

male” out of the equation, and then the characteristics that you began to enumerate were very easily applied to who we were: people whose life experience has been so stigmatized that they have to deal with the dynamics of self-hatred, of low self-esteem, of denial about your truth, or lack of opportunity because of prejudice and bias as a result of who you were.

Today, even though I don’t agree with all of the theology that leads folks to be involved and structures their responses to this disease, at least there is the general understanding that it is something we have to address. Early on, there was not even the understanding that this was something that needed to be addressed within the context of the church. So even though there might still be some disagreement, and there might be some bad theology in terms of how the responses are being shaped, it’s not as though people are sitting back and saying this is not something that the church needs to be embracing and dealing with.

That’s important because the church is still the institution in our community that has the greatest level of credibility, and also the ability to communicate effectively with the largest number of people on a regular basis. The voice of the pastor, minister, preacher, evangelist, teacher, prophet—whatever language best fits—that voice is still a critical voice, is still one that is respected and looked to. So what we find is we’re not always able to move everybody to the theological posture that we would think of being Jesus’s posture—that is, radical inclusion—but we do find that people understand enough public health to say you do need to know your status, and everybody needs to be tested. Or you find that people appreciate the fact that they might not have an AIDS ministry, but they can help ours by letting us use their vans, for instance, to transport people. Or they can help us in developing care teams, which do everything from helping families who are dealing with

loved ones who are going through the disease to just being there in times of sorrow and grief.

So I think the church is better prepared to deal with all of this today, because I think some of the ignorance has been dispelled—and that’s true across society, not just in the church. And I think a lot of the myths and fears that cause folks to be reluctant to even talk about the disease have started to erode. When there’s conversation and there’s openness to information-sharing, then I’m convinced you’re postured to be a part of the solution instead of a part of the problem. If you remain ignorant, you’re always going to be a part of the problem.

## **Elder Mamie Harris Heirs Covenant Church Cincinnati, Ohio**

I was the wife of a pastor, Michael Harris, who had his own alcohol and drug ministry. I worked at the VA, but when I retired I got involved in that ministry. Well, it’s impossible to be involved with alcohol and drugs and not be involved with HIV. So in the process of looking for something to do with my time when I retired, someone suggested to me that I also look into children who are infected with HIV. And in doing so I became aware of how African Americans are disproportionately affected.

I saw a video that had been made by the NAACP, called “House on Fire.” And someone loaned me a video of a “20/20” interview with a pastor whose son had been infected with HIV. It talked about how the church really rejected him and ostracized him, and he had to resign his position. They couldn’t even find a place for his child to go to Sunday school. And so as a result of seeing how the two communities were so opposite of each other—the church and the HIV community—I started to get involved just to try to

bridge the gap.

My desire was to get over the stigmas that surrounded the virus—such as homosexuality, adultery, the things that the church preached against—to begin to deal with the individuals who were being infected, and affected, and their need for love, support, understanding and compassion. In doing that, I got more involved, and the more I got involved, well, the more I got involved. I decided that we should become an HIV testing site. I thought if we were testing as a religious community, it would open up the doors for the people in the churches to feel safe in at least acknowledging the need for the church to address these issues.

We educated the people of our church through the Red Cross, and then we put a survey out, asking, if we did this kind of ministry, would the church be willing to accept the people who came in. And we got a 100 percent, 'Yes.' Even though we didn't embrace all of the things we were educated in, we had an awareness of the need to open up our minds. We did not support being a church that would pass out condoms, for instance. But we knew we had to teach and educate for the use of them, because everybody isn't abstinent. Everybody doesn't think like me, so I couldn't go into HIV education and HIV testing assuming that everybody that came to me was going to embrace the same moral beliefs that I had. I had to be open to the point that when I educated about sexually transmitted diseases, I had to give the whole education. And even though I don't give you the condom, I had to be associated with people whom I could send you to. So I began to collaborate with organizations that pass out free condoms.

I really think going to the Black AIDS Institute's HIV University helped, and not just because of what I learned in class. I didn't realize that I was going to be staying with three other people—three complete strangers—for 30 days. One of my roommates was infected

with the HIV virus. I didn't realize I'd be that closely associated with it. Then the first evening, I met people who had a transgender lifestyle. I was with people who were from the gay community. So I had to open up my eyes. I had 30 days that I could be there. Now, I could either get on the plane and come back home, or I could be really educated. So I had to learn to see that even though people don't always think like you think, and don't embrace everything that you believe, you have to learn how to live with diversity and respect what other people think if you want them to respect who you are. It was a rude awakening. And everything I learned, I came back home and taught it to my church and I taught it to my husband.

They thought I was kinda crazy at first. And many people said, 'I bet they're infected, because no church would embrace this if one of the two of them wasn't infected.' So they said all kinds of things. It wasn't easy. But I honestly believe I was called by God to work in the ministry with HIV. So it gave me a special ability to look beyond the pettiness of people and be driven and goal focused on what I was doing. That became more important to me than the opinion of people. And I recognize that probably still today a lot of people say, 'Well, she's gotta be HIV-positive. Nobody can be that passionate about something unless it was affecting them personally.' I've learned to live with that.

I've also learned to live with the fact that a lot of people don't understand how I can come from the church community and some of my best friends are from the gay community. We've learned to love each other. They have a right to an education that's going to protect them, if we're to stop this virus—and if we're to stop all the things that are causing problems in the African American community, because it's not just HIV. We are suffering with all of the major illnesses, and I think it's because of lack of knowledge. So I want to be in a position where I'm open to knowledge

in every area.

And that openness has allowed me to do amazing things. I even go to a home for pregnant young ladies and I'm able to talk to them about sexually transmitted diseases and talk to them even about the need for abstaining from sexual behavior as a mother, or embracing those things that are going to protect their children, and not be offensive. I'm able to go into the gay community as a person from the church community and talk about all of the issues that we face and still come out with the respect of that community and the friendship of that community, yet having not compromised one bit of what I believe to be spiritually based.

We all have issues. So I do not go in with this self-righteous attitude that we're all right and everybody else is all wrong. Or that everything I believe makes me better than somebody else, because that's not true. I can't go in and beat somebody else up for not embracing every biblical principle when I have my own weaknesses. So I think when I walk in and I acknowledge that I'm not coming with all the answers, people are more apt to hear what I have to say.

After my husband passed away, we had to merge with another church, Heirs Covenant Church of Cincinnati. And now I'm in the process of trying to work in a new community and help them to not only want to support us financially, but to support us spiritually. But we've already had people in our church who have been able to stand up since we've been there and say, 'I'm infected with HIV.' And they've been embraced.

We've tested over 8,000 people. We started our ministry in about 1998, and we started doing HIV testing about 2000. I've grown so much as a person, because I've touched 8,000 lives that I would never have reached sitting inside the church pew. I've talked with people, I've ministered to people, I've educated people, I've learned information from other people that I would never have

learned had I just sat in the church and never opened up my mind and heart. I've grown so much as a person as a result of the opportunity to serve. It's been a blessing to me, and I hope I've been a blessing to others.

—As told to Kai Wright

## **Rev. Ricky Rush Senior Pastor, Inspiring Body of Christ Church Dallas, Texas**

I think a lot of people started to participate in working against AIDS because of the approach and the appeal that was made by those who were pretty knowledgeable about the subject. On the other hand, we started because we saw such a trend happening around in the church; and we were unequipped, uneducated about what to do. I know it is still a mystery here. And I think we participated because people who educated us on it helped take the scare out of it. It is going to sound horrible, but it is almost as simple as a common cold. People who have it take the medication and they are OK.

So what we have been able to do is host town hall meetings here, and provide a lot of opportunities for people needing counseling. We guide them into other services. The church is not necessarily equipped as well as it probably should be to handle cases on a week-to-week basis. And sometime people are more sick than others, and the liability becomes an issue. But we are able to redirect them into areas where they are able to get help.

We were also able to present, for instance, to about 13,000 people at one time at Six Flags over Texas. We brought [Black AIDS Institute director] Phill Wilson in and had him do a presentation about AIDS—just to say this is what it is, this is how it affects us. That was a great turnaround for the church in