



National HIV Prevention Conference

Atlanta, Georgia - Jun 12-15, 2005

[TITLE:] THE BLACK CHURCH: ITS INFLUENCE ON BLACK MEN WHO HAVE SEX WITH MEN, IN THE ERA OF AIDS

Natl HIV Prev Conf. 2005 Jun 12-15 (abstract no. M1-A0502)

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OBJECTIVE: To examine the experiences of African American men who have sex with men (MSM) in the Black church, along with issues relating to the HIV/AIDS epidemic in the Black community. In addition, this research study explores the impact of traditional religious doctrine usually espoused in the Black church relating to MSM. The Social Cognitive Theory constructs of environment and situation are used to illustrate how these constructs play an important role in providing social, spiritual and psychological support for MSM. Also, the Health Belief Model construct of perceived barriers were ascertained to examine barriers to acceptance and fulfillment of MSM in the Black church.

METHODS: A qualitative formative research study of MSM who attend Black churches in the metro Atlanta area during January through March of 2001. Data from in-depth semi-structured interviews with MSM (range=30-50 years) was obtained ($n=30$), and relevant themes extracted. The interview guide was developed by myself and consisted of questions based on the constructs of the Social Cognitive Theory, the Health Belief Model, review of the literature and focus groups. In addition, questions relating to MSM, the Black church, and sexual orientation are explored as they relate to environment, situation and perceived barriers.

To maximize the diversity of the sample, key participants were recruited from clubs where MSM congregate, organizations in gay communities, and private parties.

In addition, some respondents were recruited through discussion with others in the study (snowball effect).

RESULTS: Most MSM in this research study (93%) describe their experiences regarding their sexual orientation in the Black church as oppressive, alienating, psychologically

discomforting and humiliating. Many respondents (80%) reported that there were negative environmental issues in the Black church relating to MSM. All of the respondents reported perceived barriers in terms of leadership opportunities in the Black church. In addition, respondents identified situations and activities that promoted feelings of isolation and alienation in regard to theological teachings.

CONCLUSIONS: African American MSM in this study perceive themselves as active participants in the life and growth of the Black church. These MSM either attend or have attended a Black church in the last ten years for at least one year. They are represented on deacon boards, usher ministries; the choir, AIDS ministries and many other auxiliaries. Despite this participation MSM continue to be marginalized, isolated, and condemned for same sex behavior as reported by respondents. All of the respondents in this research study said they considered themselves spiritual as opposed to religious, and had a personal relationship with God despite negative church doctrine regarding homosexuality. Many (90%) considered religion as man-made formalities, and spirituality as their relationship with the Divine Creator. In addition, all respondents felt that their church leaders espoused anti-homosexual rhetoric as part of their religious services, and that this espousal represented a significant barrier to self-fulfillment and self-actualization.



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