

Black churches confront the AIDS epidemic

Written by Maya Rhodan, NNPA Washington Correspondent
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WASHINGTON (NNPA) – Some churches distribute food and clothing to the needy. But Rev. Edwin C. Sanders, II, the Senior Servant and Founder of the Metropolitan Interdenominational Church in Nashville, Tenn. decided to distribute something else – condoms.

Not to encourage more sexuality, church leaders were quick to point out, but because it is an effective weapon to curb the spread of HIV, the virus that leads to AIDS.

“We believe in radical love and love to all in the community. We’re open and honest. We distribute condoms because our goal is a healthy community,” says Rev. Terry Terrell, a staff minister.

Like many Black churches, Metropolitan was forced to act when the disease could no longer be ignored in the church.

When the church was founded in 1981, one of its 12 founding members was HIV-positive and later died from AIDS. The leaders of the church were then moved to address the HIV and AIDS crisis through service and education.

Twelve years later, the church founded the First Response Center, which provides health care and support services to those impacted by or at risk for HIV. From medication to assistance finding housing and preparing for employment, the First Response Center, headed by Rev. Terrell, is open and able to provide to all, even the uninsured and uninsurable. And Rev. Sanders is a nationally-known leader in the fight against HIV/AIDS.

“The church has the largest consistent audience of African Americans,” says Paul Grant who created the documentary *The Gospel of Healing: Volume 1: Black Churches Respond to HIV/AIDS*. “You can tell how the community is doing by going to a church. We get our messages there, that’s where our social norms are set.”

The message of HIV/AIDS in the Black community is a vital one.

According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC):

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- Although Blacks represent only 12 percent of the U.S. population, they accounted for 44 percent of all new HIV infections in 2009 and are 44 percent of all people living with HIV.
- Black women accounted for 57 percent of all new HIV infections among women in 2009 and 64 percent of all new AIDS diagnoses among women. In 2010, 85 percent of Black women were infected through heterosexual activities.
- A similar picture is reflected among teens. Although Black teenagers represented only 15 percent of U.S. teens in 2010, they accounted for 70 percent of all new AIDS diagnoses among teens.
- A study in five major cities found that 46 percent of Black men having sex with other men were infected with HIV, more than double the 21 percent of White men exhibiting similar behavior.

“We have a health crisis within the African-American community that is impacting every facet,” says Rev. Terry Terrell, the chief operating officer of the First Response Center at Metropolitan Interdenominational Church in Nashville. “If healing is going to happen within the community, it will have to come from within the community.”

More than 800 miles away in Wilmington, Del., the leadership of Bethel AME Church also believes in healing from within the community.

In the lower level of the church, what began as a small AIDS ministry in 1994, a year after Rev. Silvester Beaman and his wife, Renee, relocated from Bermuda to lead the church, has grown to be the leading HIV test site in the state of Delaware.

While on the island, Mrs. Beaman she served as a nurse at a local hospital where she encountered many of her church members and neighbors infected with the virus.

“The nursing director gave me a little black book filled with names and addresses,” Beaman recalls. “These were all of the people on the island with HIV—there were members of the church, political leaders.”

She wanted to tell her husband the information, but new she couldn’t disclose the information. Instead she told him they needed to start a ministry to promote HIV/AIDS awareness and prevention from within the church.

In 2001, the ministry expanded to include Beautiful Gate Outreach Center, which now provides testing, patient care, education, and other services to their predominately Black community, which has some of the highest rates of HIV/AIDS in the city.

When Mrs. Beaman first opened the center, it took nine months before anyone came in.

“No one came in, all the calls were wrong numbers,” Beaman recalls. “But, after those nine months, we ran out of space for everyone.”

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She added, “The thousands of people that we’ve tested, the number of people who were found were positive and got into care have validated us as a full-fledged HIV ministry. We’re making an unbelievable difference.”

Rev. Keron Sadler, the NAACP HIV and AIDS health program manager says,

“We don’t just want churches to create health ministries, we want to change systems,” Sadler says. “Black faith leaders have great power, people really respond to the voice of their leader, so we begin with the leader.”

Not every church leader was quick to join the campaign against HIV/AIDS.

“Churches are hesitant to talk about HIV because they’re hesitant to talk about modes of transmission. They don’t want to talk about sex, they don’t want to talk about homosexuality, they don’t want to talk about incest and rape,” says Sheila Sullivan, the project coordinator at Antioch Baptist Church in Cleveland.

Sullivan works with a network of 16 churches throughout Cleveland that are educated on HIV prevention, treatment and works to keep congregations and leadership open to talking about the disease in the church.

Over the past five years, Sullivan has serviced over 50 church communities outside of the network providing on-site testing, attending health fairs, distributing information, and conducting presentations on HIV/AIDS and its effect on the Black community.

“I remember going to churches that were hesitant, but are now very open. I have churches that have condoms in their vestibule, not because they’re promoting sex, but because they’re promoting safety,” Sullivan explains.

Parnessa Seele is the founder and CEO of the Balm in Gilead. Through the organization she builds the capacity of faith communities by providing information on HIV to help address stigma and get people preventing, testing for, and treating the disease.

In her work, Seele has seen a number of churches open up to the idea of protecting the community from HIV/AIDS, but just as many who want nothing to do with it.

“We still have some churches that don’t want anything to do with it because they believe HIV stems from people living in sin,” Seele says. “Today we have to work to educate our congregations that HIV is still real.”

No one knows that better than Rae Lewis-Thornton, who has been living with AIDS for 20 years. In 1994, she was the focus of Chicago’s CBS affiliates feature series “Living with AIDS,” during which she gave viewers a glimpse into her day-to-day experiences as a woman with the virus which was then seen as a death sentence.

She remembers sitting in a pew of Fellowship Missionary Baptist Church on the city’s southwest

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side one Sunday when her pastor called out to her in the middle of service.

“Lewis, was that you I saw on TV?” she remembers Rev. Clay Evans asking. She responded, “Yes, pastor.”

She had been too scared to disclose her status to her pastor, so she kept the fact that she had AIDS a secret within the walls of the church.

So when her pastor said “good work,” she was surprised, but not as surprised as she was when she asked him to write her a letter of recommendation to a seminary school. After the application sat on her desk for months – again, out of fear – she finally built up the nerve to approach Rev. Evans about her call to ministry. She remembers him laughing at her and saying, “I know, I was just waiting for you to figure it out.”

Lewis-Thornton still waited 13 years after being licensed to get ordained to minister. Now, as a member and pastor at Westpoint Missionary Baptist Church in Chicago’s Bronzeville neighborhood, Lewis-Thornton is excited to share information on the virus she fights every moment her life – from the pulpit.

“Everyone is going to be talking about HIV and AIDS in my church,” says Lewis-Thornton, who refers to herself as a “diva living with AIDS.”

She explains, “You can’t do a public ministry the way I do and not have a pastor who supports it,” Thornton says. “The fact that God has given me a place that I can worship and do ministry inside those walls for the church, outside the walls for the church and in the community without any shame or friction is a blessing.”

Beaman, the Bermuda native who moved to Wilmington, Del., observes: “To know that there is a church that is really caring about it and not condemning HIV and AIDS is so important.”