Stepping Up In Faith

New York City's religious leaders come together to promote an interfaith response to HIV/AIDS.

July 20, 2009 By LaToya Johnson

Religious leaders, local officials and representatives from AIDS service organizations (ASOs) gathered July 8 at New York City Hall to kick off "Interfaith for HIV/AIDS: A Call to Take Action in 2009." The forum is a citywide effort to promote partnership between religious groups and community-based organizations in the fight against HIV/AIDS.

"The time is now that we all join together. ASOs, houses of worship, communities, community-based organizations all coming together to eradicate this pandemic of HIV and AIDS," said Darlene Cheek from The Balm in Gilead.



Shoes linedthe steps of New York City Hall to kick off the interfaitheffort.

The motif of the five-day event was "Stepping Up in Faith for HIV and AIDS." Keeping with the theme, attendees brought new or gently used footwear to the press conference as a symbol of their dedication to the HIV/AIDS battle. The shoes were donated to community-based organizations that help people living with the virus in the five boroughs.

Representatives from organizations such as the Community HIV/AIDS Mobilization Project (CHAMP), the Latino Commission on AIDS, the Queens Pastoral Council and the National Black Leadership Commission on AIDS took turns giving words of encouragement and exhorting listeners to raise their level of commitment to HIV/AIDS work.

"I pray to God that this is not just a formality, that we have come out representing something that doesn't exist," said the Reverend Stacey Latimer from Unity Fellowship Church at the forum. Latimer, who graced the November 2007 cover of *POZ*, was diagnosed with HIV in 1987. "We represent more than those you see. We represent people who have been empowered to say enough is enough. We can overcome HIV/AIDS.... It only starts with you and me."

The Reverend Edgard Danielsen-Morales, who has lost about 6,000 Metropolitan Community Church of New York members to AIDS, shared heart-felt words. Remember the stories of those who have passed away from AIDS-related illness, instructed Danielsen-Morales. "When we remember the stories of our loved ones who have died of AIDS, we become hopeful and the desire for justice ignites inside of us."

New York City's Riverside Church hosted the remainder of the conference, from July 8 through 12, which included HIV testing and workshops on HIV prevention. In addition, ministers shared their experiences

with each other with the aim of teaching spiritual leaders how to get more involved in the HIV/AIDS issues. “A lot of faith ministries want to do more, but they don’t know how. When we put them in a classroom-type setting, often a faith leader can learn peer to peer,” said Divinah “Dee” Bailey, founder of Watchful Eye, a community-based organization.



The ReverendEdgard Danielsen-Morales of the Metropolitan Community Church of NewYork urges attendees to remember those lost in the struggleagainst HIV/AIDS.

According to the New York City Department of Health and Mental Hygiene, New York remains the epicenter of the HIV/AIDS epidemic, with more AIDS cases than Los Angeles, San Francisco, Miami and Washington, DC, combined. Following this event, initiative organizers said hope faith leaders will use the resources and knowledge they received to address the issue of HIV/AIDS in their congregations.

“[HIV/AIDS] is not something that only community organizations talk about or the government talk about,” said Danielsen-Morales. “We have to stick together…work together, because this crosses racial, ethnic, economic, [and religious] boundaries.”

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