

# NAACP urges black churches to address AIDS epidemic

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c. 2012 Religion News Service (RNS) HIV primarily affects white gay men. You can contract HIV by getting tested for the virus that causes AIDS. Active church members aren't at risk for HIV.

When NAACP researchers spent a year talking with black faith leaders in 11 cities, they found myths like these continue to circulate among their pews and pulpits. Those findings led the nation's oldest civil rights organization to mount a campaign calling on black churches to speak out about the disease that disproportionately affects African-Americans.

In "The Black Church & HIV: The Social Justice Imperative," a manual released Monday (July 9), the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People acknowledges that pastors may have reservations about addressing AIDS from the pulpit.

"However, this issue is too great to ignore," reads a warning in a 24-page "pastoral brief" that accompanies the manual.

"The only way for us to help our congregations is to understand all aspects of HIV, so that we can help our community rebound from the impact of this epidemic."

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention predicts that one in 16 black men and one in 32 black women will be infected by HIV.

The pastoral brief, sprinkled with Bible verses, includes a "modern-day parable" of a minister who tried to "pray the gay" out of a heterosexual man after he received his HIV diagnosis. It later quotes a Houston minister who feared being in the same room with relatives with HIV/AIDS.

The NAACP recommends partnering with health organizations on HIV/AIDS prevention and treatment. The group compares the church's need to address HIV to Jesus' ministry healing the sick and advocating for the oppressed.

"As we make efforts to address the HIV crisis, the Black Church should not be a place where people experience HIV stigma and discrimination, but rather a place of healing, support, and acceptance," the brief says.

The 66-page manual asks churches to dispel HIV myths and spread the truth. For instance, most black women get HIV through heterosexual sex, and there is no risk for transmission of HIV through testing.

"Regardless of our church activity or engagement, as long as we are having unprotected sex or sharing needles in our communities, we are at risk for contracting HIV," the manual notes.

The NAACP urges churches to be a "safe space" for HIV prevention and treatment, even if they have to start small: "We understand that incorporating HIV activism into a spiritual setting may be perceived as a difficult process, but it is possible to begin with small steps even in the most conservative environments."