

---

# Some in faith community seek to address issue of AIDS

By [Shelia M. Poole](#)

The Atlanta Journal-Constitution

For a long time, Vanessa Sharp lived in fear that members of her Atlanta church would discover that she was HIV-positive.

"I faced fear of rejection," said Sharp, who was first diagnosed in 1990.

Today, she is an ordained minister studying in Ghana. Twenty years ago, the face of HIV/AIDS was of white, gay men. Sharp, who later developed AIDS, knew all too well how the faith community viewed people with the disease.

"I heard stories of guys I knew who were gay and HIV [positive], how they were kicked out of the church rather than helped and encouraged and loved," said Sharp, who contracted the disease from her fiancé.

Although she had the support of relatives, she also wanted to protect her family from public scorn, particularly her minister father.

"There are those who want to believe that it doesn't touch the people in the church," said Sharp, who went public with her diagnosis in 1997 on World AIDS Day.

More than a decade later, the faith community still struggles with how to address the disease, which infects more than 56,000 Americans annually. Blacks have been disproportionately affected by the disease and account for more new infections, AIDS cases and HIV-related deaths than any other racial or ethnic group in the United States, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

"This issue of HIV/AIDS is too urgent for business as usual," said the Rev. Raphael G. Warnock, senior pastor of Ebenezer Baptist Church. "We are in the fight of our lives and the African-American community is ground zero."

During a recent Sunday morning service, Warnock, 40, took a rapid oral fluid test to help allay fears of others who are afraid to know their status.

"AIDS is so stigmatized that people won't even get the test," he said. The church provided free tests for members. "In my own way, I was dramatizing the silent death that HIV/AIDS represents."

It was part of his ongoing effort to wage war against the "unholy trinity" of silence, shame and stigma. Ebenezer has participated in programs to encourage testing and has worked with HIV/AIDS support groups.

Warnock is also chairman of the Atlanta affiliate of the National Black Leadership Commission on AIDS, which supports passage of the National Black Clergy for the Elimination of AIDS Act, a pending federal bill that addresses the toll that the epidemic has had on the black community.

Among other things, the act would expand educational activities targeting black women, youth and men, particularly those having sexual contact with other men. The bill emphasizes education, prevention and testing in the African American community.

**“It’s been a long struggle,” said Dazon Dixon Diallo, founder of SisterLove Inc., an Atlanta-based nonprofit organization that focuses on HIV/AIDS issues. “We may get one or two friendly pastors or ministers that have progressed in their own ideas and theology around HIV, sexuality and sex education.”**

But many remain on the sidelines. By taking a test in front of his congregation, Warnock, pastor of one of the country’s most historic churches, sent a powerful message, she said.

**“The challenge going forward, though, is that we still have to get our faith leaders to step a little bit out of their comfort zones,” Diallo said.**

**“We need the faith leadership, in their own ideas, teachings and preaching, to somehow be inclusive and still practice compassion even if people’s actions and behaviors are different,” she said. “It’s really, really impossible to talk about HIV and AIDS without talking about sex and sexuality and that’s sticky for a lot of people in the faith leadership.”**

Several metro churches have stepped forward to help people with HIV/AIDS.

Tom Wethington is a co-leader of the AIDS ministry of the Basilica of the Sacred Heart of Jesus in downtown Atlanta. The ministry has been active since 1989. Wethington, a marketing and public relations consultant, has lost at least five close friends to the disease.

"[The ministry] is a way for me to really try to claim some sort of progress for these good friends of mine who have passed away," Wethington said. The ministry provides spiritual and physical support to those infected or affected by HIV/AIDS. It also provides support to a home for women who have the disease with no other means of support.

Hillside International Chapel and Truth Center Inc. had one of the city’s earliest HIV/AIDS ministries, offering assistance to people living with the disease. The Rev. Barbara L. King said the ministry offered testing, invited guest speakers who were experts on the topic and sponsored workshops on prevention.

“We’re all God’s children,” she said. “We’ve never been against people with AIDS. This is a community of love.”