

Silence, shame and stigmaâ€¢the unholy trinity of AIDS

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Baptists Today

ATLANTA—Churches must recognize the spread of HIV/AIDS as a justice issue and overcome pervasive stigmas about the disease if they are to live out the gospel in their communities, panelists told Baptists in Atlanta.

The issue is plagued by “an unholy trinity of silence, shame and stigma,” said Raphael Warnock, pastor of the historic Ebenezer Baptist Church in Atlanta. Warnock was among the panelists who participated in a special interest session on “The HIV/AIDS Pandemic” during the New Baptist Covenant celebration Jan. 31.

Warnock said HIV/AIDS—once considered a disease of gay white men—affects a disproportionate number of both men and women of color. African-Americans make up 12 percent of America’s population, but they account for more than 50 percent of people newly diagnosed with HIV/AIDS, he said.



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AIDS has become the leading cause of death among black women age 25 to 44, he said. But “as the epidemic has swung to people of color, the money has not followed the epidemic,” Warnock added.

The response would be different if there was a proportional increase among white women, he asserted.

The spread of AIDS is “inextricably connected to America’s growing prison-industrial complex,” Warnock said. With more than two million people in prison, most for nonviolent offenses, many men are leaving prison after participating in homosexual encounters, then returning to the general population to infect their wives and girlfriends, he said.

D. L. Jackson, pastor of Liberty Baptist Church in Chicago, said HIV/AIDS also has begun making inroads among senior adults, many of whom are uninformed and don't think they are at risk.

Carla Nelson, education facilitator for Canadian Baptist Ministries, said churches should respond to the AIDS pandemic by simply "being the church"—accepting others and reaching out to them as Christ did.

"We must end the isolation and turn the stigma around," she said, speaking of a Rwandan pastor on the outskirts of Kigali who led his congregation to make it a matter of pride to be tested for HIV and to sponsor "guardian groups" to care for those who suffer from the disease.

Malcom Marler, who has worked since 1994 as a chaplain in an AIDS clinic at the University of Alabama at Birmingham, went beyond seeing HIV/AIDS as a needed field of ministry.

"I believe HIV/AIDS is not only a calling for the church to respond to in practical and caring ways," he said. "This disease offers the opportunity for the renewal of the church" because getting to know people with HIV/AIDS can remind the church "what grace is all about."

"If we're going to find Jesus, we'd better go find people with HIV," Marler said. "If we get it right on grace, everything else will fall into place."

Participants talked about practical means by which churches can minister to those who suffer from HIV/AIDS. Church leaders need to take the lead in getting tested, the panelists said, as a way to encourage others who need the testing but might be afraid to get it.

"Ministers have to set the example," said Warnock. "Deacons and trustees and people who've been married for 60 years—if they all go, then people at risk can get lost in the movement."

Jackson described a residence facility his church founded for persons and families affected by AIDS. Called “Vision House,” the ministry provides housing at reduced cost, a wholesome environment and counseling services, he said.

All four speakers emphasized the importance of education, and not just in special seminars. Nelson cited a Ugandan study showing that children who do not attend school are three times more likely to contract AIDS by their early twenties than children who are educated.

Warnock said being informed is essential. “We need to educate our children and not be afraid to talk about sex in church,” he said.

Marler echoed his thought, “We’ve always had a hard time talking about sex or drugs in the church, but we need to talk about the people we are called to be with, to rediscover where Jesus already is.”

People need to know that they don’t have to be afraid of people with HIV, Marler said. They need to know “you can’t get it from sitting beside them, hugging them, being baptized in the same water with them, or taking communion together” he said.

When people are well informed, they don’t have to suffer from “AFRAIDS,” he said— “A Fear Related to AIDS.”

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