Walking in Purpose

Joyce Turner Keller fights HIV stigma in the church.

January 6, 2020 By Alicia Green

When Joyce Turner Keller was diagnosed with HIV 18 years ago, she relied heavily on her Christian faith to get her through this new phase of life.

“My spirituality was everything,” says the 70-year-old interdenominational minister and advocate from Baton Rouge, Louisiana, who is also the founder of Aspirations Wholistic Tutorial Services. “It was the foundation of my healing.”

Turner Keller describes her diagnosis as an awakening. If it could happen to a praying woman like her, then she thought it could happen to anyone. She knew she had to educate others, so she disclosed her HIV status to family and friends within four hours of being diagnosed.

She shared her HIV diagnosis with fellow church members during a prayer service at her home.

“It wasn’t hard,” she says. “It was like, ‘You have another purpose. Instead of saving souls, now you got to start saving some lives.’ And that’s what I did.”

She became certified in HIV and hepatitis testing and counseling and started testing fellow congregants and people at hair salons and barbershops.

Turner Keller never let others’ fear of HIV or ignorance about the virus affect her. Instead, she turned every negative response to her status into a teachable moment. “I shared with them what compassion does and how it is necessary to put yourself in another person’s shoes,” she explains.

Through Aspirations, Turner Keller has tested thousands of people and connected many to care. She has traveled to different churches and rural communities to “reach people where they are.”

“To provide HIV testing to every community is one of the most phenomenal things that my being positive has done,” she says.

Turner Keller’s “Straight Talk at the Kitchen Table” conversations address topics such as sex, HIV, gender identity and domestic violence.

“People come into my home, and I cook,” she explains. “We have people from every walk of life, and we talk about any social issues on anybody’s mind.” She has adapted her 10-year-old model

and taken it to other communities, drug rehabilitation centers and prisons.

Today, Turner Keller continues to provide testing, condoms and sex education to her community. She teaches people about the effectiveness of pre-exposure prophylaxis (PrEP) and the concept of Undetectable Equals Untransmittable (U=U).

She is also working to break the stigma associated with talking about sexual health and condoms among women in the church, which is one of her greatest challenges.

Turner Keller doesn't believe there should be a limit on how long you can serve your community. Her goal is to make a difference, be the voice of the voiceless and normalize life with HIV.

Her advice to those newly diagnosed: Get into and stay in care, find a good support group and fall in love with yourself.

"HIV is nothing more than a challenge that affords me the opportunity to walk in my purpose," she says. "I have only begun to lead."

© 2026 Smart + Strong All Rights Reserved.
http://beta.docker.poz.com/article/walking-purpose-joyce-turner-keller