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## **Voices on HIV/AIDS and the Black Church**

July 24, 2012

As the 19th International AIDS Conference began in Washington, several faith leaders and others were interviewed about the black church's handling of the HIV/AIDS epidemic.

The Rev. Anthony Evans, president of the D.C.-based National Black Church Initiative, is about to unveil a controversial recommendation that people "take a year off of sex and deal with who they are."

Evans acknowledged that talking about AIDS "goes against historic and deep-seated folkways and norms of the black community, that you are to be silent about your personal life." However, he wants people to get tested and share the results.

The Rev. Tony Lee launched Community of Hope, a nightclub-turned-church in Hillcrest Heights, Md. that does [HIV testing](#) during services four times a year. Lee himself has been tested at the pulpit and said, "What better place to be than in the House of the Lord, to find out where you stand? And who you can stand on?" When people get their results during the service, they receive health and spiritual support.

Pernessa Seele's group, the Balm in Gilead, is co-sponsoring a conference on faith and AIDS at Howard University this weekend. She said, "The role of the church is unique for the African-American community. It's where we disseminate information on anything. ...The role of faith is to dismantle stigma. We do that by speaking truth around people's lives."

Alton B. Pollard III, dean of Howard Divinity School, said HIV/AIDS awareness is growing in the black church. "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."

Joe Madison, a Washington radio talk show host on WOL-AM, said HIV/AIDS issues remain "basically ignored" in the black community because of homophobia, ignorance, and embarrassment.

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