



Now Is the Time

“Live your highest and best life,” urges long-term survivor Bishop Stacey S. Latimer, who shares his experiences and advice on aging with HIV: “You are still growing. You are yet who you shall be.”

August 12, 2024 By [Trent Straube](#)

Much has changed in the world since Stacey S. Latimer first appeared on the cover of POZ in 2007. For some context: The iPhone debuted that year, MySpace was more popular than fledgling Facebook and a junior senator from Illinois named Barack Obama announced his candidacy for president. Modern HIV treatment was also emerging: The first one-pill-once-a-day HIV treatment, Atripla, was approved the previous year, while pre-exposure prophylaxis (PrEP) to prevent HIV wouldn't be available for another five years, and the fact that Undetectable Equals Untransmittable (U=U) wouldn't be scientifically proved for almost a decade.

In 2007, Latimer was a 45-year-old, HIV-positive, same-gender-loving reverend at the Unity Fellowship Church in Brooklyn who performed HIV and AIDS ministerial work within the Black

church and advocacy within the larger community. Although he tested HIV positive in 1987 while in the Army, he had enjoyed good physical health and a rewarding life, thanks in part to treatment, care, his faith and a solid support system.

But as happens with many long-term survivors, other health challenges awaited. In 2019, Latimer was diagnosed with Stage IV prostate cancer, meaning it had already spread throughout his body. Although chemotherapy helped shrink the tumors, it eventually stopped working. Today, he's participating in a New York University clinical trial involving targeted radiation to kill cancer cells.

For this issue of POZ, which is focused on aging with HIV, we wanted to check in with Latimer, age 61, who is now a bishop with the Church of the Everlasting Kingdom. Our discussion, edited for length and clarity, covers clinical trials, the Black church, LGBTQ issues, life wisdom and, of course, an introduction to Kane, his larger-than-life canine companion and daily health champion.

Thanks to modern HIV treatment, many people living with the virus enjoy normal life spans with few side effects from the meds. That's amazing. But emerging data show that long-term survivors experience aging-related health challenges earlier than their HIV-negative peers and that they're at higher risk for certain comorbidities. For example, people living with HIV are at greater risk for cardiovascular disease and may benefit from starting cholesterol and blood pressure meds at an earlier threshold. And a recent study found that men with HIV had more advanced prostate cancer at diagnosis, which was the case with you. Do you feel you were informed about these issues before your cancer diagnosis?

I strongly feel that I had some knowledge about the prevalence of cancer in HIV patients, but I do not think I was adequately informed. By this, I mean we retain information and develop good habits through repetition. So I believe the information was not provided to me frequently enough. More needs to be done to inform at-risk individuals of the possible dangers [and] that higher-risk populations can request specific screenings as a part of their routine care, for we know early detection is key to better outcomes. There need to be more efforts in getting the message out to the masses, and there is a need for diverse messaging that meets target populations where they are.

You're currently in a cancer clinical trial. You have also participated in HIV studies, dating back to the 1980s when you were in the AIDS ward at Walter Reed National Military Medical Center in Washington, DC. Can you tell us about that?

I remember in 1987, the research team at Walter Reed came to the ward looking for subjects to volunteer to become part of research. Fear hindered my participation. I was much healthier then and not as knowledgeable. I declined but witnessed very ill people volunteer, willing to sacrifice themselves for the greater good of others. As life afforded me the opportunity to live beyond what was predicted, the experience made me wiser. I began to understand the importance of research, trials and the need for Black participation for future treatment and care outcomes as well as a cure.

Since 1988, I have been a participant in HIV research through the military, by way of the Henry M. Jackson Foundation along with the Veterans Administration. In the beginning, I was seen every three months. As health outcomes for people living with HIV and AIDS improved, that time was adjusted to every six months. Since reopening after COVID-19 restrictions, I am now seen once a year in person and once via video. I've had the privilege of participating in so many studies, I've lost count.

What advice would you like to impart to other folks aging with HIV?

There's no better time than now to live your highest and best life! Each person must take the time to figure out what that means for them. And don't forget, you are still growing. You are yet who you shall be. As we age, there's no time for being too upset, so depressed or so broken that we cannot or will not take the time to love and take care of ourselves. We must be actively involved in our health care. We must be our own best advocate. Maintaining a good support system that understands where you are is also helpful.

My philosophy, starting in 2023, the first time I was told that my cancer treatment was no longer working, has been: "I refuse to worry about and fear that which has not happened, for it will rob me of the joys of today." And a motto that we share in Kingdom is: "Life has only lessons and blessings to offer, if we are open and receptive to believe."

We must seek options and solutions to our fears, worries and doubts as we plan for favorable outcomes and a glorious end. Let nothing stop you from living your best life, not even the hard work of reconciling your faith. One of my favorite songs this season is by gospel artist Brent Jones, who [in the song "Live Your Best Life"] sings, "It's good to be alive, but it's best to live!" Also, don't be afraid to prepare for death. Come to terms with the fact it's a road we all must travel. Preparing does not mean you have given up. It means you are responsible.

Finally, as my first oncologist said to me early after my cancer diagnosis, "It's time to focus on what really matters to you." As I (we) do this, let's not forget about the "inner me": the essence of who we are, which is housed in our physical frames (bodies). We are spirit. To have a whole, balanced life, both the physical and the spiritual must be properly cared for and aligned. It's never too late to begin one's spiritual journey. I am a living witness that if the spirit is well taken care of, the physical part of you will thrive.

Your spiritual journey has been quite the trek. You were raised Southern Baptist in Laurens, South Carolina. You've also been an independent Pentecostal and a member of the gay-affirming Unity Fellowship Church in Brooklyn. You founded and were the pastor of Love Alive International Sanctuary of Praise Worship Center, and then you moved to liberation theology and became a bishop with the Church of the Everlasting Kingdom. How does faith impact your outlook and your health?

As scripture says, "We move from faith to faith and glory to glory." For me, religion has always given me hope. Faith always provided that God is going to make a way. If you believe you are divinely made by God in God's image for a divine purpose, it does something to you and for you. All of that says, "I have no time to sit around and die, nor is doing that going to fulfill me or my purpose." I think of how my life has been used to educate the Black church about HIV and AIDS and now cancer. I feel this need to herald and scream because doctors are not telling us about the

things we have to stay on top of [like cancer screenings].

You turn 62 this fall, and the Bishop's Council of Love Alive International Sanctuary of Praise is throwing a Red Party on October 4 to honor not only your birthday but also your HIV and LGBTQ advocacy. You've spoken before about earlier struggles to accept your sexuality—including a suicide attempt—and your work to meld that with your faith. Have you witnessed improvements on these fronts in the Black church, and what challenges remain?

Oh, yes, I have experienced and witnessed improvements [in attitudes] toward LGBTQIA people over the years as outreach and education continues to meet people, houses of worship and institutions where they are. The truth of love is not always easily received—that love overcomes all things, that love heals all things.

Even though we continue to make great strides concerning attitudes toward LGBTQIA people and people living with HIV and AIDS, our remaining challenges—religion, outdated cultures and customs, along with greed and hate—will more than likely continue to hinder HIV and AIDS education, prevention and access to care and treatment. This also blocks efforts to end AIDS and to solve our mental health crisis. The wheels of equality tend to move very slow. Yet in this volatile climate saturated with hate, everyone's voice is important. Every vote counts. Every life matters!

I knew I was same-gender-loving at 6 years old, but I didn't have words to [describe the experience or my identity]. There wasn't even information to help my parents understand.

My family was not perfect, but their love and support allowed me to freely grow and become me without most of the hateful biases that fill a child with brokenness and unanswered questions.

There is so much power found in self-love. Living your truth positions you to receive all the good that was meant for you. It provides you a peace the world cannot take away.

SIDEBAR

Man's Best Friend—and Healer

Growing up, Bishop Stacey S. Latimer always had dogs, and he always wanted an Italian mastiff (also known as a cane corso). Alas, it wasn't to be—that is, until a few years ago, when the image of one popped up on Latimer's Facebook feed, spurring him to research breeders. In 2019, he put

down a deposit; then, two months later, he was diagnosed with Stage IV prostate cancer.

“I didn’t know what to do,” he recalls. “I didn’t want to have him orphaned. I decided to discuss it with my doctor. He said, ‘Mr. Latimer, you get your dog. People with pets generally do better.’”

In fact, a recent survey by CancerCare's Pet Assistance & Wellness Program found that 92% of respondents said their pet was extremely important throughout their cancer diagnosis. Some respondents (15%) valued their pets so much that they considered ending or pausing cancer treatment in order to keep them.

Latimer followed the advice, and today, he and Kane are virtually inseparable. "He's a gentle giant," Latimer says. "He draws a lot of attention and is known as the mayor of Brooklyn. He has been a life changer. Before I got him, the doctor said to me one day, 'Mr. Latimer, I want you to do at least 7,000 steps a day.' It was a struggle. But once I got him—10,000 steps, 15,000 steps. Getting a dog just starts to make you feel good!"

SIDEBAR

Information Age

"We must seek out information to stay informed," says Bishop Stacey S. Latimer, a long-term survivor also dealing with cancer. "Ask questions so that you might have the answers to make informed decisions concerning your life that line up with your desires and your vision." He's planning a November event with the New York State Health Department to educate faith leaders on issues of HIV and cancer. Today, over 50% of people with HIV are 50 or older. If you are aging with HIV, check out these resources:

[HIV+ Aging Research Project—Palm Springs](#) (HARP-PS) aims to improve the lives of people with HIV by studying the impact of HIV and treatment on the natural aging process. The group also spearheads research projects.

[HIV Long-Term Survivors Awareness Day](#) (HLTSAD) is observed each June 5, but related information is available year-round.

[Let's Kick ASS—AIDS Survivor Syndrome](#) is a nonprofit that aims to empower long-term survivors and enhance quality of life.

[National HIV/AIDS and Aging Awareness Day](#) (NHAAD), observed September 18, highlights issues and organizations focused on this topic.

[POZ.com](#) continues to post related news, science, profiles and more. Click the hashtags [#Aging](#) and [#Long-Term-Survivors](#) for a collection of headlines, including "[HIV & Aging: The Basics](#)."

[The Reunion Project](#), an alliance of long-term survivors, offers national and regional gatherings, bimonthly webinars and an email newsletter.

[SAGE](#) (Advocacy & Services for LGBTQ+ Elders) offers resources for older queer people living with HIV.

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