

Black Church viewed as mighty weapon in fight against HIV/AIDS

By Ursula V. Battle

This is Part 11 of a Three-Part Series about "Mr. B," who has requested anonymity. This series looks at the impact of HIV on "Mr. B's life" and his efforts to help curtail the disease, which has reached epidemic proportions in the black community.

Many advocates feel that one of the greatest weapons currently at our disposal in the fight against HIV/AIDS among African Americans is the black church. It can be found in every community, has millions of members, is highly respected, wields tremendous influence, and has spiritual power.

"Churches are pivotal to the black community," said "Mr. B" who spoke during Speak To My Heart Ministries' first-ever Community Awareness Sunday on December 2, 2012. "The black community knows where the churches are. Black churches are critical in helping us to educate people in order to get a handle on this disease."

"Mr. B," who has requested anonymity, was among a group of panelists living with HIV/AIDS who shared their stories during the event held at the church. WEAA 88.9 FM radio personality Duane Johnson is pastor of the church, which is located at 3903 W. Belvedere Avenue in Baltimore.

"Whenever I speak, my hope is to remove ignorance," said "Mr. B." "In 2012, in the area of HIV and AIDS, there is still quite a bit of ignorance that still needs to be dealt with that is still hurting people and does not stop the disease. It is helpful to bring in individuals with HIV and AIDS who are living with the disease."

December 1, 2012 marked World AIDS Day. Speak To My Heart Ministries held their event in honor of the global effort declared by the World Health Organization for people worldwide to unite in the fight against HIV/AIDS. The event also featured free testing and a worship service. According to "Mr. B," he was asked to participate by Robbin Alexander, who works as an HIV/AIDS Outreach/Patient Advocate



Duane Johnson is the pastor of Speak to My Heart Ministries. Pastor Johnson is shown with his wife Cynthia and their children. The Johnsons and their congregation held Community Awareness Sunday on December 2, 2012 to help in the fight against HIV/AIDS.

Courtesy Photo

with Sinai Hospital and was one of the event organizers.

According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), more than 1.1 million people in the United States are living with HIV infection, including over 200,000 people (18.1 percent) who are unaware of their infection. In 2009, African Americans comprised 14 percent of the U.S. population but accounted for 44 percent of all new HIV infections in that year. Compared with members of other races and ethnicities, African Americans account for a higher proportion of HIV infections at all stages of disease— from new infections to deaths.

In light of these alarming statistics, it is imperative that community members and influential leaders in the African American community collaborate with the CDC and other government agencies, as well as health organizations to help eradicate the spread of HIV/AIDS

in African Americans.

Debra Y. Fraser-Howze, founder and past president of the National Black Leadership Commission on AIDS, the largest black HIV and AIDS non-profit organization of its kind in America was the first to mobilize a broad coalition of African American leaders that included clergy and political leaders in the fight against HIV/AIDS.

"With President Barack Obama in office again, I would love to see a coming together of the communities of the major cities in developing a new plan that will include the tools we now have [available] in the community to help fight this disease," Fraser-Howze said, noting advancements such as the new OraQuick In-Home HIV Test.

"In the black community, we are disproportionately impacted by HIV and other diseases like hepatitis C," she said. "With hepatitis C, people can go for years without any knowledge of infec-

tion until they need a liver transplant or [are diagnosed with] cirrhosis of the liver. We have to respond and we have to respond now. My hope is that we can get that done and work together as a community to eradicate these diseases."

Fraser-Howze has been widely recognized for more than two decades of global leadership to communities of color regarding teenage pregnancy, social welfare and HIV/AIDS. From 1995-2001 she advised two U.S. Presidents while serving on the Presidential Advisory Council on HIV/AIDS.

"Many individuals won't get tested under [any] circumstances because they feel they aren't at risk or not at enough risk," she said. "There are few communities that have institutions built into them as the black church is in our community. However, efforts on the part of our churches to help fight these diseases have to be more systemic."