Faith in Numbers

52 simple tips for making a difference in the struggle against AIDS

March 1, 2010 By LaToya Johnson

In ***52 Ways to Create an AIDS-free World*** Donald E. Messer, a Methodist theologian and executive director of the Center for Church and Global AIDS, reveals simple steps people can take in their everyday lives to eliminate stigma, tackle taboos and improve the lives of those hardest hit by the epidemic. *POZ* spoke with Messer about his book and its key messages.

Why did you write this book?
Almost 25 years ago, I had been asked to speak at a church in Denver about this [then] new disease and realized I needed to be educated. Five brave [HIV-positive] men shared their stories [with me], helping me prepare my sermon. In return, I promised I would continue to give voice to their hopes and concerns. *52 Ways* is an attempt to reach a public that often is more condemning than compassionate, more stigmatizing than liberating and more apathetic than active.

What is the significance behind the number 52?
Too many people focus on the global HIV pandemic only on World AIDS Day, so I am suggesting this is a daily challenge, which deserves our attention all 52 weeks of the year. I invite readers to add additional ways, since 52 is only meant to be suggestive— not limiting.

Why include a chapter on decriminalizing same-sex relationships?
HIV prevention messages are not reaching millions of people around the world because harassing laws penalize same-sex relationships. The human rights of all persons must be respected. Age-appropriate, mutually consenting, private same-sex relationships should not be outlawed. Criminalization policies negate HIV educational efforts aimed at groups often at high risk.

What can people do right now to create a world free of AIDS?
[We can] start with ourselves, making sure we don't have unprotected sex or engage in high-risk behavior. "Be frisky, not risky" is not only a good slogan, but promotes sexual health. Next is to make sure those we love know how to protect themselves—ignorance abounds. Speak out against stigma and discrimination. Become an advocate for a national AIDS policy. Everybody can make a difference.

A portion of the book's proceeds goes to The Global Fund to Fight AIDS, Tuberculosis and Malaria. ($9.95, Fresh Air Books)

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