

WORKING WITH FAITH LEADERS

STUDY GUIDE 4: "Myths, Facts, and the Church: Three Pastors in Dialogue"

BEFORE THE SESSION

- Make copies of handout.
- Ask for volunteers to roleplay the dialogue.

CALL TO LEARNING

What is the role of the church in HIV and substance abuse prevention?

OBJECTIVES

- To explore myths and facts concerning HIV and substance abuse.
- To encourage faith leaders to pursue dialogue about the issues.
- To provide a safe space for disclosing individual perspectives.

LEARNING OUTCOMES

Participants will:

- distinguish between myths and facts regarding HIV/AIDS.
- explain the impact of HIV/AIDS on African Americans.
- articulate the role of the church in HIV and substance abuse prevention.

MATERIALS

Bibles

Chart paper

Markers

Masking tape

Copies of handout: "Myths, Facts, and the Church: Three Pastors in Dialogue"

SCRIPTURE REFERENCES

Jeremiah 29:11-13; Genesis 1:26-27

LEARNING CONTENT

▪ PREPARATION

1. **Ask:** What has been your experience with HIV and AIDS in your church? Allow participants to discuss their experiences for about 30 minutes. Listen for clues to the following: Are they aware of persons who are HIV-positive or have AIDS? Are fear and denial evident among the congregation? Have they counseled persons regarding sex and sexuality? Have they conducted funeral services for persons who died of AIDS-related causes? Does their church have an AIDS ministry? Are they making home or hospital visits to persons who are HIV-positive or have AIDS? How else are they being supportive of these persons? Have they devoted Bible study or other educational time to the topics? Have they been educated about HIV/AIDS, and substance abuse? Commend everyone for his or her work regarding HIV prevention.
2. Distribute copies of the handout and ask participants to read it silently. Allow them to meditate about the contents and think about the issues it raises. Ask them to think about with which of the pastors, if any, they most closely identify?

▪ ENGAGEMENT

1. Prepare a setting or "stage" for the roleplay.
2. Put volunteers in roles and prepare to act out the scenario.
3. Act out the scenario in the handout: "Myths, Facts, and the Church: Three Pastors in Dialogue."

▪ **APPLICATION**

1. Ask participants to identify the attitudes and issues illustrated in the dialogue. Record their responses on chart paper and post on the wall.
2. Allow participants to identify any myths or facts about HIV/AIDS, substance use, or sexuality that surfaced in the dialogue. Record these on chart paper and post on the wall.
3. Ask participants to separate the facts from the myths, placing a question mark by any item about which they may not have conclusive information.
4. Ask participants to briefly apply their interpretation of Jeremiah 29:11-13 and Genesis 1:26-27 to any part of the roleplay.
5. **Ask:** What does this exercise mean to you as a faith leader? How “real” was the dialogue? What implications are there for the people in your church? Are there things you and your congregation could be doing relative to these issues that you are not now doing? What are they? What concerted action can you take, as faith leaders, to move forward, despite the reality that you may not agree on all the issues?

Allow time for participants to respond to one or more of these questions. Summarize the main points that emerged during the roleplay and the discussion. Thank participants for the interaction, honesty, and ideas.

CLOSURE

Use the “Start, Stop, Continue” technique to bring closure to this exercise. Ask each participant to state orally something she or he (as a leader of a congregation) will start, stop, or continue doing in terms of HIV and substance abuse prevention.

EXTENDED LEARNING (optional)

Put faith leaders in small groups and ask each group to develop an action plan for faith-based HIV and substance abuse prevention. The plan should include goals, objectives, activities, evaluative measures, and budget. It should also contain a timeline for completion and include a statement about how persons who are recovering substance abusers, HIV-positive or have AIDS will be involved in the planning.

CHARACTERS:

- (1) **Dr. Robin:** Keynote Speaker, HIV/AIDS and Drug Abuse Prevention Advocate, Atlanta, GA
- (2) **Pastor John:** First Missionary Baptist Church, Nashville, TN
- (3) **Pastor Gwen:** Christ the King Church, Non-denominational, Pentecostal Church, Oakland, CA
- (4) **Pastor Mark:** First Metropolitan African Methodist Episcopal Church, Atlanta, GA

SETTING:

This dialogue reflects a hypothetical conversation that took place during a hypothetical National Ecumenical Pastors' Conference on HIV/AIDS and Substance Abuse Prevention, held in Atlanta, Georgia, in March 2001.

We are at the close of the plenary session, wherein Dr. Robin, a pastor and an outspoken advocate on the subject, is concluding her remarks on “Myths, Facts, and the Church in HIV and Substance Abuse Prevention.” The other three pastors are listening to Dr. Robin’s closing comments:

Dr. Robin: It is my belief that faith leaders are biblically, socially, and culturally responsible for the prevention of HIV and substance abuse in African American communities. No longer can pastors stand in their pulpits and remain silent on such critical issues.

According to the National Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), between 650,000 and 900,000 Americans are now living with HIV and approximately 240,000 to 325,000 of them are African Americans. As a result, we as African American faith leaders cannot afford to close our eyes to this dreadful epidemic. It is devastating our congregations and our communities.

Of the estimated 40,000 new HIV cases each year, 64% occur among African Americans. We can no longer hide behind the myth that this is a white, gay disease. Our communities are hurting and dying, and, as faith leaders, we must encourage our congregations and communities by emphasizing God’s plan for their survival in the midst of this crisis. We must offer encouragement and build their faith, providing “a future with hope,” as Jeremiah exclaims in Jeremiah 29: 11: “For surely I know the plans I have for you, says the Lord, plans for your welfare and not for harm, to give you a future with hope.” I’ll take the hope, my friends. I’ve already conducted too many funerals for people who died of AIDS-related illnesses while the families pretended that their loved ones died of pneumonia or the flu. The flu, indeed! Hallelujah, I’ll take the hope...

Two of the pastors reflect on the keynote speaker’s remarks:

Pastor John: I don’t get it! Now, they’re blaming the pastors for this gay problem. If these gay people would just change their lifestyle, we wouldn’t have this big problem with HIV and AIDS.

Pastor Gwen: I didn’t draw that conclusion from her remarks. I think Dr. Robin was merely looking to the church for a solution to this plight. I don’t think she was placing blame on us as pastors. I believe we have a spiritual responsibility to keep people out of harm’s way by teaching sexual abstinence until marriage. It seems that people want to do whatever they want – drinking, drugging, and having casual sex – but they don’t want to deal with the consequences of their behaviors. That’s all I hear about is sex, sex, sex. My grandmother’s advice worked for me until I was married: “Keep your dress down and your .panties up!”

Pastor John: (Rebuking Pastor Gwen) Gwen, this isn't a sexual problem we're facing. It's a moral problem! In the Bible, God condemns homosexual acts and punishes the sinners who participate in such acts with fire and brimstone. It's an abomination, I tell you!

Pastor Gwen: We are all sinners saved by God's grace, and I don't believe that AIDS is a punishment for sexual acts, but a sign that we need to turn to God and the Church for a solution. The Bible says we must seek God with our whole heart. God is not condemning anyone. Besides, if God were in the

business of condemning the sinner, then we would all die such an agonizing death. God loves us, and, as Dr. Robin says, God has a divine plan for our lives that is for our welfare and not for harm. Besides, I think if women in the church would dress more modestly, then these men wouldn't have sex on their minds all the time.

Pastor John: So are you saying it's the women's fault that men can't control their sexual appetites? Are you saying it's the women's fault that men are after them for sex?

Pastor Gwen: No, I'm not. But a little more conservatism wouldn't hurt where women's dress is concerned, especially in the church. Too many women advertise way too much. I see it from my pulpit, and so do you, whether or not you admit it. We are made in God's image, you know. Why are women so intent on showing body parts in church? Why not allow less outer beauty and more inner beauty to show?

Pastor John: Yeah, you're right. I do see it, but sometimes those are the same women who contribute the big bucks. They're the tithers, and I am not going to bother them about the way they dress. You say "in God's image." The Bible says God created male and female in His image. To me and my church that means Adam and Eve, not Adam and Steve. This same-sex thing is sin. It's sin, I tell you.

(Pastor Mark, standing and listening nearby, now joins the conversation.)

Pastor Mark: I cannot believe that you still think that this is a gay disease and that people are being punished for sexual practices. I used to think like that until I realized that the problem is too widespread. It cuts across racial, gender, cultural, and religious lines. We cannot simply write it off as a "gay problem". What about children who contract HIV through parents who are addicted to alcohol and other drugs? What does this say about people who get HIV through means other than same sex relations, like wives, for example, who get HIV from husbands who are either heterosexually promiscuous or bisexual? And, what about teenagers in the church who contract HIV through sheer youthful ignorance? Maybe we need a more compassionate theology...

Pastor John: Well, as far as I'm concerned, the jury is still out; I'm waiting for conclusive proof. In the meantime, I still see it as a punishment from God. If we Christians would just clean up our moral act and stop all this drinking and drugging and loose living, none of this would be happening. We need to stop being hypocrites. It's just that simple.

Pastor Mark: Who are we kidding? If we, as pastors, wait until we agree on all the issues before we take concerted action, we'll never overcome this thing. We've never agreed on all the issues. I'm glad I didn't wait. My church has had an AIDS ministry for years, and we've made tremendous progress in helping the church become a place of acceptance and healing. I guess this conversation indicates that some of us still have some talking to do.

Pastor John: Reverend, I've done just about all the talking I'm going to do. I've said my piece. I'm going to my room to get into the Word. I will see you all at dinner!