's what has united us and brought us together but it's what's always been our problem and continues to be so today in terms of the differences between races and cultures,
groups, and economic groups also. It may be our downfall. The real vision of what we're all about includes unity, acceptance, at least tolerance of differences, and personal freedom balanced with social responsibility. It's been part of our weakness as American citizens that our freedom has brought us to extremes, that we're no longer sort of responsible with and for each other, and that's a very touchy balance.

So I think our tendency to go so far to the freedom end is to allow people freedom and to destroy themselves too. Destroy the lives of others. That's where violence enters in, and drug addiction, and the kinds of things that sort of bring people to those edges, just because they have so much personal freedom to do that. There are other countries where that kind of personal freedom isn't allowed. I don't think that we've completely found the right balance between taking peoples' individual freedoms maybe away when they're not able to be responsible, and, when they are responsible, to allow them to be completely free to do what they have to do.

RL: How is America your community?

VS: Well, it is and it isn't. I have two communities. America is one community because I was born in the United States, but my great-grandparents came from Russia on one side, and from Holland on the other side. I still remember that. So I'm a member of this community because I was born here more than anything else, because my ancestors certainly don't come from here. And they didn't until over a hundred years ago; before then there was nobody from my family here at all. They lived in Europe, so I guess I've been adopted by America in some ways, and that's why I'm a part of it. But I'm also part of the Mexican community because I lived there. I'm part of the religious community, which is the Anglican community, which is all over the world, and somehow that connects me with England in a way other people wouldn't be connected. Especially with the fact that I'm a priest. So it's not just sort of one way. America isn't my only community and I'm kind of glad of that.

RL: So how would you say that the American community, the world community, and any other community are affected by your activism?

VS: [Chuckle] I carry my story with me as everyone does,
and that story I share with people, with everyone who I come in contact with. Whether it's a friend, whether it's a co-worker, whether it's a person in the church, whatever it is. My story, my activism if you want to call it that, is a part of who I am because I've lived through these ten years of AIDS. I've seen people die. I've seen the struggles and the difficulties and I have to share that story with whoever I come in contact with, whoever's willing to hear it. Because there's a truth behind that story. It's a part of who we are. It's a part of who I am. I can't separate that from myself. So in that way my activism affects all of the communities that I come in contact with.

**RL:** What do you fear most?

**VS:** Oh...I think I fear indiscriminate...suffering of innocent peoples. I put lots of people in those categories. I would put people with AIDS in those categories. I would put people who are undocumented in those categories. I would put poor people in those categories. I would put gays and lesbians in those categories. People who somehow would be forced to suffer only because of some economic status, or some origin, or whatever. And there's a movement right now, certainly a political movement, in the United States to really sort of take vengeance, to somehow think that all of those groups have had higher priorities. That worries me. That's an evil. I don't think there's any other word for it, because it has a tendency to be vengeful, very negative, and harmful. People looking to get back at all of those poor people who sort of ripped us off. I don't see it that way, because I've worked with people on the margins my whole life. I'm one of those persons. I'm a margin. And so in my experiences, those people have been the most healthy in some ways, the most loving, most generous, most holy. And I'm worried. I'm worried that in a given situation that kind of pressure could really break forth into something very violent and very organized, and I don't know what I'd do if that happened.

**RL:** How have you seen this negativism affect your own life, the people that you are personally in contact with?

**VS:** I see it all the time. You know, one is just social. You just sit and watch TV and have people talk about you or your group, or the people that you work with and that you love and care for. It's as if every day you're watching TV
someone talked about your aunt or something and criticized her for being wicked or evil or whatever. So in that way it affects me, the fact that I am sort of one of the targets of all of those groups. So I feel it really personally. It's not something that I just can sort of, intellectually, like, "I'm in favor of the oppressed" or something like that. I'm one of them.

**RL:** Do you feel that as if you're a target?

**VS:** Yes, I do. I do feel...I mean certainly no one's saying, "Oh, let's get rid of Vincent Schwahn" [Chuckle] or anything like that, but I think socially I feel the pressure and I feel that that affects me.

**RL:** Is it hard because you can't pinpoint a source?

**VS:** I don't know. There really isn't any one source, and frequently these things are sort of short-lived. There's just a feeling that it's a popular thing, so people are popularly against or in favor of one thing, and that mellows out for a little while, and then it gets brought up again. So sometimes it's a fad. Though I get a little more worried when it's our leaders who are proposing those things than if it's the skinheads,² for example. Everyone was worried about the skinheads, and they were doing this and that. And I suppose there might have been reason for worry, there might not have been, but that was a small group. It was a group that didn't have a lot of power and a lot of influence, a lot of money. So you could take it with a grain of salt and say, "Well, sure, it's twelve skinheads and they might do a couple of things, but there are laws and we're protected." It's different when the laws begin to change, when it's your leaders who are beginning to propose those ideas. It's a very different feeling when it comes from above instead of from below. Then it's organized and then it's got more political power than it does when it's a small group.

**RL:** So would you say leaders are more dangerous? Potentially?

**VS:** Yes, and I think historically that's very true. The

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²Violent white supremacist groups active in Europe and parts of the United States.
leadership of a country is what people have a tendency to follow. People follow their leaders, their ideas, and sometimes those leaders are very good and very positive. You know, kind of people like Martin Luther King, Archbishop Tutu in South Africa, or Gandhi—all of those sort of folk have done great things to influence us. But then there are other people who go in the other direction and we know it. Innocent people suffer under their direction.

**RL:** What do you hope for?

**VS:** In general? I hope for a compassion. When I was ordained a priest three and a half years ago, a friend of mine, an African-American Episcopalian priest from New York City, preached at my ordination and said that one of the problems with this country is we have compassion fatigue, and the negative sort of voices were still even three years ago just beginning to flare up, the Jesse Helmses and all of those sorts of groups. I think that's still true. There's an egotism that still exists strongly within our country that I think is very dangerous. And my hopes are that people will get over their compassion fatigue and be more compassionate with each other and more understanding. If not—at least more tolerant of each other.

**RL:** Do you get compassion fatigued?

**VS:** Yes and no. I think I get a bit deader at times, and I go through those moments when I can't feel anymore or I don't know what to feel anymore and I just am. I don't have any more emotions left to be angry, or vocal, or violent, and I feel that I've just been deadened, and that comes out of the pain and the depression of the times.

**RL:** So how do you deal with that?

**VS:** I pray. [Laugh] I have a spiritual director that I see on a regular basis. I have a psychologist I see on and off. I try to create systems of support. I try to have fun. I watch a lot of the comedy channel on TV, a lot of sitcoms. I try to distract myself from the pain of the world so that it doesn't feel so intense. So I sort of retreat at times when

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3An archconservative U.S. senator from North Carolina who has authored much anti-gay and anti-AIDS education legislation.
I need to retreat and get away and then I am able to engage again.

RL: Do you recommend this to people that are suffering with AIDS?

VS: Yes I do. I've seen some good examples of people who have lived with the virus and have done very well. One secret is to not be completely preoccupied with your illness and to not spend all of your time thinking about it, because it'll drive you insane. I think denial is sometimes healthy, again in doses. If you're beginning to get sick, then you need to confront the fact that you're getting sick. But if you're feeling well, then don't create a situation that's going to make you feel bad, because you know one of these days you're not going to be feeling well. It's sort of like saying, "I know I'm going to get one of those colds that everyone's getting in a week or so," and then not going outside just because you know what's going to happen. So I think there's a healthy balance between interacting, especially with people who have AIDS who have been activists. I know a number of those people. I think it's okay--when it's time to shout and to make your voice known, do it--but there are also moments when you need to retreat, when you need to be by yourself, when you need to not be carrying the banner. I don't think that any of us can carry that banner by ourselves, and if we don't have a support system to help us carry it, then we're going to burn out. And a lot of people do burn out.

RL: Would you say that all people with AIDS or affected by AIDS are activists?

VS: No, I wouldn't say all people are. I think it depends on everyone's situation. Everyone has a story to tell. And if you want to say that AIDS in itself is an activism just because it exists, in some ways that's true. In that sense, then, all people with AIDS are activists because they all have their own story to tell. And that story frequently goes against the feelings of the times. In that sense, then, yes, I would say that it is. But some people are very quiet about it. Some people aren't vocal. Some people stay in their homes. Some people are alone, and then someone else has to tell their story.

RL: Do you think people need activism as a part of dealing
with the disease?

**VS:** Some people it helps, and some people it destroys. I really do believe in the idea of a divine call. I think God raises up prophets. I think that's part of our Christian and Judaic tradition, that prophets get raised up from time to time to sort of perk peoples' consciences and wake them up. And so I really believe that even in the AIDS community people are raised up; the Perry Tilleraases and the other people who are able to really be a voice. I don't think that's everybody, and I think everyone has to look really deep within themselves and try to figure out how they're going to tell their story, and if that's going to be real vocal or if it's going to be just in their family circle or where it's going to be. It really varies from person to person.

**RL:** How will this time in our history be remembered?

**VS:** I've heard lots of conjectures about how this time will be remembered. Some people say that AIDS will come and sort of go away almost like tuberculosis did. You know, tuberculosis was a really significant threatening disease for a period of time in American history—well, in world history—and there were places people went to get cured and all of that. And now if you look back it's only a memory unless you talk to someone who grew up during that period of time. So I think it's hard to know how AIDS will be remembered. It depends on how long it's going to be with us. It depends on how much we get used to it. I hope it will constantly be remembered, but it could easily get just sort of wiped away like people who want to wipe away the Holocaust. The Holocaust was a horrendous period in our history, and some people just want to say, "Do away with it," and as Holocaust survivors are quickly dying off, again their stories aren't being told. So I think there's a real challenge there to keep their stories alive in some way. It's good to be able to have these kinds of interviews so maybe someday someone can come back and listen and hear their stories.

**RL:** You said earlier that you think AIDS is going to be with us for a while, and just now you said that how this time will be remembered will depend on how long it's with us. Assuming that it will be with us for a while, how do you think that's going to impact the view that people have or will have?
VS: I think it has impacted already, at least on a short-term basis. It has impacted the way people relate to each other. It has certainly given a voice to the gay and lesbian community that didn't exist before because it's put the whole reality of homosexuality in the forefront in the United States. I think it's taught people some basic lessons about how they should relate to each other on a human level and on a sexual level. There is a kind of silver lining around the cloud of AIDS, and that silver lining really has to do with the things that we've learned from a very difficult time, a reckless situation, and that's possible. That's good. And I would hope that those things would last for a while. That high school students and junior high school students, when they're growing up and when they think about AIDS and other infectious diseases, that it will help them to think about how they're going to relate to each other, and how they're going to tell their children when they get older.

RL: Do you distinguish between a human and a sexual level?

VS: I don't think you can completely separate humanity and sexuality. But there certainly are aspects of our lives that are physical-sexual and other aspects of our lives that are just emotional and sexual. So I guess in that way I would make a distinction in that we have those parts of our lives.

RL: And spiritual?

VS: And spiritual. They're all kind of compartments, and they're not things that can just be completely separated. I think they form a whole, and our constant struggle is to somehow integrate all of those aspects. Our tendency, though, in history is to separate them and to put them in categories, so at one moment we're being spiritual, at another moment we're being sexual, another moment we're being emotional. And that's been destructive for many of us in the past, because if there's something wrong with any of those aspects, then we get sort of divided and we start working against ourselves. And that has been destructive.

RL: Why do you think we compartmentalize?

VS: Sometimes we do that just to be able to deal with all the aspects of our lives. You know, I heard a report of a woman who was schizophrenic and had like a hundred and fifteen personalities, and her cure was to be able to take
all those compartments of her lives, all of her personalities, and to integrate them more and more into one. Or at least start limiting all of those little sections until they were few more that she could deal with. So sometimes we compartmentalize for self-preservation. Sometimes it's denial. Sometimes it's a way for us to deal with the pain that we have. If we have a lot of pain in a certain area of our life, it's easier to compartmentalize it and then make it sort of disappear. It only comes up at certain times. The challenge is integration. I think that's the constant challenge, to integrate every aspect of our lives. And that's a lifetime struggle. I don't think that we ever get to that point.

**RL:** Why don't we get to that point?

**VS:** We don't get to that point because everything is always changing in our lives. The challenges of a twenty year old are very different from the challenge of a thirty-five year old who's just beginning his or her career, as compared to a fifty-five year old who's beginning to look at retirement. So what your economic status is, all of your history and background, all of that is constantly changing. There's constantly a new challenge that comes up. So it never gets resolved. New things come up all the time, and sometimes old things continue to come up and don't ever go away.

**RL:** Do you think you're at least partially resolving some things?

**VS:** I think I know more now what those things are, because I know myself better now that I'm thirty-six than when I was say twenty-six or sixteen. So I understand myself better. I understand my history better. I've had a lot more experience. I don't know if I have any more answers at thirty-six than I did at twenty-six or at sixteen, and some of my answers are pretty much the same and others of my answers would be a lot different because I've experienced something else.

**RL:** How would you like to be remembered?

**VS:** I would like to be remembered as a good priest. As someone who really loved people and who gave himself for people, but not for himself but as a witness to his belief about who Jesus was and who God was and what God had to
offer. I would hope people would just have fond memories of me as a person who could really be loving and caring. And that would lead them to something greater, that it wouldn't end with me and that they could then continue the same message and the same idea. So I wouldn't want to be remembered as just a historical figure or a person or an entity myself but as a part of that which is bigger which I represent.

RL: What does God have to offer?

VS: What does God have to offer? Well, to start with, God is the author of this created world that we're in, and I think there's a lot to learn from that. The beauty of the natural creation as it is is a constant reminder to us that God is around us, that there is something bigger than us, that we're not the center of the universe. All of our stories among all religious traditions have a lot in common in terms of how our origins started and the sort of tension between trying to make humanity as the center of all of the center of those origins or as the spiritual as the center of all. I think God has a wholeness to offer us healing, life, goodness. I think God is good in every aspect, but jealous like a lover is jealous for us and concerned about us. If God wasn't jealous and concerned about us, then I don't think God would care, so then everything that we did wouldn't really matter. So there's a kind of a real interaction between ourselves and God. It's not that God just sits back and kind of watches everything. I think God is actively involved in every aspect of our lives. I don't think we have a lot of answers about why and the specifics, and I don't think we find those very easily. But I can say that at this point in my life God has been an active player at every point in my life. And I don't always know where God begins and where I end or where I begin and God ends. On that I'm not sure.

RL: What, if anything, do you see God doing for people with AIDS?

VS: I think God is raising up, and has since the beginning, persons who in God's name love, care, accept, and receive people with AIDS with no prejudices, no judgment, no harshness whatsoever. I think as an Episcopal church we've had a very good history. We have been one of the churches to less condemn and set aside people with AIDS. We have our
condemners no doubt, but we have done a better job than some churches and some groups. I think that we can offer a place of welcome for people who have AIDS and accept them as they are into that realm that comes from other people.

**RL:** So God comes from other people?

**VS:** Sometimes. I think God makes God's self present in human beings. Saint Thomas Aquinas said God builds upon nature. That's a principle which means that the only way that we can come to understand God is by something concrete and real, by something that represents God. The church is that. The church is an image, in a sense a representation of God. Nature is an image of God. People are because our story tells us that we're built in the image of God. Some rabbi or some holy man said you can just look into the eyes of a person and you'll see their soul, which is probably true. I think God makes himself visible in that way.

**RL:** Thank you very much.

**VS:** You're welcome.