Sunday Best

A passionate practice-what-you-preach pastor gets HIV-tested in front of his flock

April 1, 2003 By Kayreth Williams

At the True Bethel Baptist Church in Buffalo, New York, 700 parishioners, most African Americans, sat last November 24 awaiting Pastor Darius Pridgen's sermon as usual. But that morning-later commemorated by the congregation as Breakthrough Sunday-Pridgen put his pulpit to an unusual use: He took an HIV test before his flock.

"The church, especially the black church, needs to deal with the rising HIV crisis," Pridgen told *POZ*. Religious leaders have long been accused of shying away from addressing the epidemic, which calls for honest talk of sex and other such "secular" subjects. But now, stunned by the news that more than half of U.S. HIVers are black - and inspired by groups such as The Balm in Gilead, which promotes HIV testing in black churches nationwide each June - ministers like Pridgen are opening their sanctuaries to prevention and even practicing what they preach by getting tested first.

With his blood drawn, Pridgen corralled his congregation's teens and told the blushing youths that sex, though pleasurable, "is not worth giving up everything." After pushing abstinence, Pridgen gave a condom rap, explaining he'd rather teach them to be safe than to bury them.

Pridgen said that before Breakthrough Sunday, 20 church members had told the pastor they were positive. Others confided that they had never been tested, for fear of HIV's stigma. But that day, 160 parishioners rolled up their sleeves. Pridgen, who announced a few weeks later that he had tested negative, plans to prod his parishioners to test at church every six months. "Whether we admit it or not, a great majority of the people we preach to are either gay, drug addicts or having unprotected sex," said Pridgen. "We have to deal with it." Can we hear an *Amen*?

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