



## National HIV Prevention Conference

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### **[TITLE:] THE ROLE OF BLACK CHRISTIAN CHURCHES IN THE LIVES OF YOUNG BLACK MEN WHO HAVE SEX WITH MEN**

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**BACKGROUND:** Blacks are disproportionately infected by HIV/AIDS. In 2003, Blacks made up 54% of all HIV/AIDS diagnoses, though constituting only 12.3% of the US population. Since slavery, Christianity has been central in Black culture. Given the rise in the HIV incidence rates among Blacks and the centrality of Christian churches for this segment of the population, it would be prudent to explore the role of religion among young Black MSM (YBMSM) to inform the development of faith-based, HIV prevention interventions for this group.

**METHODS:** This qualitative study occurred in San Francisco/Oakland Area from 2002 to 2003. Data were collected on a convenience sample of 31 YBMSM, ages 19-30. Sixteen of the respondents were HIV-negative/unknown and 15 were HIV-positive. All interviews were 1.5 to 2 hours long and included several questions about religion such as: Did religion play a role in your life growing up? Growing up, what did you, hear about HIV/AIDS in church? Do you currently go to church? Interviews were recorded, transcribed, entered into Atlas.TI and then: coded for specific themes.

**RESULTS:** When asked about the role of religion while growing up, each respondent acknowledged that religion was important in his personal history. However, respondents varied by current level of church participation.

Four groups emerged:

- 1) those who attend weekly services;
- 2) those who attend sporadically, perhaps once every few weeks;

- 3) those who left Christianity altogether for a non-Christian denomination, and
- 4) those who are not active in the church but receive ministry through alternate pathways, such as gospel music or prayer. No one abandoned spirituality/religion entirely.

The reasons given for anything short of weekly church attendance included the desire to avoid homophobic messages and an intolerance of hypocrisy among church-goers. Conversely, those who regularly attend church were far less critical about the apparent homophobia and hypocrisy. They reconciled their being attracted to men and being regular church-goers using numerous strategies, including feeling exonerated of guilt because they knew that many of the male church officials had sex with men, though masking their behavior from a critical and unaccepting congregation; the perception that their having same-sex desire was ordained by God, and therefore, understood and forgiven; and by transitioning from their previous homophobic churches to a more welcoming church. The sense of comfort and security provided by gay-friendly churches remained even post-HIV-seroconversion. Many HIV+ worshippers looked at themselves as a mouthpiece for God and outreached fellow Christians and non-Christians in HIV prevention efforts.

**CONCLUSIONS:** Black churches are potentially a powerful resource in combating the spread of HIV/AIDS. YBMSM identify religion as an important part of their lives. Those who remain active in Churches during their adulthood maintain this status by employing numerous coping mechanisms. These church-going YBMSM, regardless of HIV sero-status, can be an invaluable resource in promoting safer sex messages. In so doing, they may help build a bridge between the BMSM community and Black churches.



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