

BIPOC Queer Religious Responses During the Height of HIV/AIDS in the United States

Essential Question

Are Black church/Black activists among the forgotten leaders of the fight against HIV?

Lesson Overview:

This lesson focuses on the intersection of race, religion and sexuality within Black communities at the height of the AIDS crisis. The “textbook” version of the fight against AIDS focuses almost exclusively on the primarily white organization ACT UP. This lesson presents primary source evidence on Black religious organizations fighting HIV/AIDS—evidence rarely covered by major media sources. At the end of this lesson, students should be able to explain why history should or should not include Black religious organizations when describing the fight against AIDS.

After the teacher presents the historical context for AIDS, students will analyze primary sources to assess how Black clerical and lay leaders of various religious traditions addressed the sexually stigmatized AIDS epidemic particularly in poor communities of color.

Learning objectives for this lesson:

1. Students will have a complex understanding of how Black religious institutions responded and failed to respond during the AIDS epidemic of the 1980s.
2. Students will assess media coverage for bias in portraying or failing to portray the activism within the Black community.
3. Students will have a more sophisticated understanding of how history documenting, preserving, and telling can marginalize groups.

Common Core State Standards

Primary Sources:

Document A The Balm in Gilead, Inc.

Document B AIDS Prayer Week

Document C The Victory Shall Be Ours

Document D There is a Balm in Africa 1 & 2

Document E Upper Room AIDS Ministry

Document F AIDS Ministry Opens PWA Housing

Document G Gay Men of African Descent

Document H Marlon Riggs poem from documentary film, [Tongues Untied](#) (1989)

Document J Rashida Abdul-Khabeer (formerly Hassan) Interview

Document K Katrina Haslip [photo]

Document L Adodi [online newspaper article]

Resources:

[Timeline of Key Events in the Early HIV/AIDS Crisis](#)

Handouts: [Group 1](#) [Group 2](#) [Group 3](#) [Group 4](#) [Group 5](#)

Procedures

Assign pre-class reading: newspaper articles (below), [Timeline](#), and [List of BIPOC AIDS organizations](#).

Prep: Link to, upload, or print out primary sources and handouts.

Warm Up Activity:

List all the words that come to mind with the following words: Black Church, activism, HIV, Black Muslim, Africa.

-OR-

Class Discussion on assigned articles– See suggested questions for discussion (below).

Class Activity

- Divide class into five small groups and give each group a set of primary sources and handout. Give approximately 12-15 minutes for small group discussion.
- After groups explore the primary sources and discuss the handout questions, they report back to the group on the suggested theme.

Writing assignment – suggested topic below

Assigned Readings before class:

- [Selected List of AIDS Organizations with religious queer and/or BIPOC focus](#)
- “Reluctantly, Black Churches Confront AIDS,”
<https://www.nytimes.com/1991/11/18/nyregion/reluctantly-black-churches-confront-aids.html>
- “A New Antagonist for AIDS,”
<https://www.nytimes.com/1996/12/01/nyregion/a-new-antagonist-for-aids.html?sec=health&scp=5&sq=Preston+R.+Washington%2C+NY&st=cse>
- “Whither the Black Church on HIV/AIDS?,”
https://www.washingtonpost.com/local/whither-the-black-church-on-hiv-aids/2012/07/20/gJQAcB3syW_story.html

Opening Classroom Discussion:

1. Compare the list of Black organizations dealing with AIDS with the focus of the *NYTimes* articles. Did mainstream media over-represent the problems of Black Churches in dealing with HIV/AIDS instead of covering Black organizations and creative solutions? Support your opinion with evidence from the readings. What additional information would you like to have before settling on an opinion? How do primary sources evoke further questions? Compare this in your own mind with how a textbook version might look and sound.
2. Consider how the “first hand accounts” within the 2012 *Washington Post* article are selected, edited, and framed. What stands out to you about the reporter/writer/editor’s framing of the article?

Suggested Writing Assignment:

Why should today’s lesson focus on the role of Black churches, African spirituality, or Islam to understand the HIV/AIDS crisis in America? Is it or isn’t it a relevant perspective?

AIDS Prayer Week: West Side Churches Spread the Healing

By EMILY TORGAN

Last Thursday night, a multiracial crowd of nearly 500 people rose, clapped and swayed to the jubilant R&B music filling a West 116th Street church. They had come to offer remembrances to AIDS victims, but as the crowd cheered the Supremes-like pivots of singers in sequined dresses, the service seemed more hopeful than sorrowful. The evening, the fifth event in the Harlem Week of Prayer for the Healing of AIDS, had done much to reach the organizers' goal—lifting the stigma that has deepened the disease's ravages.

After the concert, Pernessa Seele, founder and CEO of the fourth annual week of prayer, mounted the pulpit and addressed the crowd in the Southern Baptist style she knew as a child.

"We must throw off the garments of fear," Seele cried out, receiving "amens" and thunderous applause. "We must take off racism, homophobia and internalized racism. . . Without further ado, let the healing begin."

The crowd stood and clapped wildly.

Seele, vice president of Harlem Churches for Community Improvement and a former scientist, spent a year designing the week's events, a unique series which joined medicine, education, politics and com-

passion under the mantle of religion to help a minority community stricken by AIDS.

Later, Seele described her motives for organizing the week of prayer, which kicked off Sept. 27 with a Boy's Choir of Harlem concert and finished Sunday with an address by Faye Wattleton, the former Planned Parenthood leader and current talk-show hostess.

"I'm black, I'm Christian, I'm a New Yorker. I've lost 17 friends to AIDS, and I know that there are approximately 10,000 HIV-positive people in Harlem right now," said Seele. "Blacks and Hispanics are disproportionately afflicted."

Besides the concert, service and Wattleton's speech, the week of prayer included a seminar on spiritual and physical therapy, a workshop on bridging gaps between medicine and religion, a discussion on volunteerism and a youth speakout.

Pauline Barfield, a spokesperson for Seele, called the seminar on spiritual therapy particularly moving.

"This is a very macho community, where AIDS carries a massive stigma, and it was really something

to see 217 HIV-positive people coming out and comforting each other," said Barfield.

Churches of five Christian faiths and one mosque hosted the programs; four of the seven events took place in West Side churches, and over 1,000 people participated.

Seele says she was chosen by a

Many announced in public for the first time that that had tested positive for the AIDS virus.

higher power to implement the week of prayer, but her personal religious faith, education and work experience also propelled her.

Brought up religious in South Carolina, Seele holds a B.S. from Clark College and an M.S. in immunology from Atlanta University. Seele worked as a drug addiction program administrator for Harlem Hospital, as an AIDS consultant for the Narcotic Drug and Research Institute, and was the first AIDS coordinator for Interfaith Medical Center's methadone clinics.

As Seele watched the AIDS epi-

demic devastate the black and Latino communities, she knew there was a desperate need for leadership.

Recognizing that the power centers of the impoverished black and Latino communities were the churches, Seele turned to the clergy. Still, she realized that many of the means of transmitting and preventing AIDS, such as homosexual intercourse, drug use and condoms, were against church teachings.

"The churches used to have a very hypocritical stance," said Seele. "They were supposed to help the sick. And there were always homosexuals and drug addicts worshipping there."

"But eventually," continued Seele, "AIDS brought the situation home, because many people the churches loved were dying. The AIDS crisis, which started as taboo, had to be dealt with effectively. It wasn't enough to be moved—the churches had to be moved to action."

Many of the people Seele brought together for the week of prayer meant action.

Beny Primm, M.D., director of the Office of Treatment Improvement in Washington, D.C., came to tell Tuesday's audience the rampant

spread of AIDS was the cumulative effect of vast social problems.

"This is a disease of poverty, and we need a social earthquake to treat it," said Primm, who explained the connections between substance abuse, AIDS and tuberculosis, a very contagious respiratory disease that kills AIDS patients and can infect the healthy.

Primm urged the clergy to see AIDS resulting from poor quality-of-life conditions, to treat the infected compassionately, and to push for better public health services. Primm told church officials that staying informed about health problems was vital, as the average woman with AIDS lives 11 months and the average man 14. If treatment begins early, said Primm, lives may be prolonged and the transition from life to death may be eased.

Faye Wattleton also attacked social conditions, calling AIDS a plight of race and class. Wattleton asked why black and Latino women were 19 percent of the country's female population and 73 percent of the country's women-with-AIDS population. A preacher's daughter, Wattleton said she saw the vital link between spiritual involvement and AIDS, but she pleaded with the community not to count on divine intervention to protect its health.

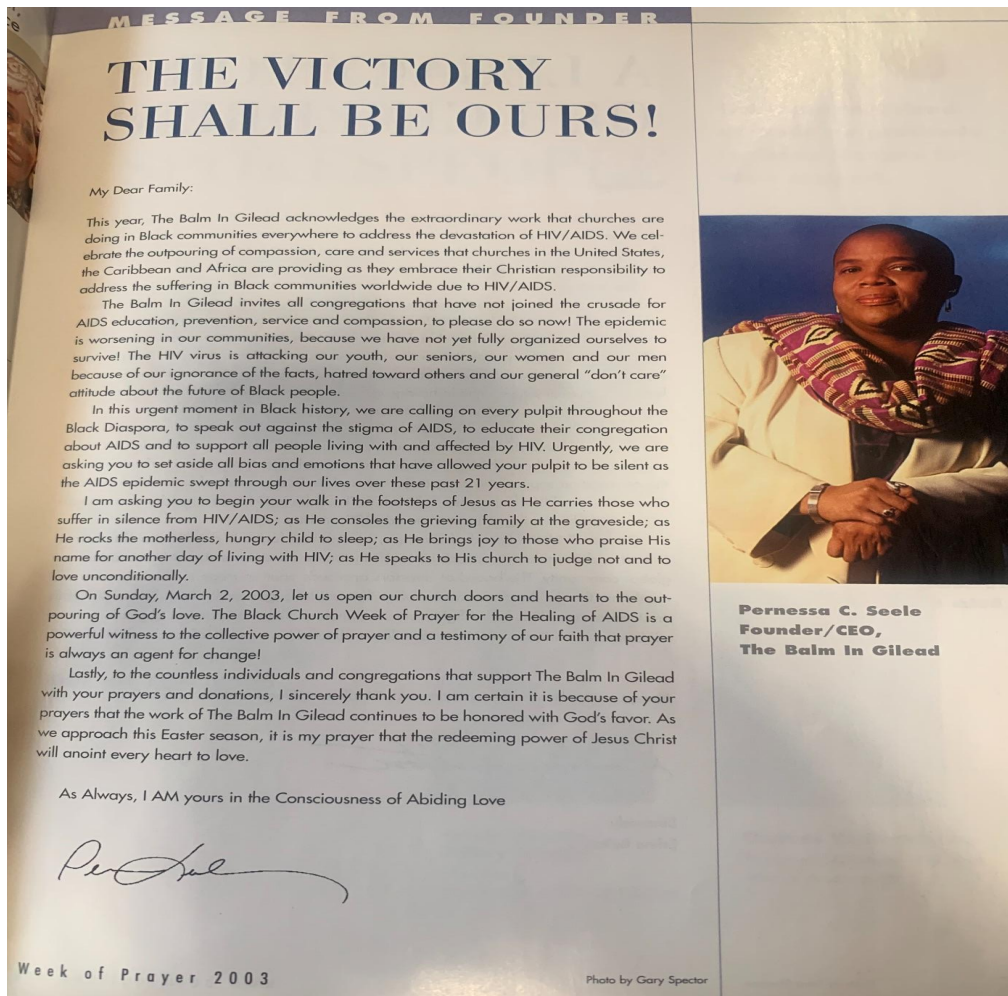
Afterward, Wattleton, who re-

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In 1992, *The Westsider* published an article about The Balm in Gilead's annual prayer for healing. Hundreds of people congregated to commemorate those who died from AIDS. This was the fourth iteration of the annual event. Seele spoke at the event and spoke about the intersection of faith and medicine.

Citation: Emily Torgan, "AIDS Prayer Week: Westside Churches Spread the Healing," found in Susan M. Chambré Research Files on Volunteer AIDS Organizations, Yale University Manuscripts and Archives MS 2054 Box 9 Folder 4.

REPORT OUT: One of the major non-profit organizations fighting AIDS used a Biblical expression for its name. Why would they?



An introductory message from the founder of The Balm in Gilead, Pernessa Seele, in the organization's annual report. Written in 2003, Seele implored all Black religious traditions to combat stigma around AIDS and to aid the afflicted.

Citation: Balm of Gilead, Inc., *Annual Report*, Susan M. Chambré Research Files on Volunteer AIDS Organizations, Yale University Manuscripts and Archives MS 2054 Box 9 Folder 4.



In The Balm of Gilead's 2003 annual report, the organization detailed its AIDS work in Nigeria, Cote D'Ivoire, Tanzania and Kenya. The organization created and used interfaith networks to engender systems of support.

Citation: Balm of Gilead, Inc., *Annual Report*, Susan M. Chambré Research Files on Volunteer AIDS Organizations, Yale University Manuscripts and Archives MS 2054 Box 9 Folder 4.

REPORT OUT: Explain potential for bias in using Primary Sources

Katrina Haslip, a devout Muslim and a formerly incarcerated person at Bedford Hills Correctional Facility, demonstrated with AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power (ACT UP) outside the Health and Human Services building to protest the federal government's omission of women from clinical trials.

Citation: Katrina Haslip [photo] Susan M. Chambré Research Files on Volunteer AIDS Organizations, Yale University Manuscripts and Archives, MS 2054, Box 4 Folder 7.



Bibashi, Founded in 1985 by Rashida Hassan, Bibashi was the first African-American organization in the United States to address the AIDS crisis.

Rashida Hassan “Malcolm X” Speech, 1986 [Abbreviated Excerpt]

“I know some of you may be offended by the fact that I would say anything against the Philadelphia AIDS Task Force, but I think what is important to understand is, That is where the resources are and our people, minority-- those differing comparatively to the population— have the right to be educated, have the right to have resources committed, have the right to stand here with you and say that we are dying from this disease and YOU are making it OUR disease.”

REPORT OUT: What newspapers covered the Black organizations and churches that fought AIDS? Consider how history necessarily generalizes complicated realities. What got left out?

Big Red News...Feb. 1 - 7, 1992...13

RELIGION

By Lady Peachena

Rev. Ella Eure-Eaton Joins The Upper Room AIDS Ministry

By Lady Peachena

The Upper Room AIDS Ministry [URAM], a nonprofit, Harlem-based organization providing direct physical and spiritual support to homeless people with AIDS, rang in the new year with the hiring of its first full-time chaplain, Rev. Ella Eure-Eaton.

Rev. Eaton is an ordained minister in the Church of Truth and holistic spiritual counselor who received her Clinical Pastoral Education [CPE] training at Bellevue and St. Luke's/Roosevelt hospitals. She's a graduate of North Carolina Central University, [Durham, N.C.] with a B.A. degree in music.

Rev. Eaton has served as a pastoral counselor to people with AIDS and their families since 1981, was recently cited by the Department of Corrections at Bayview Correctional Facility for her work in their AIDS support group. This concerned minister is featured in "Thinking About Death," a documentary produced by the Gay Men's

Health Crisis which recently aired on cable television.

As the coordinator of URAM's pastoral care services, Rev. Eaton's responsibilities include bereavement counseling to both individual clients as well as support groups; the training and direction of "buddies" from Harlem congregations to provide home and hospital visits, companionship, emotional support and household assistance; and the coordination of the quarterly weekend retreats which provide clients with spiritual, social and recreational activities outside of the city.

This multi-talented minister is also a great concert singer having sung with both the Metropolitan and City Opera companies, and she's appeared on Broadway in "Treemonisha," "Porgy and Bess" and "Trumpets of the Lord."

When I asked her how she got this position she replied, "I came to The Upper Room to confirm what everyone there already knows in his or her own heart: that because God loves us all, we must join together to address our existing conditions, going straight to the spirit as the originator of new forms and new conditions."

Rev. Eaton further revealed that she had been ministering to cancer patients, AIDS patients and homeless people since 1981, using her own monies to buy foods, clothing and necessary items for them. "People heard about what I was doing and sent me monies to continue doing this," she explained, "I was a willing vessel, God trained me for this mission and took away the fear. I was raised to be nonjudgemental and as I work with these AIDS patients I see myself standing in proxy for Christ."

"I asked myself how would Jesus respond," she said. "In the Holy Scriptures, Jesus Christ never asked people how they got sick, he just healed them."

This spirit-filled minister expressed her hope that URAM receives full funding for her position. "This community is filled with people desperately in need of spiritual support and The Upper Room is filling an essential pastoral role in Harlem that has been vacant for far too long for people with AIDS. It is critical that my position be fully funded not only for my own benefit, but more importantly, for the benefit of people who are struggling against the dual epidemics of poverty and HIV."

If you would like to support the work of The Upper Room by making a financial contribution or volunteering please call (212) 491-9000, or write to The Upper Room AIDS Ministry, 207 W. 133 Street, New York, N.Y. 10030.



Rev. Ella Eure-Eaton

This primary source details the work of Upper Room AIDS Ministry, an AIDS service organization which grew out of the Catholic Worker movement. (The Catholic Worker movement was not affiliated with the Catholic Church or any specific religious tradition.) Important figures like Rev. Ella Eure-Eaton provided succor to PWAs, both through material and spiritual support.

Citation: Lady Peachena, "Rev. Ella Eure-Eaton Joins the Upper Room AIDS Ministry," *Big Red News*, February 1-7, 1992, Susan M. Chambré Research Files on Volunteer AIDS Organizations, Yale University Manuscripts and Archives, MS 2054, Box 9 Folder 10.

NYQ December 1, 1991

AIDS MINISTRY LAUNCHES PWA HOUSING PROGRAM

By Avril McDonald

NEW YORK—The first clients moved into the Upper Room AIDS Ministry's (URAM) new scattered site housing program last week. The program, which will provide permanent accommodation for 15 individuals and five families in the Central Harlem area, is funded by the URAM and the New York City Division of AIDS services.

"The apartment program is geared towards homeless people with AIDS and their families," said Chuck Henry, URAM's director of development. "Most of them are gay," he added. Residents are free to come and go as they please and will pay a small stipend for their apartments.

URAM also recently expanded its Adult Day Community Center. Last week, it staged a grand opening of the newly relocated center, which has moved from 100th Street to 133rd Street and Seventh Avenue. The center, which currently operates three days-a-week, will be open six days-a-week starting January.

The center is a "one-stop shop," which provides comprehensive on-site services to its mainly gay homeless PWA clientele, including case management; hot meals; recreational facilities; safer sex and risk reduction education; counselling and support groups; medical care; referrals; financial advocacy; and training in daily living skills.

In addition URAM provides a pastoral care program, which includes a "buddy" service for home- and hospital-bound PWAs and spiritual guidance. However, participation in the spiritual side of the service is not a prerequisite to availing of the ministry's services, said Henry.

Last week's grand opening included a bulb-planting ceremony and speech-making by guests who included City Councilwoman C. Virginia Fields and Dr. Nathan Wright, senior minister of St. Phillips Episcopal Church.

Citation: Avril McDonald, "AIDS Ministry Launches PWA Housing Program," NYQ, December 1, 1991, Susan M. Chambré Research Files on Volunteer AIDS Organizations, Yale University Manuscripts and Archives, MS 2054, Box 9 Folder 10.

Group 5 Gay Men of African Descent, Adodi, Marlon Riggs
HANDOUT 5

REPORT OUT: Did white media miss the “pulse” of African heritage in how it chose to report on Black churches and AIDS?

Gay Men of African Descent (GMAD)



Following the Supreme Court's decision to uphold the constitutionality of state sodomy laws (1986), Rev. Charles Angel and Colin Robinson, founded Gay Men of African Descent (GMAD), protesting the ruling.

Citation: New York Public Library's exhibit: "GMAD at 25: History in Words and Images"

ADODI

Adodi, [a Philadelphia-based group that organized retreats for Black gay men starting in 1983](#), took its name from the plural of *ado*, a Yoruba word to describe “a man who ‘loves’ another man. The ADODI of the tribe were revered as shamans, elders, and wise men. They were thought to embody both male and female ways of being and held pride of place in Yoruba society.

[from Adodi website]

ADODI's HERITAGE

(Established in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania in 1986)

Our 23rd Year!

ADODI, the plural of ADO,

is a Yoruba word that describes a man who "loves" another man. More than just a description of partners in Africa, the ADODI of the tribe are thought to embody both male and female ways of being and were revered as shamans, sages and leaders.

Who is ADODI?

ADODI is a community of men of color who affirm their African lineage and love of men. Our purpose is to foster and encourage the self-discovery, validation, empowerment and liberation of all members of our diverse community.

Remember, Each One Reach One

Share The Experience:

- 1) Forward a Link To Other Bruthaz About Our Archive and e-Newsletters
- 2) Invite and Bring Other Bruthaz To Our Gatherings

in Brooklyn, New York
www.ADODIntl.org

Citation: “ADODI New York | Habari Gani e-Newsletter Archive Homepage”
<http://archive.constantcontact.com/fs065/1101859413381/archive/1102432339232.html>. Viewed 01-06-23.

Marlon Riggs' Poem

Poem from documentary film about Black gay men, [Tongues Untied](#) (1989) by Black gay filmmaker Marlon Riggs. Riggs documented the devastation of his community by AIDS and concluded the film with this poem.

*I listen to the beat of my heart,
let this primal pulse lead me,
though lately I've lived with another rhythm.*

*At first, I thought just time passing. But I discovered a time bomb
ticking in my blood.
Faces, friends disappear.
I watch.
I wait.
I watch.
I wait.
I listen
for my own
quiet
implosion.*

*But while I wait,
older, stronger rhythms resonate within me,
sustain my spirit, silence the clock.
Whatever awaits me, this much I know:
I was blind to my brother's beauty, and now I see
my own.*

Citation: Poem quoted in Daniel Royles, "Black Gay History and the Fight Against AIDS," *The Weekly Challenger*, Dec. 28, 2017.

<https://theweeklychallenger.com/black-gay-history-and-the-fight-against-aids/>