

Whither the black church on HIV/AIDS?

By [Michelle Boorstein](#), Published: July 20

The percentage of [Washingtonians living with HIV or AIDS](#) is among the highest of any U.S. city — about 2.7 percent. The rate is much higher, 4.3 percent, among African Americans, for whom life often revolves closely around the church.

Since the epidemic began in the early 1980s, many health leaders have criticized black clergy for staying silent as the virus has spread because of the church's condemnation of gay sex and drug use. Others say the black church has been unfairly singled out.

On the eve of the 19th International AIDS Conference to be held in the District on July 22-27, Post religion writer Michelle Boorstein asked several local pastors and other experts to discuss the black church's handling of HIV/AIDS.

The Rev. Anthony Evans is president of the D.C.-based [National Black Church Initiative](#), a network of 34,000 U.S. churches.

Evans said the black church “let the 1980s pass us by” in dealing with HIV/AIDS but has awakened. Two years ago, his group declared a national health emergency in the black church and is about to unveil a controversial recommendation for pastors to disseminate to their flocks: “We want everyone to take a year off of sex and deal with who they are.”

Parishioners should use the year of celibacy to focus on their sexuality and relationships with friends, family and God, Evans said. He wants people to get tested and confront the results.

“If you are positive, let your partner know,” Evans said. “If you can't, let your pastor know. Or friends. Someone has to know who you really are. You can't be a mystery anymore. AIDS has uncovered the mysteries of who we are.”

Talking about AIDS, he said, “goes against historic and deep-seated folkways and norms of the black community, that you are to be silent about your personal life. But the church is now giving you permission to open up and be realistic about your own behavior.”

But Evans said the black church is being criticized unfairly on the issue.

“There is no question one of the weapons the gay community has against the black church and its opposition

to same-sex marriage is saying we haven't done anything to solve the question of AIDS. On one hand, they're absolutely right. But I think from 1990 until today, the black church has moved mountains."

"I am constantly apologizing on behalf of the church because we should have known better," he said, but the federal government is "still not willing to extend the necessary resources to eliminate AIDS in our lifetime."

"There is a general perception of tolerating the misery and suffering of black people. The only thing we lack is sufficient funding."

The problem persists unabated among blacks largely because of ignorance, not willful behavior, so funding public education targeted at hard-to-reach communities is essential, he said.

"Most of our folks [who have HIV or AIDS] are IV drug users, they're poor, they didn't get through 12th grade and the literature is produced at a level they can't understand. They don't understand how their own body functions."

But the church, he said, will "never accept gay marriage" or gay sexuality. "There is an order and we will maintain that."

The Rev. Tony Lee *launched a church out of a nightclub to serve people around the border between the District and Prince George's County, particularly those hit by HIV. His church, Community of Hope in Hillcrest Heights, does HIV testing during services four times a year and has tested thousands of people. Lee has been tested on the pulpit.*

"I think the church's perspective has to change. Most churches still see it as outreach, and I think they should see it as in-reach. . . . People act like they don't want to see it and sometimes don't see it. Look at D.C. and Prince George's. There is no way you can act like it's not impacting our congregations."

He described how people receive their test results during the worship service in 15 minutes. Regardless of the results, people are immediately funneled into health and spiritual services.

"As intense as it is, we feel church is the best way to deal with something that intense. . . . What better place to be than in the House of the Lord, to find out where you stand? And who you can stand on?"

Joe Madison *is a popular Washington radio talk show host on WOL-AM and Sirius/XM satellite radio who focuses on issues of concern to black Americans.*

The issue of HIV/AIDS remains "basically ignored" in the black community because of homophobia, ignorance and embarrassment, Madison said.

"I must be honest, I can't remember one minister I've ever talked with who addressed this issue. I can't even think of one sermon I've heard on the issue. And I've known some of the most prominent ministers in the country. I won't say they don't exist, but they are few and far between."

"It speaks volumes about what is the purpose of a church? Of religion? What are the lessons taught in Bible? The lesson of the Good Samaritan. . . . Sometimes these lessons are right in front of us."

Pernessa Seele *is considered one of the founders of the movement in the black church to confront the AIDS virus. Through her group, the Balm in Gilead, Seele consults with black faith groups including those in Washington. The group is co-sponsoring a pre-conference this weekend on faith and AIDS at Howard*

University.

“I think things have changed, and for many, greatly. But there are still too many faith communities who are ignorant. They are still buried in the notion that homosexuality causes HIV. This biggest lie is used as an excuse not to address the epidemic.”

“The role of the church is unique for the African American community. It’s where we disseminate information on anything — voter rights, education, murder. . . . The role of faith is to dismantle stigma. We do that by speaking truth around people’s lives.”

“The challenge of HIV is compounded because it’s attached to behavior. Religions believe homosexuality is a sin, prostitution is a sin, masturbating is a sin. In many corners, the list of sins is greater than grace. We say grace must be longer and larger than any list of sins.”

But Seele thinks black institutions are sometimes unfairly criticized — or else ignored.

“I believe we in the African American community in the United States don’t always feel we are included in the international AIDS conversation. Because we are from ‘the rich United States,’ our issues don’t necessarily get heard or addressed. No one talks about the epidemic in the African American community being just as bad as Botswana’s.”

“And if you look at the white church, it’s just as homophobic. The Vatican, the Anglican Church, the mosque. Rome, Africa, China, wherever you are, the stigma is rooted somewhere in the religious experience.”

Alton B. Pollard III *is dean of Howard Divinity School.*

Pollard said he’s seen “a growth industry” [in the four years he’s been in Washington](#) when it comes to awareness of AIDS/HIV in the black church.

“The typical church may not have come to the point of talking about HIV but they are starting to talk about health care. Or the relationship between faith and health,” he said “There are some very active congregations across denominations, traditions. I think there is an awareness that, no matter what they think about how someone may or may not have become infected, there still needs to be a biblical witness to help people by reaching out. . . . There is now a growing recognition that looking at issues of right or wrong is an insufficient response. Instead of pointing fingers at behaviors, it should be an ethical challenge. . . . It’s a turn, to look at yourself, the man in the mirror.”