

What is the role of the Black church for Black gay men and HIV prevention?

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Why the Black church?

Many Black men in the US grow up in families that are significantly involved with the Black church. As a long-standing institution developed for and by Black people, the Black church provides religious education and spiritual formation, and buffers against societal oppressions. The church has been a vital and trusted institution in the Black community, providing support, defining values, and building community.¹

Using the biblical themes of social justice and inherent dignity of all people, the Black church helped restore and promote the self esteem and self-worth of Black people who were victims of racial and other kinds of oppression. However, some Black gay men feel alienated from Black religious congregations. These men experience various homophobic and AIDS-phobic messages that increase their feelings of shame, diminish their religious identity, and are separated from important resources of the Black church.¹

The Black church is a part of many Black gay men's lives, and, unfortunately, so is HIV. The HIV/AIDS epidemic has had a devastating effect on Black gay men in the US. Black gay and bisexual men are the most heavily impacted population in the Black community. Among all men who have sex with men (MSM), black MSM accounted for 10,600 (36%) estimated new HIV infections in 2010. From 2008 to 2010, new HIV infections increased 22% among young (aged 13-24) MSM and 12% among MSM overall—an increase largely due to a 20% increase among young black MSM.² At the end of 2010, of the estimated 872, 990 persons living with an HIV diagnosis, 440,408 (50%) were among MSM with 31% of those living with the disease being African American.²

Black men who have sex with other men may self-identify as gay, same gender-loving, bisexual, straight, or may refuse to be categorized at all. For this Fact Sheet, we use the term "Black gay men" to refer to all Black men who have sex with men.

How has the church positively affected Black gay men?

Churches have traditionally occupied a special place in the African American experience.³ For many Black gay men, church is a part of their identity. Often, generations of families are involved in the church: their great grandparents helped build the church, their grandparents provided leadership, their parents work and volunteer at the church. For many, going to church was a requirement as children and they may have gone to Sunday school, sang in the choir or participated in other church activities. As adults, Black gay men are often involved in church leadership positions.

Spirituality is a resource for HIV- and HIV+ Black gay men.⁴ Spirituality has been used to cope with life-threatening events, physical illness and emotional and psychological stresses. Belief in God is an important strength for many Black Americans. Religious participation also provides positive health benefits, increased life satisfaction, and is especially supportive in crisis moments.

How has the church negatively affected Black gay men?

Many religious traditions view homosexuality as a sin and have strictly defined visions of masculinity and femininity. Black gay men experience homophobia and AIDS phobia that is sanctioned by the

Black church. These oppressions and messages experienced in church increase Black gay men's internalized homophobia, which can increase risk taking and decrease access to support.⁵

Many Black gay men attend church knowing that homosexuality is considered a sin, and pastors may know or believe that they have gay men in their congregations. The common yet contradictory scene of gay men singing in the choir while homosexuality is denounced in the pulpit, creates an "open closet" at the center of church life.⁶ This contradiction in the church has a damaging effect on gay men's personal and sexual lives.⁷

The Black church's views on homosexuality also negatively affect the Black community at-large. These views and attitudes influence the entire congregation, increasing stigma against homosexuality in the community,⁸ and presenting potential problems for friends and family of gay men who are torn between their personal love for the men and their religious beliefs. These tensions play a role in reducing the amount of social support gay men receive from the community.

How can religion help in HIV prevention?

Within the context of the Black church, religion is an extraordinary opportunity to expose oppression and marginalization (homophobia and heterosexism) and create a framework for all people to be validated by virtue of their humanity, regardless of their sexual orientation. The Black church can also be a practical setting for health promotion interventions and can serve key roles in developing and/or delivering interventions.⁸ Using the justice and liberation themes of religion, HIV prevention messages can be framed in validating and life-affirming ways to everyone, including Black gay men. Thus, religion can encourage Black gay men and couples to engage in sexual behaviors that promote their emotional, psychological, and sexual well being, maximizing HIV prevention efforts.

What can Black gay men do?

Most Black gay men do not regularly engage in HIV risk behaviors such as having unsafe sex, but may cycle in and out of risk at different times in their lives.⁹ Similar to many people, risk for Black gay men often occurs during periods of stress and life changes—death of a family member or friend, loss of employment, relationship breakdowns, or depression.¹⁰ In times of profound crisis, spirituality and support from the church can protect Black gay men from falling into risky behaviors. Despite negative views on homosexuality, Black gay men have forged many ways to deal with the condemnation of the Black church and move in and out of these different paths.¹

Some Black gay men reject their homosexual identity and pray to God to help change them.

Some Black gay men co-exist with church doctrine. They may participate actively in the church and socialize with other gay members of the congregation, yet remain "in the closet," never publicly identifying as gay within the church.¹¹

Some Black gay men reject their religious identity, unable to accept a religion that labels them as sinners. However, to walk away from the church is to walk away from family, and the absence of religious affiliations can be a void in their lives. Many may reject religious traditions but remain deeply spiritual.

Some Black gay men are able to integrate their own identity with the teachings of the bible, developing a personal relationship with a higher power that may or may not include traditional religious institutions, but incorporate religious communion in more affirming and welcoming environments.¹² These gay men remain deeply spiritual, but seek to express their spirituality, including prayer, music and fellowship via other outlets, believing that God created them as worthy and capable of living healthy loving lives that include sexually fulfilling relationships.¹²

What can the Black church do?

HIV/AIDS has posed a significant challenge to Black churches and their congregations. Each church is different—some may be able to create change and address AIDS and homophobia and some may not be able or willing to.¹³ HIV prevention programs need to respect the philosophical differences between the church and public health and be open to negotiation.

A number of programs and organizations exist to address HIV/AIDS within the Black Church. For example, the Balm in Gilead Inc. provides support for faith-based institutions to address HIV and other health challenges.¹⁴ The Ark of Refuge is a faith-based HIV prevention program that provides HIV/AIDS education and prevention services for African Americans.¹⁵ Project Bridge is a faith-based substance abuse and HIV/AIDS prevention program for African American adolescents.¹⁶ YOUR Blessed Health (YBH) is a program designed to increase the capacity of faith-based organizations and faith leaders to prevent HIV/AIDS among African American youth in their organizations.¹⁷

In response to the homophobia of many traditional Black churches, several inclusive churches have arisen across the country. For example, the Unity Fellowship Church was founded in 1982 for openly gay and lesbian African Americans.¹⁸ The Fellowship, a coalition of Christian churches and ministries, supports mostly Black churches and faith organizations to move towards radical inclusivity of all marginalized populations.¹⁸ The Metropolitan Community Church was founded in 1968 as a Christian church for LGBT persons of all races.¹⁹

A survey of Black churches in California that excluded the most conservative churches found a range of institutions with four patterns of acceptance for homosexuality and HIV prevention: non-condemning, accepting, open and affirming, and radically inclusive. Churches classified as gay friendly and radically inclusive tended to be racially diverse.¹²

The growing disparities in HIV/AIDS and other health problems, particularly among African American and other poor racial/ethnic groups, coupled with dwindling financial resources requires even greater attention to and help from religious and faith-based organizations.²⁰

What needs to be done?

While some Black churches may continue to struggle with interpreting scripture related to same sex behavior, others have found success utilizing community based participatory research (CBPR) approaches to fully involve church leaders in the development, implementation, and evaluation of HIV intervention strategies.²¹ Community-level interventions have strong effects on normative and structural influences on HIV-risk behavior and can work across broad segments of the MSM population.²² Mobilizing Black churches against HIV/AIDS require active involvement of community members, putting them in control of the questions and issues investigated.²³ Due to the institution's elevated social standing in the lives of many Black gay men, the Black church represents a logical, yet largely untapped venue for HIV intervention programming.

HIV continues to ravage Black gay men—an already disenfranchised and highly stigmatized population. Given its mandate for love, justice and mercy, the Black church has a history of confronting injustice and oppression. Black church leadership and Black gay men must develop a strategy that values the lives of Black gay men. HIV+ and HIV- Black gay men are a vulnerable population who are entitled to compassionate and courageous support. HIV related anti-stigma efforts by church leaders, as well as the mobilization of community utilizing themes of compassion for prevention and outreach, may be effective ways for the church to use their teachings to engage with this population.

Says who?

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