

RELIGIOUS AMERICANS SPEAK OUT

Pro-Choice

Called to Compassion: Religions Active in HIV/AIDS Education and Care

As the global HIV/AIDS pandemic enters its third decade, mainstream religions are responding with compassion and care. Some have had to overcome traditional taboos about sexuality, homosexuality, non-marital sex, and drug abuse to address HIV/AIDS realistically and without judgment. Over time, the harsh claims that AIDS is a punishment have given way to a deeper understanding of the factors in its spread.

In addition to challenging and changing attitudes about AIDS, denominations work every day to provide health care and services to people with AIDS and their families and millions of children orphaned by the epidemic. Denominations support increased government funding for AIDS research and care in the U.S. and globally and have been outspoken in calling for increased focus on minority communities in the U.S. that have been particularly hard-hit by the epidemic.

The political agenda of anti-choice Religious Right groups has impeded progress in halting the spread of this public health catastrophe. Recently, scientifically accurate information about condoms' effectiveness in preventing HIV transmission was removed from the federal Centers for Disease Control and Prevention website. An attempt to appoint a conservative activist who called AIDS a "gay plague" to a national AIDS task force was only narrowly averted.

Mainstream people of faith are working to address sexuality issues with honesty and compassion.

The Episcopal Church, in a recent resolution, asked "the U.S. government and international agencies to dramatically increase efforts to address this crisis through funding education and awareness programs about the spread of AIDS in developing countries, programs to assist families affected by AIDS, especially

the millions of orphaned children, and efforts to make affordable medicines available to those infected." The Standing Committee on HIV/AIDS recently called for a concerted effort to address HIV/AIDS in minority communities and to "speak honestly, moving beyond discomfort about sex, drug abuse and HIV/AIDS."

Grim Statistics

40 million people globally live with the human immunodeficiency virus (HIV) that causes AIDS (Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome)

- 37 million adults, of which 19.2 million are women; 2.5 million children under 15

AIDS claimed 3 million lives in 2003

- 2.5 million adults, 500,000 children under 15
- An estimated 5 million people acquired HIV in 2003**

- 4.2 million adults, 700,000 children under 15
- Source: UNAIDS, the joint United Nations Programme on HIV/AIDS*

The Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA) provides information on AIDS prevention and treatment, faith issues, and education and worship activities through its HIV/AIDS Clearinghouse. In encouraging people to learn the facts about AIDS, the church notes that "knowledgeable and sensitive Christians are needed to help counter the prejudice and injurious discrimination that people with AIDS experience...."

The Presbyterian Church (USA) works with partner organizations in more than 90 countries to offer care for those living with AIDS and AIDS orphans. In 1988, the General Assembly "urged the church to overcome

attitudinal and behavioral barriers of race, social class and sexual orientation that prevent acceptance and a positive ministry” and voiced support for policies to protect the human and civil rights of people with AIDS. The church called for adequate numbers of drug treatment programs to care for drug-addicted persons and prevent the spread of HIV.

The Southern Baptist Convention has modified its position since its first statement on AIDS in 1987, calling for a return to “biblical standards of morality” to combat the epidemic. While continuing to make a distinction in 1994 between “innocent victims” and persons who “have contracted HIV through irresponsible and immoral behavior,” the denomination affirmed that “All persons living with AIDS and their families deserve compassionate ministry from Christians....”

The Union for Reform Judaism was one of the first religious groups to address AIDS formally, issuing a summons to action in 1985 calling for increased resources for AIDS prevention, treatment and education and an end to AIDS-related discrimination. Reform Judaism also established a national task force on AIDS and supported the distribution of condoms and clean needles to intravenous drug users. In 1994, the **United Synagogue of Conservative Judaism** adopted a resolution calling on its affiliated congregation to institute age-appropriate HIV prevention programs.

The Unitarian Universalist Association has spoken out against “the fear and loathing of the human body and sexuality instilled by some religious traditions” and “the notion of disease as divine punishment.” It supports the expansion of education programs about HIV transmission, including explicit information about sexual practices that pose high risk of infection and methods for reducing risk.

The United Church of Christ (UCC) has declared the AIDS pandemic “an international disaster of catastrophic proportions” and launched a special appeal to fund its AIDS ministries around the world. The UCC also called for debt relief for African nations whose economies are overburdened by foreign debt and AIDS and for international trade regulations that help reduce the prohibitively high cost and increase the availability of HIV/AIDS treatment drugs.”

The United Methodist Church has been active in fighting the AIDS epidemic since the 1980s. Its HIV/AIDS Ministries Network, which works in the U.S. and globally, recently secured a federal grant for

research papers on prevention and education programs in African American, Hispanic American and Native American congregations. In 1988, in response to vindictive statements blaming the epidemic on homosexuality, the Council of Bishops issued a statement affirming that, “we in the religious community are certain that it is not sent as a curse from God upon those whose lifestyle is called into question.” The statement commends monogamy within marriage as the behavior expected for the faithful and the best way to prevent the spread of the disease, but recommends the use of condoms “for those who choose other than this standard.”

What You Can Do

Education and action will make a difference in preventing the spread of HIV and reducing deaths. **Go to the Legislative Action Center at www.rcrc.org to:**

Join the campaign to support responsible sexuality education, including information on safe sex and condom use.

Oppose harmful “gag rule” restrictions, which deny funds for AIDS prevention to health facilities that provide, counsel about, or refer for abortions.

Start an HIV/AIDS education program in your congregation. For more information, visit <http://religiousinstitute.org> and www.siecus.org.

Begin “Keeping It Real!” and “Breaking The Silence” programs, the Religious Coalition’s faith-based dialogue models for youth and adults in African American churches. Contact info@rcrc.org or 202-628-7700.

Call, write or visit www.rcrc.org for a listing of national religious AIDS networks.

The Religious Coalition for Reproductive Choice, founded in 1973, is the national organization of pro-choice people of faith. The Religious Coalition—comprising Protestant, Jewish, and other denominations and faith groups, the Clergy for Choice Network, and state affiliates throughout the country—works to ensure reproductive choice through the moral power of religious communities. All programs seek to give clear voice to the reproductive health issues of people of color, those living in poverty, and other underserved populations.

For more information, contact:
Religious Coalition for Reproductive Choice
1025 Vermont Avenue NW, Suite 1130
Washington, DC 20005
Phone: 202-628-7700 Fax: 202-628-7716
E-mail: info@rcrc.org
Website: www.rcrc.org