

Churches step up in battle vs. AIDS

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On Friday nights they walk down 34th Ave. in Corona in the growing darkness and quietly shuffle into the open doors of Mount Horeb Baptist Church.

Yet these churchgoers do not enter the house of God to worship or pray - they come for free hypodermic needles and condoms - and a saving grace from the scourge of HIV/AIDS.

Mount Horeb is one of two churches in Queens that hosts a syringe-exchange program run by the nonprofit AIDS Center of Queens County.

While some would consider it sacrilegious to pass out hypodermic needles in church, the syringe-exchange program is an example of how some of Queens' African-American clergy are bucking church orthodoxy in an effort to combat the alarming spread of HIV/AIDS in the black community.

"It's not about promoting any type of sinful behavior," said the Rev. Gilbert Pickett Sr., who grew up worshipping at Mount Horeb and has served as the church's pastor for the last nine years. "What I'm looking at is saving lives."

Pickett, 45, said he believes the syringe program is not contrary to Christian doctrine, noting that the Bible describes how Jesus sought to help prostitutes, adulterers and thieves.

"He interacted with them and he made a difference. He helped to change who they were," said Pickett. "Whatever the need is, ministry means meeting the need through service."

The syringe-exchange program is also hosted once a week at the Evangelical Christian Church on Guy Brewer Blvd. in Jamaica, where the Rev. Ernestine Sanders is pastor.

Sanders said Queens' African-American clergy had long been in denial about the growing prevalence of HIV/AIDS in Queens' black community.

But as the crisis worsened, she said, black pastors began to see the need to educate themselves and their congregants about HIV/AIDS prevention.

"The pastors themselves have opened up," Sanders said. "We all realize this is something we have to deal with."

Philip Glotzer, executive director of the AIDS Center of Queens County, said support from Queens' African-American clergy is essential to fighting HIV/AIDS in the borough, where some 20,000 residents are presently infected.

"We need to have the church leaders with us as allies to prevent this epidemic from destroying another generation," Glotzer said, pointing out that more than half of ACQC's roughly 5,000 HIV-positive clients are African-American.

"To say that's a crisis is an understatement," he added.

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