

Voices: The African American community in light of COVID-19

April 16, 2020

Recently, COVID-19 has shined a light on the health disparities of the African American community.

Statistics have revealed for a number of years the healthcare of minority communities is less than favorable. While there are a number of documented reasons why many minority groups are more than likely not to have access to healthcare providers and healthy choices for food and nutritional options, the coronavirus has vividly exposed the matter.

Disparities in health and nutrition

It is now a proven fact people who suffer from certain pre-existing medical conditions will have a more difficult time fighting this very dangerous virus. People who have lung disease, often due to smoking and working in unhealthy conditions, are less likely to survive the damage this virus can do to one's lungs.

It also is noted persons with hypertension and heart maladies are more likely to succumb to the ravishes of the disease as well.

African Americans are noted to suffer disproportionately from heart and lung disease. According to the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, almost one-third of African American adults suffer from hypertension—high blood pressure. That number is higher than any other people group.

Compounded with certain dietary choices that in many cases are made

more pervasive by the “food deserts” in which many minority people live, this disease has proven to be deadly.

A “food desert” by definition [A “food desert” by definition](#) is an area with limited access to affordable and nutritious food, in contrast to an area with higher access to supermarkets or stores with fresh foods. The latter is called a “food oasis.” The designation “food desert” is made by considering the type and quality of food available to the population, in addition to the accessibility of food stores.

The church’s response to disparity

The Centers for Disease Control reports one-third of all hospitalizations due to COVID-19 are African Americans, though African Americans represent only 13 percent of the total U.S. population. Cities such as Chicago and New Orleans have reported 70 percent of the deaths from the disease are African Americans.

While this is not the time to argue or discuss the politics and other matters that may have contributed to these overall disparities, it is time to look within the bosom of the church to supply contemporary and effective suggestions.

What can the church do in a time like this? How can the faith community band together to curve the number of fatalities that is far too great?

Clergypersons, pastors and lay leaders within the African American church community will do well to communicate the importance of “social distancing.” Let it be clear: This is not a sole remedy when many of the people who are “essential workers” are employed as bus drivers, custodians, grocery store workers and the like. However, it is one suggestion that must be voiced.

Another suggestion that also must be considered involves debunking online myths that COVID-19 does not affect people of color; the numbers don't lie.

More importantly, as hard as it is, pastors must insist on urging their congregants to "stay at home," even on a Sunday morning. While church attendance among African Americans is slowly declining, the voice and authority of the pulpit still ranks higher than many other racial and ethnic groups in our country.

Now is the time to convince the faithful of the fact "this too will pass." When this pandemic is over, let the real hard and uncomfortable discussions begin.

We are our brother's keeper.

Rev. Dr. Michael Evans Sr. is the pastor of Bethlehem Baptist Church in Mansfield, Texas, and the president of the Baptist General Convention of Texas. The views expressed are those of the author.