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A RESPONSE TO “LIFT UP YOUR VOICE LIKE
A TRUMPET!” MOBILIZING AFRICAN-
AMERICAN CHURCHES TO RESPOND
TO THE HIV/AIDS PANDEMIC

“The Lord looked and was displeased
to find there was no justice.
God was amazed to see that no one
intervened to help the oppressed.”
(Isaiah 15b and 16a, NLT)

Introduction

This passage expresses God’s concern for the oppressed in society and reflects a call for those who would be responsive to the needs of an oppressed people. It is possible to consider persons living with HIV/AIDS among the oppressed, not only due to the physical effects of the disease but also because of social responses. We are encouraged to consider the prophetic role of the church as significant in addressing the challenges of HIV/AIDS. We are a people in crisis! Although ours is not a crisis of meaning nor a crisis of faith, the current predicament in the African-American community involving HIV/AIDS is ontological—a “crisis of being,” threatening our existence.

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The Black Church As Liberating Agent

Dr. Raymond Sommerville introduces the idea of the Black Church as liberating agent, responding to the epidemic of HIV/AIDS, encouraging us to see the significance of its prophetic role in our history as voice for the voiceless, confronting injustices, and speaking truth to power. The Black Church's position as the guardian of the spiritual, social, and political life of the community places it in the forefront of the struggle for freedom and equality, but now that voice is being silenced. He calls for the church to reclaim its voice, asserting that prophetic voice to the challenge of HIV/AIDS despite changing demographics, the growth of megachurches, and declining inner-city communities. Not only does the crisis of HIV/AIDS in the Black community demand that the Black Church awaken to its prophetic witness but also to its priestly vision, rebuilding the African-American community's trust and applying a healing balm to the wounds created by the effects of HIV/AIDS.

We are to remember our story. Firstly, we reflect on our rich history and legacy of the African-American Church, one which scholars have long heralded, chronicling its tragedies and triumphs. Secondly, we remember the contributions of the great men and women who labored in the struggle for freedom and justice and on whose shoulders we now stand, to reach back and gather the best of what our past has taught us. In looking at the present we are faced with the cruel realities of our existence. The HIV/AIDS threat to our being makes the potential of non-being much more eminent, making the priestly function of the Black Church critical.

Rebuilding Community Trust

Statistics portray the importance of the priestly function of the Black Church: 47 percent of AIDS cases are African-American

men and women despite the fact that African Americans make up only 13 percent of the population.¹ African-American males are nine times more likely than non-Hispanic white males of contracting the disease and African-American women twenty-one times more likely to contract the disease than non-Hispanic white women.² These statistics reflect the impact of HIV/AIDS in our communities and in our congregations. In other words, these figures translate into people who sit in our pews, sing in our choirs, serve on boards and auxiliaries, and possibly preach from our pulpits.

The Black Church must consider its own patriarchal history, its inclination toward oppression, and call into question its discriminatory practices, particularly toward African-American women. Although African-American women comprise the majority of church membership, they are still targets of victimization and continue to bear what Frances Wood calls the "yoke of oppression": silencing, ignoring, degrading, and dismissing women's experience, especially those encounters that reveal the nature and extent of oppression perpetuated against them within the community.³ Additionally, the African-American Church must also examine its attitude regarding members of the gay and lesbian communities, recognizing what Martin Luther King Jr. wrote: "Justice too long delayed is justice denied."⁴

The Black Church must make amends for its discriminatory actions and deliberately focus its liberating efforts toward

¹The Office of Minority Health, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, "African American Profile" [Overview (Demographics) and HIV/AIDS 2006] <http://www.omhrc.gov/templates/browse.aspx?lvl=2&lvlID=51> (accessed January 9, 2007).

²Ibid.

³Frances E. Wood, "Take My Yoke upon You," in *A Troubling in My Soul: Womanist Perspectives on Evil and Suffering*, ed. Emilie M. Townes (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1993), 39.

⁴Clayborne Carson, ed., *The Autobiography of Martin Luther King Jr.*, ["Letter from Birmingham Jail"] (New York: Intellectual Properties Management and Warner Books, 1998), 192.

African-American women who are being infected with HIV/AIDS at alarming rates, making up more than half of new HIV infections. The majority of African-American women contract HIV/AIDS through unprotected sex in heterosexual relationships. The fact that heterosexual transmission is now the most commonly reported mode of HIV transmission among women raises critical questions: How is it that women are being so adversely affected by this disease? What is the role of denial and silence regarding homosexuality, "down-low brothers," human sexuality in general? Why is there no out-cry? What contributes to the absence of concern? The church must reflect on these questions for the purpose of generating liberating action, realizing that the crisis of HIV/AIDS threatens not only the existence of this generation but generations to come.

Healing Our Wounds and Brokenness

With the devastation created by the spread of HIV/AIDS it is not unreasonable to conceive a community of wounded and broken people. To appropriate a priestly dimension is to be empowered by the Spirit to affirm the rich spiritual heritage that is ours as descendants of Africans who were brought to America. It is the Spirit that inspires our efforts and undergirds all that we are and do. It is the spiritual dimension that makes reality-healing possible. We see healing not as the absence of disease, but the presence of God's love in spite of the disease. The power of the Spirit enables those who are suffering to transcend their present circumstances and facilitates transformation. It is the Spirit's power that the Black Church brings to those affected by HIV/AIDS as it endeavors to fulfill Jesus' mission proclaimed in Luke 4:18: "The Spirit of the

Lord is upon me, for he has anointed me to bring Good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim the captives will be released, that the blind will see, that the oppressed will be set free, and the time of the Lord's favor has come."

Conclusion

Dr. Sommerville concludes his essay, "Breaking the Silence," by suggesting that the church re-claim its prophetic voice due to ever-increasing apathy regarding the issue of HIV/AIDS. The prophetic function of the Black Church is a necessary component in addressing this problem. One additional element can be added: the development and implementation of programs that focus on self-esteem, targeting our youth to become empowered to make better choices with their lives.

The threat of HIV/AIDS represents for African Americans everywhere a "crisis of being"—a threat to our existence. In Chinese culture, the character for "crisis" is two symbols—one for despair—the other for opportunity. For the Black Church, succumbing to despair is not an option. The African-American Church is in a pivotal position to build on its legacy of activism, to expand its moral base to include those suffering with HIV/AIDS and their loved ones. The African-American Church and clergy can demonstrate in a tangible way God's love to facilitate healing and wholeness through the pastoral counseling ministry to those who are wounded by the outcomes of HIV/AIDS, i.e., isolation, pain, suffering, and financial hardship.

