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THE BLACK CHURCH IN THE ERA OF HIV/AIDS:  
WHAT IS OUR TESTIMONY? WHAT  
WILL BE OUR LEGACY?

Introduction

It is virtually impossible to examine any crisis in the African-American community without discussing the Black Church's role. African Americans have historically looked to the African-American pulpit for guidance, leadership, and direction in mobilizing around critical issues that challenge the African-American community. However, for more than twenty-five years, we have been impacted by the HIV/AIDS epidemic<sup>1</sup> and far too many Black Churches are not equipped to meet the demands of this epidemic and to effect change regarding its impact.

The Silence

Given the fact that although African Americans make up less than 13 percent of the United States population, they account for 49 percent of new HIV/AIDS cases in the fifty states,<sup>2</sup> the role of the Black Church has almost been non-existent. In the early 1980s when most of the AIDS cases were

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<sup>1</sup>Black AIDS Institute, [2006 "AIDS in Blackface: 25 Years of an Epidemic"], [http://www.blackaids.org/image\\_uploads/article\\_202.pdf](http://www.blackaids.org/image_uploads/article_202.pdf) (accessed January 15, 2007).

<sup>2</sup>Centers for Disease Control, [2006 "HIV/AIDS Surveillance Report"], <http://www.cdc.gov/hiv/topics/surveillance/resources/slides/race-ethnicity/slides/race-ethnicity.pdf> (accessed January 15, 2007).

among white gay men, the Black Church was deliberately silent, believing that HIV/AIDS was of no concern for the African-American community. This inactive period allowed the disease to spread silently and rapidly among African Americans without any organized efforts to combat it. Because the Black Church neglected its powerful role of keeping the African-American community informed regarding critical issues affecting its health and well-being, persons were not tested and continued to engage in risky behaviors, allowing the disease to spread.

Over that last twenty-five years, the Black Church has vacillated between silence, misinformation, and misunderstanding. The testimony of many Black churches continues misinformation, finding its voice in the church's teaching and preaching ministry. Far too many Black churches still preach and teach that HIV/AIDS is a disease caused by certain sins and lifestyles. This belief is rooted in a misunderstanding of the doctrine of creation that establishes every person's connection to God. The Black Church seems to have forsaken its embrace of the correlation between the doctrine of creation and the person and work of Jesus Christ who reconciles us to God. The Black Church whose past theology has been centered in the belief that all persons are created in the image of God and therefore significant, important, and precious to God, has reverted to a dogma that seems to support divisiveness, neglect, exclusivity, condemnation, and oppression. This schizophrenic theology is the major cause for withholding ministry to those infected and affected by HIV/AIDS in the African-American community. And likewise, infected African Americans have been reluctant to reach out to the Black Church in their time of need.

### Role of Black Church

As the spread of HIV/AIDS has reached epidemic proportions in the African-American community, the Black Church has slowly shifted its ministry approach to infected and affected persons. However, there continues to be a great deal of misunderstanding. Until the late 1990s, the Black Church saw its role to infected persons primarily as ministry to the dying versus ministry to the living. This concept of HIV/AIDS ministry has often led the Black Church to approach HIV/AIDS ministry as charity work versus seeing it as directly related to issues of justice, affecting the African-American community. Most Black churches still minister to persons infected and affected with HIV/AIDS in a vacuum. There is little or no correlation between the economic and social issues that affect African Americans and the rise of HIV/AIDS in our community. In addition, we fail to see the correlation between the disproportionate increase of incarcerated African-American men and women throughout this country and the spread of the virus in our communities. In a real sense, the Black Church has lost its prophetic voice with regard to the HIV/AIDS epidemic. It has failed to speak out against the social, economic, and educational issues that support the spread of HIV/AIDS. While race and ethnicity, by themselves, are not risk factors for HIV infection, there is a complex set of historical, structural, environmental, and cultural factors—including racism and discrimination, poverty, denial, stigma, homophobia, and limited access to health care—that make African Americans more vulnerable to HIV infection.<sup>3</sup> When

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<sup>3</sup>National Minority AIDS Council, [2006 "African Americans, Health Disparities and HIV/AIDS: Recommendations for Confronting the Epidemic in Black America"], <http://www.nmac.org> (accessed January 15, 2007).

these issues are addressed, we will see a significant decrease in the spread of HIV/AIDS.

The testimony of the Black Church in the past has been missed opportunities for ministry. But what should be the role of the Black Church in the future? How do we leave a legacy consistent with our prophetic call? The Black Church must take its rightful place in the fight against the spread of HIV/AIDS in the African-American community. Although its role in addressing the HIV/AIDS epidemic is still fragmented, most churches are attempting to address the issue.

Let us focus on three areas: awareness, prevention, and support. The Black Church has remained silent too long and has lagged behind in sounding the alarm with regard to the HIV/AIDS crisis. We must use our power of influence to make our communities aware of the dangers of the spread of HIV/AIDS. Information is power, and the Black Church must become empowering by sharing information that will prevent the spread of HIV/AIDS. Every church should use the traditional resources of the church bulletin, the church newsletter, other church flyers, and printed materials to inform the community. The role of the Black Church has always been to inform as well as to inspire. Every Black Church should have at least one HIV/AIDS forum in their community yearly, providing HIV testing during health fairs and health screenings. The legacy of the Black Church shapes our thinking and helps us in making critical decisions for the good of all of the people. It must be instrumental in assisting the African-American community to understand that true salvation is deliverance from systems and situations, as well as personal sin. The Black Church must make the African-American community aware that God desires that we are healed and made whole.

### HIV Prevention Education

Historically, the Black Church has always been proactive. In the fight against the spread of HIV/AIDS, we will need to focus on HIV prevention education. This means that the church will need to dispel the myths about how HIV/AIDS is contracted and spread and examine its teaching and preaching to properly interpret scripture and teach a gospel that is liberating and life-giving. In order to prevent the spread of HIV/AIDS in the African-American community, the Black Church will need to initiate dialogue about sexuality and spiritually and move beyond abstinence in its approach to HIV prevention education. Every youth in the church thirteen-eighteen must be introduced to the curricula of *Keeping It Real* and *B.A.R.T. (Becoming a Responsible Teen)*. The Black Church will need to merge religion and reality and allow HIV prevention education to be the core of the church's Christian Education ministry with the *S.I.S.T.A.* curriculum used with women and *Project Respect* with men. Historically, in the Black Church, the direction and focus for ministry is determined, to a large degree, by the pastor and church leaders. Therefore, it is critical that they be sensitized to make HIV/AIDS prevention education the focus for their church's ministry. Research indicates that pastors and church leaders who have post-secondary education or seminary training are more likely to take action to circumvent the spread of HIV/AIDS than their counterparts. Studies further indicate that, even for those who are sensitized to the need for action, they are often not clear as to what action is needed. Every historically African-American seminary should offer a course for seminarians, as well as local pastors, on HIV/AIDS prevention education ministry. In addition, there should be seminary-wide forums to address the

issue of HIV/AIDS ministry in the life of the church. If seminarians are sensitized to the crisis of HIV/AIDS while still in seminary, they will carry the message to the churches who call them to leadership positions. There should be an intentional partnership between the academy and the church to plan and host joint community forums and conferences.

The Black Church has a legacy of affirming the least and the left out. It has always stood on the side of the world's oppressed, always supporting the rejected and ostracized. In keeping with this legacy, we must create a safe haven for all persons regardless of sexual orientation, being open to sexual diversity and fostering a spirit of community. The Black Church should initiate dialogue between persons of differing sexual orientations and minister to those struggling with their sexuality. We should move out of our comfort zone and provide on-going ministry to those often overlooked: sex workers, transgendered persons, and drug addicts. The Black Church's ministry to infected and affected persons should address the social, economic, and educational aspects of the disease, as well as the physical, with leaders becoming vocal advocates. We must lead the way in the fight against the spread of HIV/AIDS in the African-American community by being tested ourselves.

### Conclusion

Given the issues of concern, the devastating impact HIV has on the African-American community, and its historical influence, it is time for the Black Church to "blow the trumpet in Zion," taking its rightful prophetic place, sounding the alarm. Just as the prophet Joel warned the people about the crisis that had come, catching them off-guard, unaware, and vulnerable, the Black Church must "blow the trumpet in

Zion” so that the complacent Black-faith community wakes up and breaks its former silence, forsaking easy indifference, and offering an urgent, intentional response to the HIV/AIDS crisis. And as the Black Church dares to sound the alarm, the awesome good news is that God will be the first-responder, blessing, healing, and restoring.

...the Black Church has been a major force in the development of the Black Power movement. It has provided a spiritual and moral foundation for the struggle against racism and has been a source of inspiration and leadership for the Black community. The Black Church has also been a center of social and political activity, and has played a significant role in the development of the Black community.

The Black Church has a legacy of struggle and sacrifice. It has always been on the side of the oppressed, and it has always been a source of inspiration and leadership for the Black community. We must carry on this legacy, and we must continue to struggle for the liberation of the Black community. The Black Church has a responsibility to the Black community, and it must continue to play a leading role in the struggle for Black liberation. We must continue to work for the liberation of the Black community, and we must continue to work for the liberation of the Black community. We must continue to work for the liberation of the Black community, and we must continue to work for the liberation of the Black community.

### Conclusion

The Black Church has a long and proud history. It has been a source of strength and inspiration for the Black community, and it has played a significant role in the struggle for Black liberation. We must continue to work for the liberation of the Black community, and we must continue to work for the liberation of the Black community. We must continue to work for the liberation of the Black community, and we must continue to work for the liberation of the Black community.