General Delivery

At the third-annual National Black Religious Summit on Sexuality in July, the usually low-key U.S. Surgeon General David Satcher made palms sweat by bluntly calling church leaders to preach HIV prevention from the pulpit. “If we don’t talk about sex, sex can kill,” the doctor told the audience of 600-plus African American clergy and laypeople. Satcher, a former head of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, has made AIDS a big piece of his platform since he was appointed in 1998. He recently spoke with POZ about his vision.

October 1, 1999 By Shana Naomi Krochmal

What prompted you to speak out?

It relates to my memories of what life was like as a child in Alabama before the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) brought the black community together to stand up for civil rights. For decades before, African Americans felt there was little to do about these problems. Today, the community is falling dangerously behind in the war on AIDS. We have conducted ourselves far too long as if this disease did not relate to us, or as if there were nothing we could do about it. But just as in the civil-rights era, black churches and local community groups are in a unique position to be the agents of change.

How can we best educate about HIV?

We need to develop positive programs that reach out to our youth and teach responsible sexual behavior and the value of committed relationships. Religion can play a powerful role in helping to change attitudes among youth from hopelessness to hope. Young people without hope for the future will do anything. We have to give them the promise of a future with dignity. Churches can also help teach about the specialness of sex: that it has to do with more than sexual activity—it has to do with relationships and respect for other people.

What practice do you preach?

We must not be afraid, ashamed or too busy to reach out to our neighbors to prevent HIV. To dismiss HIV today is to dismiss our sons and daughters, our nieces and nephews, our sisters and brothers, our friends, and even our babies.

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