



## **HIV in the Context of the African American Church**

***Pernesssa C. Seele-Founder/CEO***

***Rev. Makeba D'Abreu- National Director, HIV Programs-Domestic***

# Our Mission



- **The Balm In Gilead is a not-for-profit, not governmental organization whose mission is to improve the health status of people of the African Diaspora by building the capacity of faith communities to address life-threatening diseases, especially HIV/AIDS.**

# Five Core Elements

- Create Awareness
- Engagement
- Capacity Development
- Community Mobilization
- Advocacy



# Programs



- **Black Church Week of Prayer for the Healing of AIDS**
- ***Our Church Lights the Way* Testing Campaign**
- **African American Denominational Leadership Health Initiative**
- **Black Church Institute for HIV and other Health Disparities**
- **Domestic Cervical Cancer Program**
- **National Training Center for Hepatitis C**

What Issues Does the Balm In  
Gilead See In the Black Church?

- Awareness of HIV is both remote and imminent
- “Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell” Phenomenon
- HIV brings up embarrassing issue for the church
- HIV raises internal conflicts (theology, morality, compassion)
- The first impressions about HIV are now the deadliest
- The “Isms” of society are pervasive in the church, causing paresis
- “Us” and “Them” is destructive
- People delineate “victims” and “sinners”

- Avoidance
- Not knowing a starting point
- Ignorance
- Stigma
- Hurt on both sides
- People being ostracized
- Small mindedness
- Fear on both sides
- Isolation
- Criticism

What do we know about the African  
American Church?





- **Throughout all Black communities worldwide, churches are considered by the people to be the most important institution in the community**
- **Churches are strategically positioned to play a major role in the fight against HIV.**

- **Churches are the places where the community sets and enforces social norms.**
- **As such, Churches represent the ideal place for the dissemination of HIV information and services.**





With an established social system and network, the faith community is unparalleled in its ability to reach the masses of people across gender and age groups to address the crisis of HIV/AIDS

- The faith and church were at the heart of the Civil Rights Movement
- Great expectation by our people and society for the church to mobilize in the same way



# Five Core Elements

- Create Awareness
- Engagement
- Capacity Development
- Community Mobilization
- Advocacy



# Unique Features of the Week of Prayer

- It is the largest AIDS awareness program in the United States targeting African American faith communities.
- It assists Black churches to become community centers for AIDS education, prevention and compassion.
- It stimulates year-round AIDS prevention, testing and services in congregations and communities.
- It has been the entry point of thousands of Black churches across the US to become AIDS service providers in their communities.

# What has the Balm In Gilead Learned In 18 Years

- The Black Church is not homogeneous
- There are churches and religious leader who were in the fore in the early stages of the epidemic
- Diplomacy
- The Black church has high “Jesusology”
- Focus on compassionate leadership, using Jesus as model
- Realities of mobilization of the Civil Rights Movement
- Use noted and accepted leaders (gatekeepers)
- Directly engaged close to 20,000 of the recorded 85,000 Black churches in the US

# In a recent survey

- Approximately 80% of pastors participating in the Week of Prayer addressed HIV/AIDS from the pulpit. However, only 13% are involved in HIV education and prevention and only 7% conduct testing.



# Barriers to testing

- Lack of resources (i.e. funds, appropriate literature)
- Lack of knowledge
- Perceived lack of need
- Perceived lack of leadership/congregational support
- Insufficient personnel
- Inadequate facilities
- Administrative challenges
- Insufficient community partnerships
- Concerns for confidentiality
- Theological Ramifications (or need for justification)

# Challenges

- Bombarding the church with responsibilities
- Criticism of the Black church and leaders
- Dispelling the “one size fits all”
- Providing a context for faith leaders to reconstruct theological framework
  - To do HIV ministry
  - Create messages that target behavior change that decrease risk
- Dealing with destructive assumptions
- Raising awareness concerning the need for advocacy
  - Insurance companies supporting routine testing
  - Access to care

- Decreasing the risk of HIV testing at churches replacing routine medical check ups
- Encouraging people to know their serostatus
- Getting positives into care
- Providing specialized training on pastoral counseling for positives
- Addressing domestic violence, drug abuse, sex
- Confidentiality
- Developing comprehensive Drug Prevention strategies
- Addressing Drug Abuse in all age groups

- Addressing the need to find someone/something to blame
- Challenging “Don’t ask, don’t tell”
- Addressing “Isms” in church
- Honoring the need to maintain Christian identity
  - Church leaders fear being asked to compromise morality and theology
- Understanding HIV “jargon”
  - Using “jargon” consistently

- Agreeing on a common ground and redefining terminology for use in the sacred setting
- Distrusting needle exchange: support the pouring of drugs into our community
- Sleeping with the enemy
  - World and church in agreement or conflict
  - “In world not of it”
- Lock out!/Shut down by Black faith community
- Rethinking theological constructs
- Using science to explain the role of faith
  - Documenting Faith Behavioral Models
- Acknowledging that people infected and affected by HIV are in the church

# The Balm In Gilead, Inc.

Rev. Makeba D'Abreu

Director, HIV Programs - Domestic

701 East Franklin Street

Richmond, VA 23219

Toll Free: 888 225 6243

Richmond Office: 804 644 BALM (2256)

Fax: 804 644 225

[mdabreu@balmingilead.org](mailto:mdabreu@balmingilead.org)