



FIRST SUNDAY OF ADVENT & WORLD AIDS DAY

CULTURAL RESOURCES

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I. World AIDS Day

World AIDS Day (WAD), observed on December 1 each year, is a time for people all over the world to pause and remember the devastating affects of the HIV/AIDS pandemic. Established in 1988 by the World Health Organization (WHO), WAD's primary purpose is to raise awareness. Through this global effort, WAD calls international communities, governments, faith based organizations, churches, community agencies, national AIDS programs, and individuals to respond to one of the most pressing health issues in the world today. Many have heeded the call: by holding memorial services in honor of those who have died; sponsoring forums and educational seminars regarding aspects of the disease as well as medical advances; addressing poverty, health care, and other socioeconomic disparities; providing care for those living with HIV/AIDS; hosting prayer vigils; and mobilizing their communities in the fight against HIV/AIDS.

From 1981 (when the first case of AIDS was diagnosed) through 2007, "more than 70 million people around the world have been infected with HIV the virus that causes AIDS,

and more than 22 million have died.”¹ As of 2007, an estimated 33 million people globally were living with HIV. Over the past two decades, HIV/AIDS has become one of the most devastating pandemics in recent history. What is most distressing about this disease is that it is completely preventable through education, awareness, and a commitment to avoid high-risk behaviors.²

II. The First Sunday in Advent

By combining World AIDS Day and the First Sunday in Advent, the African American church has a unique opportunity to embody the lessons from our lectionary scriptures, which call us to love God with our whole being and to love our neighbor as ourselves. God desires to accomplish God’s will in the world through a church that is willing and ready to reach out in love to people who have been impacted by the ravishing affects of HIV/AIDS.

It is out of this very context that the African American church can be a beacon of God’s love and hope. By following the example of Christians in the early church who expressed love for one another through compassionate care, concern, and direct action, African American Christians can mirror this love toward people living with HIV/AIDS. As Joan Delapane rightly concludes, “every moment of time is an opportunity to give God glory through a loving and caring response for all creation and for each of God’s creatures.”³

As we light the first Advent candle, we celebrate with joy the promise of the coming Christ. Let us remember that Jesus is the light of the world who comes to heal our wounds and to bring new life. Let us let the light of Christ shine within us as he calls us to compassionate service in the world.

“O Come, O Come, Emmanuel”⁴

III. HIV/AIDS and the African American Church

Like many African Americans, I once believed that the only people who were infected by HIV/AIDS were gay white men, HIV/AIDS didn’t affect heterosexuals, it didn’t affect African Americans and it certainly didn’t affect people who belonged to the church. While I was shocked to learn of the staggering statistics of people from all walks of life affected by the disease, I was especially dismayed to hear the alarming rates of HIV/AIDS in the black community, particularly among African American women, children, and youth. According to the CDC, African Americans experience more illness due to HIV/AIDS, their survival rate is shorter, and they experience more deaths than any other group. In recent years, the statistics have continued to escalate. For example, as of 2005, the CDC reported (according to information from thirty-three states) that in the African American community:

*African Americans made up about 50% of the estimated 44,198 AIDS cases diagnosed in the 50 states and the District of Columbia.

*African Americans made up approximately 49% of the estimated 38,096 new HIV/AIDS diagnoses, even though they were only about 13% of the total U.S. population.

*African Americans accounted for about half of all people living with HIV/AIDS.

*African Americans were reported with AIDS more than any other racial/ethnic group.

*African American women accounted for approximately 64% of all women living with HIV/AIDS. Roughly 41% of men living with HIV/AIDS were African American.

*Approximately 63% of children under the age of 13 diagnosed with HIV/AIDS were African Americans.

*As of 2003, African American adolescents ages 13-24 accounted for 55% of all HIV infections.

*More than 50% of HIV cases among senior citizens over 55 were African American.

*AIDS was the leading form of death among African Americans, outnumbering heart disease, cancer, and homicide.

*The most common ways of contracting HIV among African American men and women are, first, through unprotected sex with someone infected with HIV and, second, by sharing injection drug works (e.g., needles or syringes) with someone who has HIV.⁵

IV. The African American Church's Response to HIV/AIDS

Given the devastating statistics related to African Americans, I began to wonder, what is the black church's response to HIV/AIDS? At the time, there were a number of African American churches and community organizations doing significant work, such as Balm in Gilead, a national organization working to educate and mobilize African American churches in response to HIV/AIDS by involving them in hands-on ministry in the black community; the AIDS Interfaith Network, a grassroots faith-based organization addressing the AIDS crises in black communities and communities of color in New Haven, Connecticut; the Minority AIDS Project: Unity Fellowship Church, Los Angeles, California, which provides culturally sensitive prevention education programs; and others that were doing similar work. Yet, my general observation and experience suggested that the church's response to HIV/AIDS was one of silence.

There was silence around the topics of sex, sexuality, and sexual orientation. It was taboo to talk about sex in the church, so we didn't; we simply said to our children, "You better not bring home a baby." There was silence about who was actually contracting the disease and how it was being spread. Since many African Americans believed that the

disease was primarily affecting the gay white community, they did not feel the need to broach the subject seriously. Consequently, the church turned a blind eye to women, children, heterosexuals, and gay members in their congregations who were also contracting the disease. And, finally, there was silence surrounding the stigma, discrimination, and suffering (often perpetuated by the church) by those living with or affected by AIDS. Thus, in my early experience, the black church embodied a culture of silence, fear, ignorance, and discrimination toward people living with HIV/AIDS.

Having grown up in the church and later accepting a call to ministry in the Baptist tradition, I often heard words of condemnation from the pulpit (in both black and white churches) regarding the perceived lifestyle of those who had been infected by HIV/AIDS. Churches frequently presented this attitude as justified because homosexuality, drug abuse, and prostitution, all of which were considered sinful in the eyes of many churches, were associated with the transmission of the disease. But, rather than speaking, as the gospel teaches us to do, words of compassion, healing, hope, and new vision for ministry among people with HIV/AIDS, the church often perpetuated a spirit of rejection, fear, misunderstanding, hatred, and condemnation. While it is true that the African American church is concerned about a number of pressing issues impacting the black community (e.g., racism, classism, unemployment, teen pregnancies, drug abuse, violence, gang activities, and poor education) and while many churches are trying to survive in the midst of these issues, in the area of addressing HIV/AIDS, the African American church still has a long way to go. I was struck by this sad reality when I heard Professor Emilie Townes, the Andrew W. Mellon Professor of African American Studies in Religion and Theology at Yale Divinity School (YDS) and an ordained American Baptist minister, speaking on a panel about her uncle, a long time member of the African American church, who died of AIDS. She noted that, prior to his death, her uncle asked her to make the funeral arrangements for him and to conduct the services because he didn't trust the church to "bury him right."⁶ Unfortunately, similar stories of churches refusing to conduct funerals and of families, friends, and even church homes alienating persons infected by HIV/AIDS are not uncommon in the black community.

As we observe World AIDS Day and celebrate this season of Advent, the African American church must reclaim its legacy of faith and action. As the focal point of social and cultural activity, the black church has historically been "the communities' protest center, the spiritual powerhouse, and the fellowship community center for radical unity, talent launching, and fund raising for survival causes."⁷ It has also been a sanctuary for healing and wholeness and a safe place for African Americans to express their deepest cares and concerns. Since African Americans have often been denied full participation in the broader society, the church has provided emotional and psychological healing for those confronted not only by the daily challenges of life, but also by the burdens of racism, oppression, disenfranchisement, and various forms of discrimination and injustice. **Although this legacy has begun to fade in recent years, the black church has historically been responsible for empowering African Americans to take an active role in transforming their personal and communal lives through self-care, community involvement, and social action.**

In the ongoing struggle to combat HIV/AIDS, the black church can no longer be silent regarding this disease. Instead, it must reclaim its legacy of faith and action and take the lead in addressing it. Furthermore, the church must embrace a sense of urgency and declare with Tony Wafford, AIDS activist and director of the Palms Residential Care Facility, that “HIV/AIDS is our current civil rights movement.”⁸ In so doing, the African American church can regain its prophetic voice and once again be the place where suffering people come to release their emotions, to struggle for justice, to find healing and wholeness, and to renew their “hopes, faith, and courage.”⁹ As people of faith, the black church community must remember that, although there is power in coming together in worship, prayer, and fellowship, they must also educate themselves about this disease and strive to eradicate it from their communities. The African American church can reclaim its legacy of faith and action and work in solidarity with others to create a world free of HIV/AIDS.

V. Some Have Begun to Address Issues Related to HIV/AIDS

Although I began this narrative by critiquing the African American church’s response to HIV/AIDS in the black community, I conclude by acknowledging that, while there is still much work to be done, a growing number of black churches have begun to educate their congregations and to implement outreach ministries for people living with AIDS. Some pastors have even encouraged their congregations to be tested for HIV by sponsoring health seminars in their churches and by being tested themselves. Churches all over the country, representing the major black denominations, are now participating in the Balm in Gilead’s Annual Black Church Week of Prayer for the Healing of AIDS, now in its twentieth year. Churches such as First Institutional Baptist Church of Phoenix, Arizona, and Mt. Aery Baptist Church of Bridgeport, Connecticut, are also sponsoring educational workshops and spearheading fundraisers to benefit various agencies that provide services for people living with AIDS.

In an effort to move beyond only prayer, reflection, fundraisers, and educational seminars, the Antioch Baptist Church of Cleveland, Ohio has conducted an AIDS ministry in the church since 1999. Named AGAPE, this ministry provides a wide range of free, faith-based services for people infected and affected by HIV/AIDS. Services include HIV antibody testing, prevention education, case management, treatment referrals, risk reduction counseling, and spirituals counseling.

Finally, I was extremely encouraged to receive an invitation from the Interdenominational Theological Center (ITC) in Atlanta, Georgia to attend a forum in March 2007 titled, “Breaking the Silence: Church Conversations about HIV/AIDS.” This historic forum represented a collaborative effort by a consortium of black theological schools, other theological institutions, and health care professionals. Faculty from various theological schools, seminary students, denominational leaders, church pastors, leaders in HIV/AIDS ministries, and persons living with HIV/AIDS as well as those affected by the disease were invited to contribute to the discussion. Although these are but a few examples, I am encouraged to see black churches beginning to respond to the HIV/AIDS crises in the black community. For I believe that when the black church community

unites in the effort to combat this disease, it can stem the tide of HIV/AIDS and pave the way forward in healing its community.

VI. Music and Poetry

When the Storms of Life are Raging (Stand by Me)

When the storms of life are raging,
stand by me (stand by me);
when the storms of life are raging,
stand by me (stand by me).
When the world is tossing me
like a ship upon the sea,
thou who rulest wind and water,
Stand by me (stand by me).

In the midst of tribulation,
stand by me (stand by me);
in the midst of tribulation,
stand by me (stand by me).
When the hosts of hell assail,
and my strength begins to fail,
thou who never lost a battle,
stand by me (stand by me).

In the midst of faults and failures,
stand by me (stand by me);
in the midst of faults and failures,
stand by me (stand by me).
When I do the best I can,
and my friends misunderstand,
thou who knowest all about me,
stand by me (stand by me).

In the midst of persecution,
stand by me (stand by me);
in the midst of persecution,
stand by me (stand by me).
When my foes in battle array
undertake to stop my way,
thou who saved Paul and Silas,
stand by me (stand by me).¹⁰

The poem, “Questions, Questions, Questions” by Elsie Cofield addresses the devastation that AIDS can cause but the writers leaves life ultimately up to God.

Questions, Questions, Questions

Oh Lord I ask you, is this fair?
I'm looking at him lying there.
10 years old, so very young,
Tales untold, songs unsung.
Mother is lying sick in a hospital room
Little twin sister's heart is filled with gloom.
Why so much suffering all these years,
Why does grandma live with so many fears?
Why am I chosen to give the family this news?
Lord, please help me, give me some clues.
Black children are dying everywhere
Lord, I ask you, is this fair?
Why AIDS and drugs on every street
Heartache and crying from all I meet?
Youth are looking worried, no eyes aflame
No planning of goals or dreams of fame.
No hope for tomorrow, short lives they see
Lord, this doesn't seem fair to me!
Who am I to complain, when I don't understand?
By faith I know it's all in your hand.¹¹

I Want Jesus to Walk with Me.

Walk with me Lord,
Walk with me.
Walk with me Lord, walk with me.
All along my pilgrim journey,
I want Jesus to walk with me.

You walked with my mother,
Walk with me.
You walked with my mother,
Walk with me.
All along my pilgrim journey,
I want Jesus to walk with me.

When I'm sick Lord,
Walk with me.
When I'm sick Lord,
Walk with me.
All along my pilgrim journey,
I want Jesus to walk with me.¹²

VII. National Agencies/Services

Black AIDS Institute
1833 W. Eighth St. #200

Black Leadership Commission on AIDS
105 E. 22nd St. #711

Los Angeles, CA 90057
(213) 353-3610
www.BlackAIDS.org

New York, NY 10010
(212) 614-0023
www.blca.org

Balm in Gilead
701 East Franklin Street
Suite 1000
Richmond, VA 23219
(804) 644-BALM (2256)
(804) 644-2257 (Fax)
(888) 225-6243 (Toll Free)
info@balmingilead.org
www.balmingilead.org

Sister Connect (hotline for women)
(800) 747-1108

Centers for Disease Control and
Prevention (CDC)
1600 Clifton Road
Atlanta, GA 30333
(800) CDC-INFO
(800) 232-4636 TTY
(888) 232-6348 - 24 Hours.
Every day online at cdcinfo@cdc.gov

VIII. Advent and HIV/AIDS Devotional Calendar

“Keep the Promise – Advent in a Time of AIDS” (Ecumenical Advocacy Alliance)

This devotional resource with daily reflections, beginning on World AIDS Day (December 1) and ending on Christmas, features 37 reflections by Christian leaders worldwide who are actively involved (at all levels) in responding to the HIV/AIDS pandemic. Incorporating scriptural references, beautiful pictures, a devotional reading, and brief prayers, this resource can be a helpful tool for churches and faith-based organizations to “reflect with Christians from around the world, on the pain, hope and love made starkly visible in the HIV pandemic.” For more information on the calendar or to download a free copy visit Ecumenical Advocacy Alliance online location: <http://www.e-alliance.ch/en/s/hiv aids/keep-the-promise/advent>.¹³

Advent Benediction

Leader: Go! Be the Living Word in a world awaiting the Christ.

People: We will pray most earnestly that we may see God face to face.

Leader: I pray that God restores whatever is lacking in our faith as we wait.

People: Now, may our God and Sovereign direct our ways this week.

Leader: And may the empowering grace of Jesus Christ and the glorious power of the Holy Spirit make us increase and abound in love for one another and for all the people of God, so that at the Advent we will be blameless in our hearts by our holy living. Go in grace and shalom!

People: **And it is so! Glory, hallelujah!**¹⁴

Notes

1. Ott, Kate and Debra Haffner. The Age of AIDS: A Guide for Faith Based Communities. Religious Institute/Christian Community, 2007. p. 2. Online location: <http://www.religioustheology.org/resources/study-guides> accessed 25 June 2009
2. Joint United Nations Programme on HIV/AIDS (UNAIDS). Report on the Global AIDS Epidemic: Executive Summary. Geneva, Switzerland: UNAIDS, 2008. p.7. Online location: http://data.unaids.org/pub/GlobalReport/2008/JC1511_GR08_ExecutiveSummary_en.pdf accessed 25 June 2009; See also McMickle, Marvin A. A Time to Speak: How Black Pastors Can Respond to the HIV/AIDS Pandemic. Cleveland, OH: Pilgrim, 2008. p. xiii; Weatherford, Ronald J. and Carole B. Weatherford. Somebody's Knocking at Your Door: AIDS And the African-American Church. Binghamton, NY: Haworth Pastoral, 1999; Steele, Pernessa C. "The Church's Role in HIV Prevention." Online location: http://www.rcrc.org/programs/blackchurch_worldAIDSday.cfm accessed 25 June 2009; Ott, Kate and Debra Haffner. The Age of AIDS: A Guide for Faith Based Communities. p. 2.
3. Delaplane, Joan. "Let's Talk about Time." Preaching and Worshiping in Advent, Christmas, And Epiphany. Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 2005. p. 76.
4. "O Come, O Come, Emmanuel." African American Heritage Hymnal. Chicago, IL: GIA Publications, 2001. #188
5. Find publications at U.S. Center for Disease Control and Prevention: "Fact Sheet: HIV/AIDS among African Americans." Online location: <http://www.cdc.gov/hiv/topics/aa/resources/factsheets/print/aa.htm> accessed 25 June 2009; "HIV/AIDS and African Americans." Online location: <http://www.cdc.gov/hiv/topics/aa> accessed 25 June 2009; "Specific Populations. How are they Affected?" Online location: <http://www.cdc.gov/hiv/resources/reports/hiv3rddecade/chapter4.htm> accessed 25 June 2009
6. Presentation on "HIV/AIDS Work of African Women in Faith Communities," panel discussion during the Woman's Initiative Consultation on Gender, Faith, and Responses to HIV/AIDS in Africa, Yale University Divinity School, February 28-March 3, 2002. At the time of the conference, Professor Townes was the Carolyn Williams Beard Professor of Christian Ethics at Union Theological Seminary in New York.
7. Excerpts from this reflection were first presented at the Woman's Initiative Consultation on Gender, Faith, and Responses to HIV/AIDS in Africa, Yale University Divinity School, February 28-March 3, 2002, and later during the conference sponsored by the Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians titled, "Sex, Stigma, and HIV/AIDS: African Women Challenging Religion, Culture, and Social Practices," Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, August 4-8, 2002. An extended article titled "HIV/AIDS: A Challenge for Christian Education in the African American Experience," will also appear in the forthcoming Things to Admire: A History of the Present Illness. Ed. Carol Duh.
8. Smith, Susan. "Speak Now, Or. . . ." Tony Wafford. Trumpet. Feb 2007: 39
9. Stokes, Olivia Pearl. "Black Theology: A Challenge to Religious Education." Religious Education and Theology. Ed. Norma H. Thompson. Birmingham, AL.:

Religious Education, 1982. p. 85.

10. Tindley, Charles Albert. "Stand by Me."

11. "Questions, Questions, Questions." Written by Elsie Cofield when a ten-year-old boy died of AIDS. Cofield is the Founder of the AIDS Interfaith Network in New Haven, Connecticut. Copyright, 2000 by Elsie W. Cofield. Used by permission.

12. "I Want Jesus to Walk with Me." Spiritual. Online location:

http://www.negrospirituals.com/news-song/i_want_jesus_to_walk_with_me.htm

accessed 25 June 2009

13. Some of the contributors to the calendar include Archbishop Emeritus Desmond Tutu, Rick and Kay Warren, Rev. Canon Gideon Byamugisha, Rev. Dr. Walter Altmann, Dr. Musimbi Kanyoro, Sister Maria Cimperman, Erik Sawyer, and Pastor Patricia Sawo. The Ecumenical Advocacy Alliance is an international network of over 100 churches and Christian organizations committed to joint advocacy on HIV and AIDS as well as on global trade. For more information on this organization, see online location:

<http://www.e-alliance.ch> accessed 25 June 2009.

14. Hollies, Linda H. Trumpet in Zion: Worship Resources, Year C. Cleveland, OH: Pilgrim, 2003. p. 5.