

The New Black opens new dialogue about LGBT and religion in black community

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(RNS) Is gay marriage a civil right like black equality? Or is it a sin African Americans should condemn?

That's the question at the heart of *The New Black*, a documentary by filmmaker Yoruba Richen that examines African-American attitudes toward LGBT people leading up to Maryland's public referendum on gay marriage in 2012.

The film is now enjoying a new life as part of an initiative to get students at historically black colleges and universities to talk about a longtime taboo in the African-American community—sexual identity and the church.

The initiative is a project of the Human Rights Campaign, an advocate of LGBT equality, and Promised Land Films, the producers of the film. HRC designated \$4,000 in grants to bring *The New Black* to historically black college and universities. To date it has been shown at about a half-dozen schools, including Spelman College, Howard University, and Tennessee State University. Chris Smith, an outreach coordinator for HRC, said the grant money covers the screenings and follow-up discussions.

"The overarching goal is to create the opportunity to begin a dialogue," Smith said. "We want them to create greater safety and inclusion on HBCUs" and their communities.

Filmed during the 2012 general election, the documentary features those who work for equality, such as Morgan State graduate Samantha Master, and those who opposed it, such as Derek McCoy, president of the Maryland Family Alliance.

The film also shows how a small group of African-American pastors spoke out in favor of gay rights and were instrumental in passing the Maryland law. Maryland was

the first state to approve gay marriage by popular vote, and there are now 37 states that have legalized gay marriage.

This week's screening at Morgan State was followed by a discussion led by Jamie Washington, a Baltimore-based pastor who works for LGBT rights.

Anika Simpson, an associate professor of philosophy, said the film is a good dialogue starter because it humanizes people on both sides of the debate.

"It is one thing when you talk about an issue," Simpson said. "But when you meet the film's characters and the people they are in love with, and you see African-American pastors saying we can embrace a same-gender-loving person, it is very powerful so you can open your mind and think a little bit differently than you have."

The black church has long been uncomfortable with issues around sexuality, said Kelly Brown Douglas, a professor of religion at Goucher College and author of *Sexuality and the Black Church: A Womanist Perspective*.

Douglas ties those attitudes to two narratives she traces to the 1800s. The first is the myth of the "oversexuality" of black people, and the second is a Christian attitude, born of the Great Revival, that anything having to do with the body is sinful.

"So you get this reluctance to speak about issues of sexuality and you get this rigid line about LGBTQ sexuality," Douglas said. "If it is discussed at all, it is discussed as a sin. That narrative is very strong. In the main it is not a welcoming environment, not just of LGBTQ people but all matters of sexuality."

But that may be changing, Douglas said, and she credits screenings of films such as *The New Black* and other initiatives in the African-American community with some of the change.

But there is still significant opposition to LGBT rights among African-American Christians. A 2013 Pew Forum poll found that only 41 percent of black Protestants supported gay marriage, compared with 60 percent of white Protestants.

Bill Owens, president of the Coalition of African American Pastors, said the coalition's 7,000 members would continue to speak out against LGBT equality, especially in churches.

“It is destroying the family,” he said of the push for LGBT rights. “It is against everything the black church has stood for.”

Brian Stewart, a 21-year-old Morgan State senior who is gay and no longer religious, said the film shows that members of the African-American community must bring “their whole selves” to the discussion of LGBT rights.

“We need to make sure religion shows up in the room,” he said after the Morgan State screening. “It is really important to bring that if we want inclusion across the board.”