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## The Red Ribbon and the Black Cross: A Qualitative Study of the Relationship between Social Activism and Contemporary Black Church Responses to HIV in Oakland, CA

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 <p><b>Justise Wattree</b></p> <p>Major: Humanities</p> <p>Mentor: <b>Dr. Michael R. Fisher Jr.</b></p> <p><i>The Red Ribbon and the Black Cross: A Qualitative Study of the Relationship between Social Activism and Contemporary Black Church Responses to HIV in Oakland, CA</i></p>	<p><b><i>Biography</i></b></p> <p><i>Justise Wattree is from Sacramento, California. He received his B.A. in the Humanities with a minor in Public Health May 2023 at San José State University. He is a McNair Scholar, a recent fellow for the CDC-CUPS fellowship, and an alumnus of the Humanities Honors program at SJSU. He has worked as a research assistant for several non-profits and a global research collaboration. He has received awards for his research, one of which being 1<sup>st</sup> place in the CSU system-wide research competition. His research discusses racial health disparities. He hopes to further explore this topic as he attends Johns Hopkins University for his Master of Health Science in Social Factors.</i></p>
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***The Red Ribbon and the Black Cross: A Qualitative Study of the Relationship between Social Activism and Contemporary Black Church Responses to HIV in Oakland, CA***

**Abstract**

The Black Church as a social institution has been a source of social activism during racial crises, but there is a lacking social activist response by Black churches to HIV's disparate impact on Black communities. Previous research does not adequately explore the influence of community-based organizations on Black church responses to HIV in the context of social activism. This study examines the relationship between social activism and contemporary Black church responses to HIV in Oakland. It considers community-based organizations (CBOs) as potential drivers of social activism. Semi-structured interviews with Black church leaders in Oakland were conducted and content analyzed along with associated church websites to thematize contemporary responses to HIV. Findings reveal that Black churches that have adequate resources, are committed to social justice, and welcome and affirm gender and sexual minorities are motivated to address HIV through social activism.

**Keywords:** AIDS; Black Church; community-based organizations; HIV; Oakland; social activism; social justice

## INTRODUCTION

On the 35<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the HIV epidemic in 2016, former President Barack Obama released a press statement claiming that an AIDS free generation is possible.<sup>1</sup> This is a bold claim but has increasingly become more likely with the advent of new biomedical innovations that can treat and prevent HIV. He emphasized that a continued mobilization of testing, treatment, and education among the most impacted populations is necessary to realize this goal.<sup>2</sup> From the onset of the epidemic until now, African Americans have been disparately impacted. In 1981, the year of the first reported AIDS cases in the U.S., they represented 29% of HIV cases while being only 11.7% of the total U.S. population.<sup>3</sup> Similarly, in 2020, they accounted for 13.4% of the total U.S. population but are 37.4% of people living with HIV.<sup>4</sup> Racial disparities in HIV outcomes are associated with structural barriers to HIV care and prevention, like access to affordable

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<sup>1</sup> Amy Lansky, “Statement by the President on the 35th Anniversary of HIV/AIDS in America,” June 5, 2016, <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/blog/2016/06/05/statement-president-35th-anniversary-hivaids-america>.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup>Centers for Disease Control, “HIV Surveillance Report, 2020,” May 2022, <https://www.cdc.gov/hiv/pdf/library/reports/surveillance/cdc-hiv-surveillance-report-2020-updated-vol-33.pdf>. This report notes that the reduction of HIV diagnoses in 2020 is likely “due to disruptions in clinical care services, patient hesitancy in accessing clinical services, and shortages in HIV testing reagents/materials, which causes concern regarding underdiagnosis.”; Reinhold, Robert, and Special to the New York Times. “1980 Census Shows 17% Growth of Blacks Surpassed Rise for U.S.,” *The New York Times*, February 24, 1981, sec. U.S., <https://www.nytimes.com/1981/02/24/us/1980-census-shows-17-growth-of-blacks-surpassed-rise-for-us.html>.

<sup>4</sup> “Impact on Racial and Ethnic Minorities,” HIV.gov, January 26, 2022, <https://www.hiv.gov/hiv-basics/overview/data-and-trends/impact-on-racial-and-ethnic-minorities>.

healthcare, incarceration, and poverty.<sup>5</sup> Community-based interventions (CBIs) are health programs designed to improve health outcomes in certain communities.<sup>6</sup> They are an effective evidence-based solution to address social and structural barriers because they “allow increased access and ease the availability of medical care to populations at risk, or already with HIV.”<sup>7</sup> Churches and other faith-based organizations (FBOs) are ideal conduits for CBIs due to their trusted position in vulnerable communities.<sup>8</sup> Given the historical role of Black churches in addressing pressing issues in Black communities in the U.S., Black churches are well-situated to be efficient mediums for implementing community-based interventions.

### **The Black Church & HIV**

Historically, the Black Church has held a central role within the Black community.<sup>9</sup> Its prominence is largely due to its function as a source

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<sup>5</sup> Matthew E. Levy et al., “Understanding Structural Barriers to Accessing HIV Testing and Prevention Services among Black Men Who Have Sex with Men (BMSM) in the United States,” *AIDS and Behavior* 18, no. 5 (2014): 972-996, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10461-014-0719-x>.

<sup>6</sup> Kenneth R. McLeroy, Barbara L. Norton, Michelle C. Kegler, James N. Burdine, and Ciro V. Sumaya. “Community-Based Interventions.” *American Journal of Public Health* 93, no. 4 (April 2003): 529–33. <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC1447783/>.

<sup>7</sup> Rehana A Salam et al., “Impact of Community-Based Interventions on HIV Knowledge, Attitudes, and Transmission,” *Infectious Diseases of Poverty* 3, no. 1 (2014): n.p., <https://doi.org/10.1186/2049-9957-3-26>.

<sup>8</sup> Karen R. Flórez, Denise D Payán, Kartika Palar, Malcolm V Williams, Bozena Katic, and Kathryn P. Derosé. “Church-Based Interventions to Address Obesity among African Americans and Latinos in the United States: A Systematic Review.” *Nutrition Reviews* 78, no. 4 (April 1, 2020): 304–22. <https://doi.org/10.1093/nutrit/nuz046>.

<sup>9</sup> Richard I. McKinney, “The Black Church: Its Development and Present Impact.” *The Harvard Theological Review* 64, no. 4 (1971): 452–81. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1509098>.

of resiliency and social justice to rectify racially discriminatory conditions. Sociologist Sandra Barnes (2004) describes the Black Church as an agent for “civil, political, and economic involvement” and as a “refuge in a hostile, white world.”<sup>10</sup> By appropriating Christian tenants of hope and salvation to the Black American experience, many Black Americans use the Christian faith as a source of “moral and spiritual strength” against racial injustices.<sup>11</sup> The Black Church facilitates the creation of groups and networks in which resources are distributed and exchanged. Sociologist Daniel C. Thompson states that the Black Church acts as a parent to many organizations in the Black community who seek to compensate for insufficient access to resources by providing services.<sup>12</sup> An example of this is the burial-aids societies which assisted families with funeral funds. Furthermore, Black churches create socially cohesive communities due to mass participation in worship and other church activities where messages of resistance and social justice are shared. As a result, congregants can find the motivation to create social change by being immersed in church culture. The Black Church has historically given members the tools to stay resilient to past injustices, but its participation in some contemporary racial issues, namely HIV, is lacking compared to previous efforts.

In 1981, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) declared the onset of the HIV epidemic. It paralyzed some Black congregations due to its high prevalence in socially ostracized groups, e.g., men who have sex with men, people who use drugs, and commercial sex workers.<sup>13</sup> At that time, the dominant Christian theological interpretation of

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<sup>10</sup>Sandra L. Barnes, “Priestly and Prophetic Influences on Black Church Social Services.” *Social Problems* 51, no. 2 (2004): 203, <https://doi.org/10.1525/sp.2004.51.2.202>.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> Daniel C. Thompson, *The Negro Leadership Class*, (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall-Spectrum Books, 1963).

<sup>13</sup> Nikita Viswasam, Sheree Schwartz, and Stefan Baral, “Characterizing the Role of Intersecting Stigmas and Sustained Inequities in Driving HIV Syndemics across Low-to-Middle-Income Settings,” *Current Opinion in*

homosexuality condemned same-gender love and stigmatized premarital sex, and construed HIV/AIDS as God's punishment for disobeying his commandments.<sup>14</sup> Church leaders also did not think it was worthy of being addressed due to media portrayals of HIV being a “white, gay man’s disease.”<sup>15</sup> The taboo of sexuality and the lack of awareness of its prevalence within Black communities prevented Black churches from mobilizing resources at the beginning of the epidemic. Unfortunately, studies note that this lack of early response among Black churches is partly responsible for the virus’s disproportionate impact on Black communities.<sup>16</sup>

By the mid-1990s, the impact of HIV became apparent within congregations and the broader community, catalyzing the creation of church ministries and programs to help those living with HIV thrive and to educate the wider community on prevention. For example, the African Methodist Episcopal (AME) Church—the first Black Church denomination in the U.S.—instituted guidelines to increase HIV literacy among its clergy. Requirements mandate that clergy at all levels are expected to 1) have a basic scientific understanding of HIV and 2) be recertified every four years.<sup>17</sup> Similarly, activist Parnessa C. Seele organized the Harlem Week of Prayer to educate Black religious leaders and to help them develop

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*HIV and AIDS* Publish Ahead of Print (January 2020): n.p.,  
<https://doi.org/10.1097/coh.0000000000000630>.

<sup>14</sup> Horace L. Griffin, *Their Own Receive Them Not: African American Lesbians and Gays in Black Churches* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2010).

<sup>15</sup> Angelique C. Harris, “Sex, Stigma, and the Holy Ghost: The Black Church and the Construction of AIDS in New York City.” *Journal of African American Studies* 14, no. 1 (2010): 31.

<https://doi.org/10.1007/s12111-009-9105-6>.

<sup>16</sup> For a representative sample, see Cohen, Cathy J. *The Boundaries of Blackness: AIDS and the Breakdown of Black Politics*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999.

<sup>17</sup> Robin G. Lanzi et al., “Love with No Exceptions: A Statewide Faith-Based, University–Community Partnership for Faith-Based HIV Training and Assessment of Needs in the Deep South,” *AIDS and Behavior* 23, no. 11 (2019): 2936-2945, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10461-019-02604-7>.

progressive responses to HIV.<sup>18</sup> Her efforts later expanded to the creation of the Balm of Gilead, a non-profit organization that coordinates religious institutions worldwide to address HIV and other health disparities. The cumulative work of activists like Seele resulted in Black clergy addressing homophobia and misinformation within their congregations. Furthermore, the Ryan White CARE Act of 1990 and other government-funded initiatives enabled churches to apply for capacity development grants to increase their ability to develop community-based interventions.<sup>19</sup> Churches could use grant money to establish in-house primary care services to increase access to essential services for those living with or at risk of contracting HIV. Despite increased support, congregations are still battling stigma, lack of awareness, and insufficient funding for the mobilization needed to improve HIV outcomes in Black communities.

### **Social Activism, Social Justice, and Social Services**

Addressing health issues is neither new nor uncommon among Black churches. They utilize education, community building, and alliances within a social-activist framework to mitigate health disparities and their effects on other social inequities. In a study that seeks to understand the relationship between social activism and gender inclusivity in Black churches, Barnes (2006) defines social activism as “community involvement designed to address social problems such as poverty, discrimination, and other forms of unequal treatment.”<sup>20</sup> Social activism is

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<sup>18</sup>Dan Royles, *To Make the Wounded Whole: The African American Struggle against HIV/AIDS* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2020).

<sup>19</sup> “Part C: Early Intervention Services and Capacity Development Program Grants,” Ryan White HIV/AIDS Program, (February 4, 2022), <https://ryanwhite.hrsa.gov/about/parts-and-initiatives/part-c-early-intervention>.

<sup>20</sup> Sandra L. Barnes, “Whosoever Will Let Her Come: Social Activism and Gender Inclusivity in the Black Church.” *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 45, no. 3 (2006): 383, note 2. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-5906.2006.00312.x>.



rooted in the prophetic role of the Black Church. Religious scholars Eric C. Lincoln and Lawrence H. Mamiya (1990) contend that the Black Church has the priestly and prophetic function. The priestly function deals with the spiritual concerns of congregants, while the prophetic role is concerned with “political involvement and activities.”<sup>21</sup> This prophetic role allows churches to work “in the world to improve political, social, and economic conditions.”<sup>22</sup> Ultimately, social activism in the Black Church tradition can be useful in addressing the social and structural drivers of health disparities.

Churches often establish health ministries to address health issues within their respective communities. Health ministries are formal and informal church programming that holistically—spiritually, physically, and psychologically—addresses health.<sup>23</sup> They refer clients to medical care and social services to compensate for social and healthcare disparities within their own communities. These services are meant to act as the collective’s provision of resources and support for its own members and are offered in the example of the Christian emphasis on helping the less fortunate.<sup>24</sup> Some examples of services are counseling, food services, housing assistance, and financial aid.

Social services and social activism are different due to their intended beneficiaries. Social services within churches are meant to address the individual needs of clients. Social activism addresses issues that collectively impact the public. Social activism addresses structural drivers of disparity, which affects multiple populations. Social services mitigate outcomes of structural inequities, which are often unique to the place, time, and

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<sup>21</sup> Eric C. Lincoln, and Lawrence H. Mamiya. *The Black Church in the African American Experience*. Durham: Duke University Press, 1990, 12.

<sup>22</sup> Sandra L. Barnes, “Priestly and Prophetic Influences on Black Church Social Services,” 209.

<sup>23</sup> Diane Dean, Karen T. Jorgensen, David S. Loose, and Mary E. Duffy. “Local Health Planning: A Report of a Collaborative Process between a University and a Church.” *Family and Community Health* 10, no. 4 (1988): 13–22. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/44952918>.

<sup>24</sup> Sandra L. Barnes “Priestly and Prophetic Influences on Black Church Social Services.”

population they manifest in. Nevertheless, both participate in the project of social justice. Social justice is a process and an outcome in which resources and social benefits are distributed fairly.<sup>25</sup> Within the Black Church tradition, social justice advances the welfare of marginalized populations through theological principles of equality, justice, and inclusiveness and is used for the socio-political deliverance from racial oppression.<sup>26</sup>

### ***HIV in Oakland and Local CBOs***

Oakland's Black residents account for approximately 24% of its population, making it the city with the largest Black population in the San Francisco Bay Area.<sup>27</sup> In Alameda County, where Oakland is located, roughly 6,300 people are currently living with HIV.<sup>28</sup> Most of these cases are in Oakland.<sup>29</sup> From 2018–2020, Black people made up 40.2% of new HIV diagnoses while only being 10% of the population in Alameda

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<sup>25</sup> Colin R. Bonnycastle, "Social Justice along a Continuum: A Relational Illustrative Model." *Social Service Review* 85, no. 2 (2011): 267–95. <https://doi.org/10.1086/660703>.

<sup>26</sup> Sandra L. Barnes, "Black Church Culture and Community Action," *Social Forces* 84, no. 2 (December 1, 2005): 967–94. <https://doi.org/10.1353/sof.2006.0003>; James I. Clark, "Social Justice and Black Church Leadership: A Phenomenological Study." *ProQuest Dissertations Publishing*, 2014. <https://www.proquest.com/docview/1691842963>.

<sup>27</sup> Stephen Menendian and Samir Gambir, "Racial Segregation in the San Francisco Bay Area, Part 2," *Other and Belonging Institute*, (2019), n.p., <https://belonging.berkeley.edu/racial-segregation-san-francisco-bay-area-part-2>.

<sup>28</sup> "2022 Demographics," Healthy Alameda County, accessed July 10, 2022, <https://www.healthyalamedacounty.org/demographicdata>; Alameda County Department of Health, "HIV in Alameda County, 2018-2020," n.d., <https://oaklandtga.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/01/hiv-ac-2018-20.pdf>.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid.

County.<sup>30</sup> There is a diverse denominational landscape of Black churches to accommodate Oakland's large Black population that includes the African Methodist Episcopal Church, the Baptist Church, the Church of God in Christ, and the United Church of Christ, among others.<sup>31</sup>

Previous studies suggest there is a connection between faith-based responses to HIV and social activism, but scholars have not given sufficient attention to the relationship between the two.<sup>32</sup> Research on faith-based responses to HIV within the Black Church primarily examines the influence of spirituality, cultural stigmas, and clergy demographics on the church's responsiveness to HIV.<sup>33</sup> While such studies are informative, they fail to

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<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

<sup>31</sup> Churches were found through web search and inquiry on denomination websites. Please refer to these sites, "American Baptist Churches USA," Accessed January 27, 2023. <https://www.abc-usa.org/>; United Church of Christ, "Home," Accessed January 27, 2023, <https://www.ucc.org/>; "Fifth Episcopal District African Methodist Episcopal Church," Accessed April 29, 2023. <https://www.ame5.org/>; "Church Locator - Church of God in Christ," December 17, 2014. <https://www.cogic.org/church-locator/>.

<sup>32</sup> For representative samples, see Connie Musolino et al., "Global Health Activists' Lessons on Building Social Movements for Health for All," *International Journal for Equity in Health* 19, no. 1 (June 2020): n.p., <https://doi.org/10.1186/s12939-020-01232-1>; "Home," The Black Church and HIV (August 21, 2018) <https://theblackchurchandhiv.org/>; Shelley A. Francis, and Joan Liverpool, "A Review of Faith-Based HIV Prevention Programs," *Journal of Religion and Health* 48, no. 1 (2009): 6–15. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10943-008-9171-4>.

<sup>33</sup> For representative samples, see Madeline Y. Sutton and Carolyn P. Parks, "HIV/AIDS Prevention, Faith, and Spirituality among Black/African American and Latino Communities in the United States: Strengthening Scientific Faith-Based Efforts to Shift the Course of the Epidemic and Reduce HIV-Related Health Disparities," *Journal of Religion and Health* 52, no. 2 (2011): 514-530, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10943-011-9499-z> and Patrick A. Wilson et al., "Ideologies of Black Churches in New York City and the Public Health

give attention to the external factors, namely other organizations, which also shape Black churches' willingness to address HIV in a social-activist manner. Sociologist Brad R. Fulton (2011) states that a Black church's responsiveness to HIV is associated with its commitment to “external engagement,” meaning the level of community involvement determines the presence of HIV programming in a congregation.<sup>34</sup> Sociologists Paul J. Dimaggio and Walter W. Powell (1991) emphasize the social environment “sets standards of legitimacy and pressures” the organization to adopt its interests.<sup>35</sup> There are several CBOs in Oakland that are addressing the HIV epidemic that may influence Black churches’ responses, including the AIDS Project of the East Bay (APEB), Women Organized to Respond to Life-Threatening Disease, and the Oakland LGBTQ Center.

### **Research Questions**

This study examines the relationship between social activism and contemporary responses of Black churches to HIV in Oakland. In doing so, it explores if CBOs are potential drivers of social activism within Black churches and investigates if they influence contemporary responses to HIV within Oakland Black churches.

The following research questions guide this study:

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Crisis of HIV among Black Men Who Have Sex with Men,” *Global Public Health* 6, no. sup2 (2011),  
<https://doi.org/10.1080/17441692.2011.605068>.

<sup>34</sup> Brad R. Fulton, “Black Churches and HIV/AIDS: Factors Influencing Congregations’ Responsiveness to Social Issues,” *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 50, no. 3 (2011): 617-630,  
<https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-5906.2011.01579.x>.

<sup>35</sup> Paul J. DiMaggio and Walter W. Powell, “The Iron Cage Revisited: Institutional Isomorphism and Collective Rationality in Organizational Fields,” *American Sociological Review* 48, no. 2 (1983): 147,  
<https://doi.org/10.2307/2095101>.

1. Is there a relationship between social activism and contemporary Black Church responses to HIV in Oakland?
2. Does engagement with HIV CBOs make Black churches more likely to respond to HIV with social activism?
3. If so, how do these relationships shape Black churches' responses to HIV? What do these responses look like?
4. If not, what other factors encourage Black churches to respond to HIV with social activism?
  - a. In what ways do Black Churches respond to HIV, which is not social activism?

### METHODS

Semi-structured interviews up to one hour in duration were conducted to collect primary source data. Interview participants were identified through a web search of Black churches in Oakland. The criterion for participation included holding a leadership position in a local Black church that currently or recently had an active HIV ministry/initiative. Participants represented their respective churches. A total of four interviews were conducted with five participants on the web-conference platform, Zoom, and in person. Three Black churches were represented in the sample. Secondary source data was collected from the internet and included websites of churches represented in the study and previously conducted interviews with affiliated clergy available on archival sites. Content analysis was used to analyze interview transcripts, website content, and archival data to identify dominant themes relevant to the study.

The following is an anonymized chart of participant churches and their respective respondents.

Table 1: Participant Churches and Respondents

Black Church 1	Respondent 1 Respondent 2 Respondent 3
Black Church 2	Respondent 4

Black Church 3

Respondent 5

## RESULTS

### **1. Is there a relationship between social activism and contemporary Black church responses to HIV in Oakland?**

Yes, there is a relationship between social activism and contemporary Black church responses to HIV in Oakland. All three participant churches indicate responses to HIV that adheres to definition of social activism in this study. These activities included housing development, encouraging other churches to respond to HIV, and the use of client-based services. Additionally, they are informed by a commitment to social justice.

#### *Theme #1- Housing Development*

##### **Respondent 4, Black Church 2:**

But I think our biggest claim of fame is we were the first African American church west of the Mississippi to build housing for people who are living with HIV, that housing and federal housing program called 811.

##### **Respondent 1, Black Church 1:**

It was horrifying for black men at that time, in the early eighties. And so, [Anonymous Church Leader Name] sprang into action with this, supportive housing program, and she got and rented a house. There [were] some beds in there, made sure there was food, got people, no funding.

This theme reflects efforts to address housing discrimination faced by individuals living with HIV. Participants recognized that the advent of HIV exacerbated housing inequalities in Black communities. Individuals who were living with HIV were restricted from housing. This prompted these churches to create housing projects that would accept individuals living with HIV. Housing is a structural-level determinant of health, and the

lack of it has been identified as a major predictor for HIV seroconversion.<sup>36</sup> The theme is significant because it shows that participant churches have the capacity and understanding to engage with HIV on a structural level.

*Theme #2- Encouraging Other Churches*

**Respondent 4, Black Church 2:**

And then we got a book that we wrote, the CDC adopted for, you know, targeting African American people through the church, through the churches, because that's where we, where it's assumed that most of us will be found.

And then we finally did write a grant, got some change in order to do some education, specifically to African American churches.

Participant churches had multiple efforts to make more Black churches open to addressing HIV progressively. Participants understand their HIV efforts within the context of church-based discrimination of LGBTQ individuals. Participants noted that many Black churches held interpretations of Christianity that excluded sexual and gender minorities. According to participants, discriminatory attitudes towards LGBTQ people make it harder to organize social activism around HIV. Therefore, participant churches assist other congregations in curating social activist responses by providing tools to navigate HIV stigma and homophobia. This theme is significant because it shows that participants are invested in organizational change within denominations and individual congregations. Participant churches acknowledge the impact Black churches have on their communities, so increased HIV literacy in other congregations is intended

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<sup>36</sup> “Issue Brief: The Role of Housing in Ending the HIV Epidemic | Policy and Law | HIV/AIDS | CDC,” December 1, 2022, <https://www.cdc.gov/hiv/policies/data/role-of-housing-in-ending-the-hiv-epidemic.html>.

to increase HIV social activism in churches and the diffusion of preventative resources within Black communities.

*Theme #3- Client-Based Services*

**Website, Black Church 2:**

We provide local HIV medical and social services and prevention awareness to educate those at-risk for contracting the virus.

[Black Church 2's] AIDS Ministry seeks to address the fear and lack of knowledge surrounding HIV by providing medical and social services.

**Respondent 5, Black Church 3:**

So, we did “test for a ticket” where everybody that got a test got a ticket to the Raiders game that weekend. And so that was popular among some of the church guys. And we also kind of combine HIV testing with HEP C testing.

Client-based services for this study refer to social and medical services. They are used to meet the specific needs of individuals and to create a community impact, thus cohering with the definition of social activism in this study. Churches recognize the lack of access to certain resources on an individual and population level. These churches use client-based services as social activism. Client-based services are not regarded as social activism in this study, but when utilizing them to address community health disparities for a broader population, such action coheres with the definition of social activism in this study. This is significant because it shows that social activism is defined by the context in which an activity is being done. For this sample of participant churches, the context is unequal treatment that drives racial HIV disparities.

*Theme #4- Social Justice*

**Respondent 3, Black Church 1:**



So, the first thing I would say to you is that the history of the Black church has been one of social justice. From the time of enslavement till today, the church has been one of the main vehicles for the African American community to address social justice issues.

**Respondent 4, Black Church 2:**

And [Black Church 2] is a church based on the foundation of social justice. And so, when you take a look at our foundation, it's about doing what needs to be done in the community.

This theme makes clear that HIV social activism within participant churches is informed by a commitment to social justice. Participants identify that social justice is embedded in church history and theology and that it is operationalized to meet the goals of HIV ministry. This signifies that a social justice orientation facilitates HIV social activism.

**2. Does engagement with HIV CBOs make Black churches more likely to respond to HIV with social activism?**

It cannot be determined if engagement with CBOs solely makes Black churches more likely to respond to HIV because churches engage equally in collaborations with government agencies and other churches. Participant churches' HIV ministries established partnerships with government agencies, other churches, and local CBOs. Furthermore, collaboration with government agencies and other churches had more influence compared to CBOs. These collaborations had a more discernable effect. For example, with government funding, some churches were able to establish housing. While partnerships with CBOs were limited in number and resulted in the exchange of resources rather than realized programming and activities. All collaborations led to resources being exchanged, and some resulted in the creation of coalitional partnerships.

*Theme #5- Coalitional Partnerships*

**Respondent 5, Black Church 3:**

Black AIDS Institute, I went to [a training] that they host at [another national HIV organization]. And that was when I was starting the ministry at the Church. And, so my problem was, really, how do I mobilize churches in Oakland around HIV with the Black AIDS Institute? And through that year fellowship program, I met everybody I need[ed] to meet in Oakland, just talking about HIV. I kind of got an idea of what everybody was doing, and you know, a few years later, we ended up starting a faith-based organization to encourage other churches to be active against HIV.

**Respondent 3, Black Church 1:**

It's a fellowship of African American churches that [is] doing work in HIV, that [is] doing work on homophobia, that is doing work and getting more clergy involved in politics and getting those people elected to keep rows throughout the country. So, our [fellowship] is an organization that's in many states across the country.

Participant Churches engaged in coalitional partnerships to address the needs of local and global communities impacted by HIV. Most of these organizations are faith-based, but some have other orientations. For example, there is an organization created by Black Church 3 that seeks to unite Black churches and secular medical HIV healthcare providers. The purpose of these organizations is to synergize the resources and missions of multiple churches in one entity. This leads to a wider and more profound impact compared to work done by a single congregation. Respondent 3 indicated that coalitional partnerships facilitated an impact across multiple states and demonstrates that social activism within participant churches has a wider impact through collaboration.

*Theme #6- Exchange of Resources*

**Respondent 5, Black Church 3:**

So, [an international organization], has, you know, resources. So, I used to put it together, you know, prayers for every day of the week, for the National Week of Prayer. I would use to work with another local organization to kind of publicize those things widely throughout the Bay Area and kind of make that week a big deal for churches.

**Respondent 3, Black Church 1:**

And so, it has been the grassroots organizations working in tandem with the Black churches that feel called to do this work, to actually get these messages and to get the resources to the community.

This theme indicates that one of the results of collaboration is the flow of resources between organizations. Resources can be material (e.g., money), immaterial (e.g., information), or both. They are created to execute the mutual goals of partnering organizations. These collaborations give churches the necessary resources to address HIV in a social-activist manner.

**3. If so, how do these relationships shape Black churches' responses to HIV? What do these responses look like?**

This question cannot be answered because CBOs were not determined to be the only outside entity that influences participant churches' social activism. Their effect cannot be isolated, therefore rendering these questions unanswerable.

**4. If not, what other factors encourage Black churches to respond to HIV with Social Activism?**

Theological beliefs, congregational autonomy, and lived experiences of clergy and congregants were other factors that encouraged Black churches to respond progressively to HIV. The presence of these factors is rooted in the characteristics of a congregation. For this study,

participants identified how racial identity and sexual orientation in the congregation allowed life experiences to be translated into church activity, how their respective church reflects congregational autonomy, and how their chosen theological framework influences beliefs about Christianity and activism.

*Theme #7- The Lived Experiences of Church Leaders and Congregants*

**Respondent 5, Black Church 3:**

And I think, you know, most congregations focus on what they know is impacting their members, right? So, I think when I first joined [Black Church 3], breast cancer was a big deal because a few members were dealing with that publicly. So, you know, they formed a team. They did the breast cancer walk two years in a row. And so...when it's obvious that somebody's dealing with something in the congregation, it's easy for them to kind of rally around that issue. If you don't know that HIV is living in the congregation, then you can turn a blind eye and pretend like, "Well, that doesn't affect us. We don't have anybody dealing with that." So, it normally takes some personal connection.

**Respondent 1, Black Church 1:**

"...When they first started, people were still calling it GRID when I started writing, you know, [Pastor] had this idea that we had in, in one, in one year, in one congregation, ten men, ten black men passed away with HIV.

Participant churches addressed issues that were relevant to the lives of congregants and clergy. All participant churches have a connection to HIV that is based on their experience of being within Black and gay communities. Comments from participants show that integration with these communities promotes awareness within the congregation and provides knowledge on navigating HIV in a manner that is culturally appropriate.

*Theme #8- Theological Beliefs*

**Respondent 3, Black Church 1:**

I thought that I was alone, and that it was a punishment, and that God didn't love me because that is the messages I heard as a gay man coming up in the Black church. And it wasn't until I came to San Francisco, met [Pastor X], She did a ten-week course on what the Bible really says about homosexuality that just blew my mind. It was the first that I heard that God made you, God knows who you are, God loves you, and God can do anything but fail.

But those who know God know that God doesn't operate this way. This is not a punishment of God. This is an opportunity that God has given us to come together in community.

All participant churches had views of Christianity that were inclusive of sexual minorities and promoted action on issues impacting the community. These beliefs are a reaction to the discrimination that Black LGBTQ folks have experienced within the Black church and inaction regarding HIV by the Black church in the early years of the epidemic. This theme illustrates that participants have integrated their religion into their HIV social activism. This is important because, with these beliefs, congregations have navigated around the stigma of sex and sexuality that has historically prevented other congregations from addressing HIV.

*Theme #9- Congregational Autonomy*

**Respondent 1, Black Church 1:**

So [my denomination], by birth, is a progressive Christian denomination that leaves room for individual congregational autonomy, which means any congregation can pretty much do pretty much what it wants to, as long as it doesn't violate certain dearly held norms.

Some participant churches are not constrained by denominational polity. This means that participant churches could do what they would like with little to no denominational oversight. With congregational autonomy, these churches can organize against HIV despite oppositional views that may be promoted by the denomination. These churches do not have to worry about denominational interference, particularly in cases where there is a misalignment of theological beliefs on HIV. This theme demonstrates that church polity influences the type of social activism in which participant churches partake.

**4a. In what ways do Black Churches respond to HIV, which is not social activism?**

**Respondent 5, Black Church 3:**

I promoted [an initiative] to all the church ladies, so everybody came to church in their red shoes for National Women's and Girls' HIV awareness day. And they were talking about HIV. You know, World Aids Day, National HIV Testing Day, and National Black HIV Awareness Day, they would, they would hear from me about HIV... I was always going to conferences, so I would come back and be like, "Hey, this is what I heard. This is coming down the pipeline.

Church programming is not a form of social activism because although it potentially addresses social issues, it is primarily instituted at the congregational level and not the larger community. As seen in the example, the awareness event a participant church held was mainly attended by church members. Events like these may directly improve social conditions regarding HIV within participant churches but not necessarily for non-affiliated communities and individuals.

## DISCUSSION

Participants based the relationship between social activism and Black church responses to HIV on a commitment to social justice that is inclusive of groups ostracized in Black Christian communities, namely LGBTQ individuals. The specific influence of CBOs is still unknown because participant churches reported fruitful partnership with government

agencies and other churches. Partnerships with other organizations tend to facilitate an exchange of resources that allows participant churches to engage in HIV social activism. Findings suggest Black churches can be effective mediums for CBIs targeting HIV if resource needs are met and churches have a commitment to social justice and inclusion of sexual and gender minorities.

Previous research on HIV responses in the Black church examine theological interpretations and political orientation as predictors for responding to HIV in a social activist manner. This study's findings indicate that there are additional motivating factors that inform Black churches' responses to HIV. They capture the interplay of congregational characteristics and external factors. Congregational autonomy, a social-justice orientation, and the racial and sexual identity of churchgoers give churches tools and knowledge to do social activism, and the resources gained from external influences such as CBOs allow churches to mobilize. For example, the lived experience of congregants and clergy will inform leaders that there are barriers to accessing HIV care. Churches typically do not have the resources to provide medical services, so they may partner with government agencies and hospitals to establish in-house services. This study's findings suggest that Black churches may not engage in social activism to address HIV without external partnerships. This may explain the lack of mobilization among Black churches for HIV. It is also important to note that churches motivate other congregations to engage in social activism. In the sample, Black Church 1 partnered with Black Church 2 in one of Black Church 2's early HIV programs. Additionally, Black Church 3 started a community organization to motivate Oakland faith communities to address HIV. Black churches, therefore, may be more motivated to address HIV if they are able to partner with other local congregations.

The churches represented in this study understand HIV as a social, religious, and medical issue, thereby allowing for a multi-faceted approach to addressing the disease. First, they use social and medical services as social activism. These services are not typically understood as social activism because they are used to meet an individual client's needs. Instead, participant churches used these services to create a community-wide impact to redress discrimination due to sexuality, race, and HIV status.

Furthermore, participant churches built housing for people living with HIV and trained clergy to be more inclusive of LGBTQ congregants. The diversity of social activism shows that participant churches are addressing HIV on multiple fronts to improve both individual and population outcomes. Interview participants made it clear that their commitment to social justice inspires their social activism. The Black Church is a source of resiliency and social justice within the Black community. Although, when it comes to HIV, many churches did not live up to that legacy, by engaging in HIV social activism, participant churches in this study illustrated how Black churches remain agents of social change.

This study is meant to contribute to efforts to create an AIDS-free generation. As former President Barack Obama stated, the participation of churches is fundamental. These findings may be useful to encourage more Black churches to address HIV and may inspire public health practitioners to navigate barriers of stigma and lack of resources.<sup>37</sup> For example, knowing that collaborations with other churches are more effective, practitioners can utilize other Black churches to spearhead stigma-reducing programming. Additionally, findings highlight how church activities are determined by their environment, which is important to understanding why and how Black churches respond to specific social issues. Future research should test the strength of the specific external and internal factors stated in the study on church activism.

One limitation of the study is that findings are not generalizable because of the small sample size. The study had a 33% response rate with only three Black churches represented in the sample. A criterion for participation is active or recently active HIV ministry thus excluding many churches from participating due to HIV ministries being uncommon within many Black congregations. Despite the low response rate and small sample size, this study usefully highlights the facilitators and barriers to social

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<sup>37</sup> Sarita K Davis, “Understanding Barriers and Solutions to the Black Church Providing HIV Services in a Southern Urban City,” *Fire!!!* 3, no. 1 (2017): 116–30, <https://doi.org/10.5323/fire.3.1.0116>.



activist responses to HIV within participant congregations and may inspire innovative ways to encourage more churches to address HIV.

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