

Clergy can fight HIV on faith-friendly terms

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Pastors march in Philadelphia to help stop the spread of HIV. Pastors say they can reinforce public health messages about testing and social justice that are faith-friendly. Credit: Bates Photography Inc

The public health community has long struggled with how best to reduce HIV infection rates among black Americans, which is seven times that of whites. In a new paper in the journal *PLoS ONE*, a team of physicians and public health researchers report that African-American clergy say they are ready to join the fight against the disease by focusing on HIV testing, treatment, and social justice, a strategy that is compatible with religious teaching.

"We in [public health](#) have done a poor job of engaging African-American community leaders and particularly black clergy members in HIV prevention," said Amy Nunn, lead author of the study and assistant professor of medicine in the Warren Alpert Medical School of Brown

University. "There is a common misperception that African American churches are unwilling to address the [AIDS epidemic](#). This paper highlights some of the historical barriers to effectively engaging African American clergy in HIV prevention and provides recommendations from clergy for how to move forward."

The paper analyzes and distills dozens of interviews and focus group data among 38 black pastors and imams in Philadelphia, where [racial disparities](#) in HIV infection are especially stark. Seven in 10 new infections in the city are among black residents. With uniquely deep influence in their communities, nearly all of the 27 male and 11 female clergy said they could and would preach and promote HIV testing and treatment.

That message, delivered by clergy or other influential figures, would provide a needed complement to decades of public health efforts that have emphasized risk behaviors, Nunn said. Research published and widely reported last year, for example, suggests that testing and then maintaining people on treatment could dramatically reduce new infections because treatment can give people a 96-percent lower chance of transmitting HIV.

"For decades, we've focused many HIV prevention efforts on reducing risky behavior," said Nunn, who is also based at The Miriam Hospital. "Focusing on HIV testing and treatment should be the backbone of HIV prevention strategies and efforts to reduce racial disparities in HIV infection. Making HIV testing routine is the gateway to getting more individuals on treatment. African American clergy have an important role to play in routinizing HIV testing."

The barriers clergy members face

Many religious leaders acknowledged that they've struggled with how

best to combat the epidemic, particularly with challenges related to discussing human sexuality in church or mosque, according to the analysis in the paper.

"One time my pastor spoke to young people about sex, mentioning using protection," the paper quotes a clergy member as saying in one example. "I was sitting in the clergy row; you could feel the heat! I was surprised he said that. Comments from the clergy highlighted they were opposed to that. It's a tightrope walk."

Many clergy members also said they face significant barriers to preaching about [risk behaviors](#) without still emphasizing abstinence.

"It's my duty as a preacher to tell people to abstain," one pastor told the research team, "but if they're still having sex and they're getting HIV, there has to be another way to handle this."

What clergy can do

Many clergy members suggested couching the HIV/AIDS epidemic in [social justice](#) rather than behavioral terms, Nunn said. They also recommended focusing on HIV testing as an important means to help stem the spread of the disease and reduce the stigma.

"We need to standardize testing," one pastor told the researchers. "One thing that we could do immediately is to encourage our congregations — everybody — to get tested. ... We're not dealing with risk factors. And we're all going to get tested once a year. That's the one thing that we could do that doesn't get into our doctrine about sexuality."

In general, many of the religious leaders said they could encourage discussion of HIV not only in main worship services, but also in ministries and community outreach activities.

The streets of Philadelphia

Nunn and collaborators have already begun such work in the city. In 2010, for example, she worked with prominent pastors, local media companies and Mayor Nutter's office of faith-based initiatives to promote and destigmatize HIV testing across the city. This year, in partnership with dozens of churches and other community leaders, she will oversee an HIV prevention campaign that includes door-to-door testing in an entire zip code of Philadelphia with high infection rates.

"Religious leaders are, in fact, willing to engage in dialogue and HIV prevention if you do it in a culturally appropriate and faith-friendly way," Nunn said. "This means that HIV prevention should be couched in social justice and public health rather than in exclusively behavioral terms. HIV testing should be the backbone of any strategy to engage African American clergy in HIV prevention."

Provided by Brown University

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