Faith-Based
BLACK HIV/AIDS
Awareness & Prevention Guide

A Resource from the NBA Activism & Advocacy Peer Learning & Wellness Group
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About the Authors

This guide was created by the National Benevolent Association Activism & Advocacy Peer Learning & Wellness Group, which convened from 2018–2020. NBA Peer Learning & Wellness Groups engage leaders in peer-to-peer learning, spiritual renewal, justice, and wellness.

Part One

The Issues
According to Red Elephant AIDS Awareness and Prevention (REAAP), “HIV/AIDS tends to be one of the many ‘elephants in the room’ when intersected with Black communities and faith-based institutions. HIV/AIDS is a well-known, yet not properly understood or dealt with amongst Black faith-based communities, and many other communities at any intersection of identity. Misconceptions, myths, fears, and stigmas can plague and prevent necessary conversations around health, care, and pastoral presence within our churches, ministries, and locales. Breaking the silence around this taboo topic, providing accurate information, and safe spaces of discourse around HIV and AIDS in the Black community is an attainable eschatological hope.  

For many, the diagnosis of HIV/AIDS has been historically, and is currently, relegated to the gay community. What was historically coined as GRID (Gay Related Immune Disease) has professionally and scientifically become a major public health crisis for all genders, sexualities, and identities. HIV/AIDS has no cure or vaccine, and there is insufficient funding for public health programs. Additionally, taboo stances drenched in myths plague our religious communities.  

Yet, with the help of you, and people like you, we can end these stigmas, ideological barriers, and discrimination. You can shift the mindsets of your neighbors through education. You can educate yourself, your church, your ministry, and or community. You can engage in whole pastoral care for those infected with HIV/AIDS without fear and include everyone in your ministry without prejudice. It takes one step, one move towards inclusion (regardless of status), to create a wholeness within our fragmented spaces.  

HIV/AIDS is not a gay problem nor a straight problem. It's not a white problem or a Black problem. It is a human pandemic that infects thousands every year and disproportionately affects the Black community. So, through this literature, we hope to provide you with a brushstroke of ideas, insights, and clarity so that you can know how to include, affirm, and pastorally care for those within your congregation and community who have or don’t have HIV/AIDS. Allies or those who have tested positive can worship together, volunteer without discrimination, participate in the fullness of ministries without prejudice or misguided information. This literature can be the one step towards getting the necessary conversations started within our ministries so that we can save lives, affirm persons, and provide the best pastoral care without stigma or prejudice.  

By Rev. Whittney Ijanaten
In 1986, the World Health Organization declared that

“People cannot achieve their fullest health potential unless they are able to take control of those things which determine their health.”

Thirty-four years later, this could not be truer. Many operate out of a notion that organizing for justice only involves issues such as race, violence, economic inequity, housing, or education. However, this myopic view of justice neglects the truth that justice includes any issue that impacts the human rights of all people. This includes organizing around issues of health.

Now more than ever, as the Black community grapples with so many issues that affect our ability to live to our fullest potential as humans, we must do our part to organize around policies that impact our physical health, which includes HIV/AIDS. Organizing is a tool used to leverage both personal and financial power to eradicate identified issues that negatively impact the quality of life for a group of people.

Beyond basic access to healthcare, organizing around HIV/AIDS means to put it at the top of the public health agenda as a real priority. This means fighting for funding, for research and programs that aid in creating avenues for a better quality of life for anyone living with HIV/AIDS. It’s our job to hold elected and appointed officials accountable for how they represent the entirety of their constituency. This includes anyone living with HIV or AIDS.

By Rev. Angéle Saunders Johnson
HIV, or human immunodeficiency virus, is a disease that can be transmitted through blood and/or sexual contact. HIV attacks the body’s immune system. Currently, there is no effective cure for HIV, therefore those who are diagnosed with it, will have it for life. However, the virus is treatable with medicine.

AIDS, or acquired immunodeficiency syndrome is a late stage of HIV. HIV progresses to AIDS when a person’s immune system has become severely damaged due to the virus. While treatment for the disease is possible at this stage as well, it is significantly more difficult for the body’s immune system to recover.

A person can only be diagnosed for HIV/AIDS after getting tested. A lack of widespread HIV testing in communities can lead to increased spread of the disease.

Below are statistics that illustrate how Black communities and other communities of color are disproportionately affected by this disease. A lack of access to healthcare, understanding of the disease and transparency about the disease is affecting these communities negatively. These statistics comes from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, HIV.gov, and Gallup.

In 2018, the infection rates by race were...

- 5.2% whites
- 19.3% multiple races
- 22.4% Latinos
- 45.4% Black

Black men are diagnosed with HIV at a rate of 72.4 per 100k, white men are diagnosed at a rate of 8.9 per 100k

AN ESTIMATED
36,400
NEW HIV INFECTIONS occurred in the United States in 2018.
GAY AND BISEXUAL
Black men make up 61% of all Black infections

Rate of infections are 5 TIMES HIGHER for males compared to females, 22.1 (males) vs. 4.8 (females) per 100k annually

GAY AND BISEXUAL Black men are over 8x more likely to become infected with HIV annually than gay white men

Of all diagnoses in the Black community, 75 PERCENT ARE MEN and 25 PERCENT ARE WOMEN

If current rates persist, 1 in 2 BLACK GAY AND BISEXUAL MEN may be diagnosed with HIV in their lifetime

In 2018, there were an estimated 328,600 Black men living with HIV. Of those, only 84.3% have been diagnosed.
Part Two

Your Role

You can help your community by:

- Offering spiritual care to those affected
- Preaching about this topic
- Providing education and resources
1. Offer Spiritual Care

A Ritual of Healing, Hope, and Blessing for Those Who Have Tested Positive for HIV*

**The Preparation**

Leading up to the ritual, ask the participant to do several tasks.

1. **Write yourself a letter**, as if you are writing it to a friend who had just received the news of their own HIV positive status.

2. **Collect photos of yourself** to be placed upon the altar.

3. **Bring a copy of the information you received from the doctor** regarding the HIV status.

4. **Think of food and drink that brings you comfort.** Tell the pastor/leader those dishes.

**The Ritual**

The Ritual is broken into three parts: **remembrance**, **letting go**, and **re-connection**. Each section is meant to help guide the Beloved away from shame, loneliness, and guide them towards love, connection, and community. This service can be done with one person surrounded by a group of supportive loved ones or can be done with multiple people seeking healing, hope, and blessings.

**Opening**

*The individual(s) the community is supporting comes forward and light a candle while the Leader prays:*

Great God of Love, we come together tonight to give space for all of the emotions, feelings, anger, heartache, and grief, that might be swirling inside your Beloved child, [Say their name]. A positive HIV status can carry with it shame, disconnection and isolation.

Remind us there is nothing that can separate us from your love, no status that makes us untouchable, unloveable, or unworthy in your eyes. We come to be re-connected to you, to each other, and to ourselves. May it be so. This we pray in all your many names. Amen.
**Litany of Remembrance**

*Then the Leader says:*

It can be easy to forget who we are, easy to forget the beauty, possibility, and hope that is fashioned into our very bodies. Look now on your memories, remember who you are, and remember the beauty that exists within you regardless of your status. When and if you are able, please read the letter you have written to yourself.

*Allow for silence*

**Leader:** Will you join me in the Litany of Remembrance?

**Leader:** In the rising of the sun and its going down,

**Beloved One:** I remember myself

**Leader:** At the blowing of the wind and in the chill of Winter,

**Beloved One:** I remember myself

**Leader:** At the opening of buds and in the rebirth of Spring,

**Beloved One:** I remember myself.

**Leader:** At the blueness of the skies and in the warmth of Summer,

**Beloved One:** I remember myself.

**Leader:** At the rustling leaves and the beauty of Autumn,

**Beloved One:** I remember myself.

**Leader:** At the beginning of the year and when it ends,

**Beloved One:** I remember myself.

**Leader:** Regardless of your health status, your status as Beloved will always be.

**Beloved One:** I remember myself.

**Litany of Letting Go**

Beloved One, remember back to those first moments after hearing about your HIV status. Remember all of the feelings, emotions, confusion, numbness, and grief you felt and perhaps are still feeling. This status is a part of who you are and yet it is not the whole. You are not your status.

*Allow for silence*

Just as the Spirit of the Lord rushes into the body, igniting new life when you are ready, take the symbol you have chosen to represent that first status hearing, place it into the fire, and let the stories you told about yourself be carried away in the smoke.

*Allow for silence*

**Litany of Re-Connection**

We are a people of connection, a people created to be in community with one another. Beloved One, there is nothing you could do, no status you could have that would separate you from our love. If any action on our part has caused you to feel disconnected, we apologize for the impact of our ignorance. We promise to grow alongside you, to educate ourselves about HIV/AIDS, to believe and trust that you know what is best for your body, to examine our own embedded stigmas, and to advocate for healthy sexuality conversations within our churches and healthy sexuality practices within our communities.

Just as Christ shared food and drink with those he loved, let us re-connect with one another sharing in this food, especially this food and drink that brings you comfort. Let us lovingly meet one another at the table, where all are welcome.

Share in a meal together and join in celebration that love has bound us to one another.

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**Footnote:** Adapted from Postcolonial African Practical Theology: Rituals of Remembrance, Cleansing, Healing, and Re-Connection by Emmanuel Yartekwei Amugi Lartey, A Ritual of Healing, Hope, and Blessing For Pregnancy after Loss by the Rev. Danâæ Ashley, and from the Reform Jewish Prayer Book.
2. Preach

There are foundational ways our tradition thinks about God. These foundations create barriers in the church for addressing the disparity of HIV/AIDS in Black bodies. We must note as a movement that now that fewer white males are dying, the white gay community is impacted significantly less, therefore, resources and urgency have decreased. Clearly, this is result of race and caste in our country. It is important to note this cultural shift as we attend to theological questions. Has the congregation had a liberate, biblically based conversation on sex and sexuality? Example: Sexuality and our Faith

In preparing sermons for a worship service lifting up the HIV/AIDS movement that needs more voices to join in, consider these questions and assumptions that are likely on the hearts and minds of the gathered. These are questions and topics that need to be addressed in a sermon or teaching plan to prepare the congregation to truly and deeply engage in this work.

Sample Series Framework/Name:
Theological Diseases
In Soteriology, Christology, Ecclesiology, where do you see infection in these areas of our theology?
Suggested Scripture: The Gospel of John

Questions/assumptions you may hear as you begin to talk about HIV/AIDS:

1. Why are we talking about this at church, we need to focus on saving souls?

2. Don’t people who have HIV/AIDS deserve the consequences of their ‘sin’?

By Rev. Dr. Dietra Wise Baker

Question One: Why are we talking about this at church, we need to focus on saving souls?

Rebuttal Question: What is a Church if it just saves soul and not the body? How can we save souls and not save lives?

Text: John 3 (Jesus and Nicodemeus)

Review: Lewa Youth Clip (48-52 min)

Source: Lewa Farable: A St. Louis Womanist Gathering

Note: Jesus invites Nicodemeus to be born again, many in our congregations will need to wrestle with our commitment and energies directed on future state of being, while neglecting communities and a people living with HIV/AIDS hellish present.

Question Two: Don’t people who have HIV/AIDS deserve the consequences of their ‘sin’?

Rebuttal Question: Does anyone deserve the consequences of their sin?

Text: John 8 (The Woman caught in the act of adultery)

Note: Consider that only the woman was brought to be stoned for being caught in the act adultery. It’s important to lift up structural sins like racism and access to healthcare as well as how dehumanization and stigma effect self-esteem and the ability to make wise choices in sexual health. Our tendency is to view sin as individualistic when it often has communal implications. Jesus points to this when he says, “Let you who have not sinned cast the first stone.” Try not hear ‘you’ as each individual in the crowd but as the community that has brought this woman to Jesus for punishment.
3. Education and Resources

Here are some ideas on how you can participate in education and provide resources to your community:

1. Read blogs, articles, and books on the Black HIV/AIDS crisis.
2. Listen to Black voices who have been affected by HIV/AIDS. Watch their videos, listen to their music, see their art.
3. Examine your own habits and beliefs. What can you do dispel myths and break the stigma, both internally and in your community?
4. Take positive action in your community. Form a team and go on an AIDS walk/run. Normalize testing by getting tested yourself. Consider offering a testing clinic at your church or community center. Host a group to watch a documentary, read a book, or listen to a podcast.
5. Use social media to share information and resources. Follow impactful organizations and nationwide or government entities who provide helpful content.
6. Donate to an impactful organization. Create a fund to help those in need access testing.
The mission, duty and purpose of Red Elephant AIDS Awareness and Prevention (REAAP) is to engage and mobilize Black leaders, faith-based institutions and community members in an effort to publicly confront and end HIV/AIDS related stigma and silence in the Black community through social awareness, advocacy, education, mentorship and leader development.

REAAP is a nonprofit organization that raises awareness about the impact that HIV/AIDS has on the Black and Faith Based communities. REAAP promotes the advancement of comprehensive HIV prevention, care, support services and programs that address HIV/AIDS related stigma, silence and discrimination in the Black community.

Founded by Eric LeSure, REAAP is a Disciples-affiliated 501(c)3 nonprofit organization. LeSure attended the National Benevolent Association’s SENT Seminar in 2019 and participated in the 2018–2020 NBA Advocacy & Activism Peer Learning and Wellness Group whose combined efforts created this guide.

Contact REAAP

Web: www.reaap.org
Email: info@reaap.org
Address: PO Box 26548, Indianapolis, IN 46226
Part Three

Additional Resources
Mental Health & Self Care Resources
- HIV/AIDS Allied Therapists
- LGBTQ Allied Therapists
- Self Care in the Christian Lectionary
- 7 Bible Passages to Remind You God Loves You & Wants You to Take Care of Yourself

Audio/Video Resources
- Mary Bowman “Dandelion”
- Mary Bowman “I Know What HIV Looks Like”
- HIV Podcasts
- 11 ideas for ending HIV/AIDS
- “Why Us? Left Behind and Dying” documentary

Nationwide and Governmental Resources
- Black AIDS Institute
- Black AIDS Institute: Brown Bag Lunch webinar series
- HIV.gov from the Department of Health & Human Services
  - Testing and services locator
  - Access to PrEP, a preventative pre-exposure medication, for people without health insurance
- The Centers for Disease Control & Prevention (CDC)
- AIDS Healthcare Foundation

Books/Articles
- On the Battlefield: The Black Church, Public Health, and the Fight against HIV among African American Gay and Bisexual Men
- AIDS, Sexuality, and the Black Church: Making the Wounded Whole book by Angelique Harris
- Postcolonial African Practical Theology: Rituals of Remembrance, Cleansing, Healing, and Re-Connection article in the Journal of Pastoral Theology, 21:2, by Emmanuel Yartekwei Amgui Larney

Social Media
- Red Elephant AIDS Awareness & Prevention
  - Instagram
  - Facebook
- Rev. Rae Lewis Thorton, AIDS Activist
  - Instagram
  - Twitter
  - Facebook
- HIV Prevention for Women
  - Instagram
- Black AIDS Institute @blackaids
- HIV.gov @hivgov
- CDC @starttalkinghiv and @cdchiv
- AIDS Healthcare Foundation @aidshealthcare
- National Black HIV/AIDS Awareness Day, February 7 — ready-made social media content
For more information about how you and your organization can partner with NBA on issues of justice, equity, advocacy, and community engagement, please contact:

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