To Whom We Belong

Building bridges between faith and HIV communities

May 15, 2017 By Olivia G. Ford

On a recent afternoon, Rob Newells—executive director of AIDS Project of the East Bay (APEB) and an associate minister of Imani Community Church, both in Oakland, California—recounted an experience from the 2016 United States Conference on AIDS (USCA).

“On the first day, there was a faith session, and I wore my little clergy collar—nobody was talking to me,” he remembers. “The rest of the week, while I was on the beach in my bikini, folks were like: ‘Hey, you’re the preacher, right? Can I talk to you about such and such?’ ‘Aren’t you a minister? Lemme talk to you!’”

Not that he was bothered by the beachside chats. But Newells wants people to know he’s “just a normal guy” who is always approachable and doesn’t really separate his roles as a clergyman and as a community member. “APEB is my church; it’s my congregation,” he laughs.

Though APEB takes a sex-positive approach and is not a faith-based organization, Newells considers his leadership at the AIDS group pastoral. “I’m very calm; I don’t freak out,” he says of his style. And while preaching at Imani is his weekend job, it’s important to him to be visible in faith communities as a Black gay man living with HIV.

“If there’s nobody that looks like you in the pulpit,” he says, “then you don’t necessarily know that you’re welcome.”

Newells had just returned to his hometown of Oakland, and to church, when he was diagnosed with HIV, in May 2005. “My first response was: ‘Well, God, what do you want me to do with this?’”

In 2007, he joined Imani, the East Oakland church his parents had started attending a few years earlier; in 2010, he helped start Imani’s first AIDS ministry. “I got up in front of the church to talk about the program I wanted to start and talked about my own experience,” he says. The congregation was receptive. He soon began collaborating with local leaders—and eventually national nonprofits—to build bridges between faith and HIV communities. He also became a minister at Imani in 2011. Since then, word of mouth has brought more gays and lesbians through the doors; Newells looks forward to welcoming more parishioners of trans experience as well.

“We don’t fly a rainbow flag,” Newells muses, “but people know they are comfortable when they

come to our church."

The American Baptist Churches (ABC) USA's official stance on homosexuality, according to the denomination's identity statement, is that it is "incompatible with Biblical teaching," hence the absence of a flag. (This is a considerable warming from the organization's 1987 assertion that "the unrepentant homosexual has no claim to full acceptance in the Christian community.") Local churches must conform to some extent, to maintain support from the national body.

However, each congregation is autonomous. The progressive leadership at Imani continues to "do what we do and not mess with the overall ABC folks," Newells says. At Imani, he has hosted events such as a screening of a film about Black gay health issues and a popular Bible study series on Black LGBT people.

"We know there is a need for it," he says of the gay subject matter. "People want something around faith—they want to be connected—but a lot of folks are afraid. There is so much 'church hurt' out there. And there are still local churches preaching hell and damnation."

The United States is already known as a highly religious nation. In a 2014 Pew Research Center study on the nation's religious landscape, 77 percent of respondents reported some religious affiliation. That number fell to 59 percent for LGBT-identified folks in the study.

Further, in a 2013 Pew survey of LGBT people's attitudes toward religion, high percentages of folks regarded major faith groups as "unfriendly" to LGBT community members. And for many, church hurt—the particular pain that abuse, discrimination or alienation from a religious institution can cause—may come with a crisis of identity.

Within the United States, African Americans stand out as by far the most "faith-full" group by race, with 88 percent of them professing certainty of the existence of God.

Rev. Deneen RobinsonCourtesy of Rev. Deneen Robinson

“For Black people,” says the Reverend Deneen Robinson of Living Faith Covenant Church in Dallas,

“faith is what has unified us through every tragedy—from slavery and our coming to this country to now.” Historically, Black churches were also rare institutions over which Black people themselves had control.

“You could go to a job and they call you Boy,” explains Bishop Yvette Flunder, in the 2014 documentary The New Black. “Then you come to your church, and your name is Deacon…and you have a place of prominence that the world doesn’t give.”

“For most Black people, faith is not just its own thing; it’s connected to family and friends and status,” adds Robinson, who is also a longtime HIV activist and founder of The Fellowship of Affirming Ministries in which she was ordained. For many, that (at least) 90-minute Sunday-morning engagement is at the center of a thick web of relationships, rituals, trust, protection and norms that binds together a person’s sense of who they are.

Ibrahim (not his real name), an American Muslim man from the Middle East who is gay, can relate.

“When you are already facing a lot of anger in the United States—when everything seems to alienate you—your connection to your community becomes the most important thing,” he says. “You feel like everybody is angry at you, and the only community that accepts you is your own community, the Muslim community.

“The last thing you want to feel is that even that community is rejecting you.”

“Most people aren’t willing to walk away from all the things that they’re connected to,” Robinson points out. For her, faith was “a context for building my life.” It was what she leaned on when she was diagnosed with HIV in 1991; she had two small daughters at the time and was told she had three to five years to live.

Despite growing up in a conservative Bible Belt Baptist church, Robinson did not take to heart the negative messages about LGBT people. Her great-aunt, whom she called Mama, helped raise her and had no patience for them.

Robinson recalls Mama’s best friend bad-mouthing someone for being gay: “I remember Mama saying, ‘That man is kinder to you than your own sons are to you. You’re not going to say bad things about him to me.’”

This was part of why Robinson never questioned the fact that she was attracted to both women and men—and why she didn’t hesitate to share her HIV diagnosis with anyone important in her life, including her pastor. “It was always reinforced, in my utopia, that God did literally love everyone, and there were no exceptions,” Robinson says. “I’ve realized that’s not what everyone heard.”

***

Using religious doctrine as a cover for social bias is a handy tactic for religious institutions. For

Ibrahim, there is religion and there is faith—and his relationship with his faith is untouchable by any human's bias.

"For people living with HIV, especially those who are Muslim, the first thing that happens to them is, because of religion, they feel they are in quarrel with their faith," he says, before clarifying the resulting conclusion: "Their connection to God is not governed by a virus. In fact, if anything, that will strengthen their relationship to God."

Ibrahim has been a community leader in his own right. For several years, under a pseudonym, he wrote a blog for the HIV website TheBody.com, becoming a voice in a busy, largely anonymous online network of HIV-positive and LGBT Muslims seeking information and support. [Editor's note: Our author edited his blog for more than three years.]

"I understand that for folks who are living with HIV and also have the issue of being LGBT, it becomes more complicated because of how much they hear hate coming from people who are using the guise of religion as a way to promote their own agenda," Ibrahim says.

"In the end, it's faith that will help them remember that in Islam, God is described as the most compassionate, the most merciful—just like the core of Christianity is love, the core of Islam is mercy. And the first mercy you have to start with is having mercy for your own self."

Imam Daayiee Abdullah is one of a tiny handful of openly gay Islamic faith leaders in the world. A Black man who came out in 1969, Abdullah experienced the most tragic period of AIDS history. He considers himself a survivor of the HIV epidemic, though he is not himself living with the virus. He was an early volunteer for Us Helping Us, now the largest Black gay HIV organization in Washington, DC, back when it was run from founder Bishop Kwabena Rainey Cheeks's living room.

Imam Daayiee AbdullahCourtesy of Imam Daayiee Abdullah

Abdullah's connection to the intersecting HIV and faith communities led him to become an imam. In 2002, Abdullah performed the ritual washing, shrouding and Janazah prayer for a Muslim man who died of complications of advanced HIV. His body had been left in the morgue for 30 days. "I always believed that a person has the right to have their religious rites," he says. After that, community members encouraged him to continue his pastoral work.

In the late 1990s, Abdullah began researching positive interpretations of homosexuality in Islam. He had converted to the faith several years earlier, after discovering that in some sects, being gay was not unusual.

"I came to realize that these different stories and ways in which they were interpreted were based upon the interpreter and the sexual taboos in their society," he explained. "What was being promoted as impossible in the Quran was actually just bias and prejudice of individuals."

Around the time that Abdullah was enthusiastically sharing his research, Urooj Arshad was consumed with her own struggles around identity as a young queer Muslim woman originally from Pakistan. "9/11 changed that," recalls Arshad, a seasoned activist now working at Advocates for Youth, a global sexual and reproductive health policy institute. "The questioning of oneself as Muslim went away because, whether we wanted it or not, more of a sociopolitical identity was emerging."

Another prevailing concept was that Muslims as a whole were terrible when it came to women and

LGBT communities. Right-wing leaders in the United States exploited this idea as part of justifying the war on terror. But Islam, as Arshad points out, encompasses 1.6 billion people worldwide and is not monolithic.

“We absolutely have a right to exist as both identities; no one gets to define that,” says Arshad, who identifies as Muslim but does not practice. “But we get hate from both communities. We get hate from Muslims who don’t think we belong within Islam. And we get hate from mainstream LGBT people who think, ‘Why would we want to fight for a faith that they think is terrible?’”

***

For several years, starting around 2011, Abdullah operated the Light of Reform Mosque in Washington, DC—a worship space that was not just affirming of LGBT people but also welcoming to all those who wanted a more open environment to practice their faith. “It held a lot of people, particularly a lot of young families, who were looking for a space where their children could grow up uninhibited,” Abdullah says.

A variety of people may be drawn to the affirming mosques and prayer services that are increasingly sprinkled across the Americas, adds Arshad, referencing Canada’s Toronto Unity Mosque, which she said is “inviting and open to anyone who doesn’t want to subscribe to a heteronormative or very rigid space—which is a lot of people!

Urooj ArshadCourtesy of Urooj Arshad/Todd Franson at Metro Weekly

“A lot of Muslims in the West are not connecting to mosques anymore,” Arshad notes. “There is this emergence of ‘third spaces’—community meetings and Islamic centers—that are opening up what it means to be Muslim.”

Oakland minister Newells also identifies affirming congregations as a remedy for the church hurt that so many have experienced. “People feel comfortable in that kind of space because you don’t have to put up any guards or wear any masks,” Newells says. “You can just be, and you know people aren’t judging you. You don’t get that at many congregations.”

***

“How do we transform institutions and congregations and gathering places to be more welcoming, so that people don’t leave?”

That question underpins the work of Teo Drake, a spiritual activist who works in multifaith spaces around what he calls “radical welcome.”

Drake was raised working-class Roman Catholic. Again, religion was culture, woven into every aspect of daily life. “I grew up with a lot of chaos, violence and addiction around me,” he recalls, “but when I was a little kid [because of my faith], I had a sense of something that loved and cared for me, that was bigger than I was. I couldn’t quite make sense of it, but it had an intimate feel to it.”

Drake went to Catholic high school and to Catholic college, but as a queer gender-nonconforming person, he found the environment so hostile that he had to get out. While getting sober in a 12-step recovery program, he discovered its sense of spirituality, and it marked the first time he found permission to have a direct relationship with the divine. “In Catholicism, there are so many intermediaries,” he remembers. “This was new.”

Thus began Drake’s “quest to ritualize access to the divine.” He began to find practices that worked for him—breathwork meditation, Buddhism, yoga—that helped him be at home in his body and heal the trauma that lived there.

“As a trans person living with HIV, my body was a war zone,” he says. “I was struggling with what I knew about my essence to be true and then the evidence that the world was telling me, based on my body, that couldn’t possibly be true.” He is a long-term survivor who was diagnosed with HIV before the advent and promise of effective treatment in 1996.

“Having practices and faith traditions helped me physically come home in ways that were gentle and to be in stillness with what I knew to be true about myself,” Drake says. As a result, “I could begin to negotiate a relationship that felt loving, that could take the place of all the evidence that I was getting from the world around me.”

Something Drake has noticed in LGBT communities in recent years is “more space to not always

see religion and faith as the enemy but to understand that there are a lot of us who are already here who find it healing."

This is particularly true, he says, among people with multiple marginalized identities, including living wit hHIV. It's "overwhelmingly common," he says, because one of the biggest tools for survival is having some type of faith practice. For him, working with faith communities around radical welcome is another, complementary side of that coin.

***

Visibility became a mandate in some corners of the LGBT community following the Pulse nightclub massacre in June 2016, in which 49 people, most of whom were young Latinx queer people, were killed by a disturbed homophobic young Muslim man.

Arshad and other queer Muslim activists cite the tragedy, while horrific, as an opening for building solidarity and understanding at the intersections of Muslim and LGBT identities. (Click here to read an interview with a Pulse survivor for more about the aftermath of the massacre.)

Pulse also galvanized Newells to be even more out in faith communities. "I made a decision not to be the 'safe gay' at church," he explains. "Whenever I stand up to talk about HIV now, I make it very personal."

Ibrahim is experiencing an almost opposite effect. State-approved racism and xenophobic hatred here in the United States—along with the trauma of violence in his region of origin and numerous other community challenges—have pushed his wish to be more open with his family about both his HIV-positive status and who he loves farther down his priority list.

"I have a very personal life," he says. "I feel it's going to be selfish if right at this time I try to push my own personal lifestyle on the community when they are trying to deal with bigger issues.

"Yes, I am part of the community in a way that is, maybe, not for my best interests at this time," he acknowledges, "but it is definitely because I want to be involved in this community that is facing a lot of hate and a lot of attacks. I have to be part of it. My hope is that once this cloud passes, I'll be able to fully engage in the community in the way that I want."

Ibrahim sees inspiration in others in the Muslim community who are able to be more open about who they are. "But we live in a very difficult time in America today."

"To whom do I belong?" Drake asks. "The answer, particularly within Buddhism, is that I belong to myself. But there is a communal sense of belonging, also, to others, in a loving and held way, that has been huge to my own survival."

Teo DrakeCourtesy of Teo Drake/PWN-USA

Drake finds it liberating, he says, to be among “people who wholeheartedly embrace their faith and their practice when dominant culture says we shouldn’t.” To him, it’s similar to being in the company of “people who thrive when dominant culture says we shouldn’t. There is something inherently divine about that.”

© 2026 Smart + Strong All Rights Reserved.

http://beta.docker.poz.com/article/faith-hiv-communities