

HIV Risk Reduction

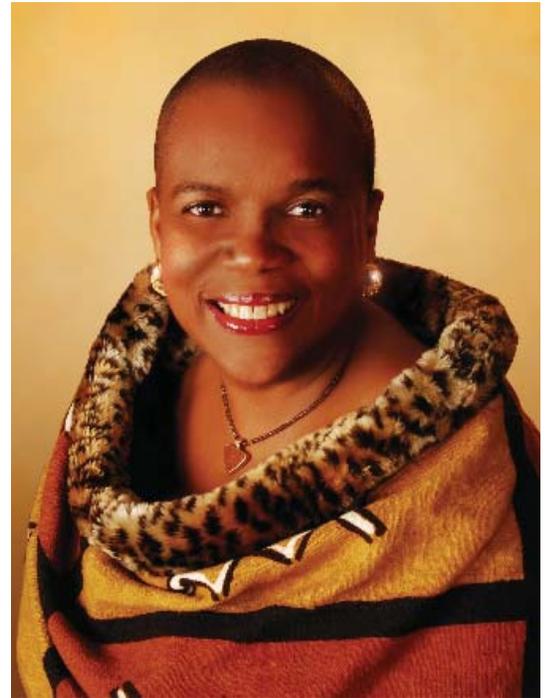
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Engaging Faith Leaders

Empowering the Faith Community to Combat HIV and AIDS

It was 1989. AIDS was on a rampage. And Pernessa Seele, who describes herself at the time as “young and crazy,” was drawn to Harlem. And her destiny.

Leaving behind a job as a research scientist, Dr. Seele moved to Harlem and soon became one of the first AIDS educators in the city. Her job at Harlem Hospital called for her to “go and see folks who were living and dying - mostly dying - with AIDS,” says Dr. Seele. At the time, AIDS patients were not just dying, they were dying in nearly complete isolation. Though in theory her role was to provide “logistical support” for those with AIDS, the reality was overwhelming says Dr. Seele. “Nobody was coming to see them. Churches weren’t coming, family members weren’t coming, nobody was coming.” Cut off from friends, family, and any sense of belonging, when the young AIDS worker appeared at their bedside, AIDS patients were desperate for human contact. “They wanted to talk; they wanted prayer; they wanted support,” says Dr. Seele.



Pernessa C. Seele, Founder and Chief Executive Officer of the non-profit The Balm In Gilead, Inc., grew up “with folks who taught me how to believe and how to create.”

Born and raised in Lincolville, South Carolina, a town founded by African Americans in the late 1800’s, Pernessa Seele attended Clark Atlanta University where she earned a bachelor’s degree in biology and a master’s in immunology. As a research scientist, Dr. Seele worked at The Rockefeller University and the CDC before launching what was to become the National Week of Prayer.

Painfully aware that she was not prepared to meet the needs of so many abandoned, dying people, after two days as an AIDS Administrator she was ready to quit.

And it was at that moment that her life took a turn. “God gave me an idea,” says Dr. Seele. “It was the Harlem Week of Prayer for the Healing of AIDS.”

New to the city, Dr. Seele “did not know a soul. I did not know one clergy person.” So she began knocking on doors to introduce herself: “Hi. I am Pernessa Seele, and we are having a Harlem Week of Prayer for the Healing of AIDS.”

“We” says Dr. Seele, “was me and thee.” An idea whose time had come, similar attempts to rally the faith community against the epidemic had been tried elsewhere, but the Harlem event was the first to succeed and quickly attracted people from across the country. “The Week of Prayer became culturally appropriate for the faith community,” says Dr. Seele.

On the bedrock of that success, the non-profit The Balm In Gilead, Inc. was founded. “Our mission was to mobilize faith communities to address HIV and AIDS.” Over the course of 23 years the Harlem Week

of Prayer became the Black Church Week of Prayer for the Healing of AIDS and then the National Week of Prayer for the Healing of AIDS. Today the organization mobilizes people of all

faiths including about 25,000 church congregations and their goal is to involve everyone in the country in the healing of AIDS. Since 2001, at the request of the CDC, The Balm In Gilead has also been working with Christian and Muslim congregations in Africa.

Poised at what Dr. Seele describes as “that intersection where public health and faith meet,” the The Balm In Gilead has been instrumental in empowering faith leaders to address

an issue that is highly charged and complicated by stigma.

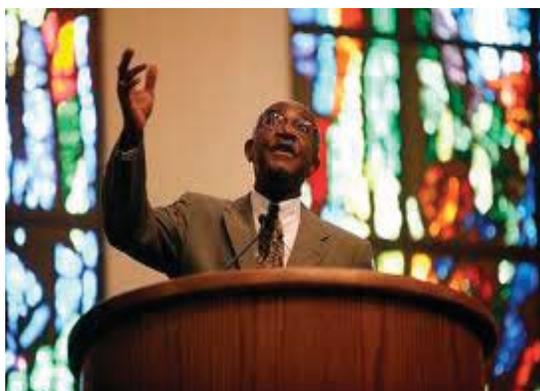
“It has, and continues to be, a spiritual walk for me,” says Dr. Seele. “Understanding what faith means to individuals – not just to the community as an institution – but how a person’s faith designs the way they live every single day of their life” is the insight that has allowed Seele and her organization to free so many from unwitting prejudice and unexamined fears around HIV. It is a fundamental of the epidemic that HIV/AIDS thrives on stigma. And few are in a better



To engage a faith leader in the healing of AIDS, as HIV workers we must begin by looking at our own fears: Are we comfortable talking about condoms? What is our position on homosexuality and faith?

position to overcome stigma than leaders in the faith community.

But before attempting to enlist their pastor, says Dr. Seele, HIV workers must begin by examining their own attitudes and beliefs. Before approaching a faith leader, “we have to really look at ourselves. We have to look at what defines us, at who we are when it comes to AIDS and faith. The first step is to be clear on who we are because the barrier begins with us.”



The thing to understand is that the faith leader is human.

Illustrating the point Dr. Seele says that when she speaks to a group of nurses or health educators, people often ask her to come talk to their church. Her standard response is to point out that as members of their church they know the pastor, and that she does not. Again, says Dr. Seele, “We have to look at what our fears are. Do we feel comfortable talking about condoms to our faith leaders? Or to our own children? Do we think that the church has a role to play in the HIV epidemic other than prayer? What is our position on homosexuality and faith?”

When meeting with a faith leader says Dr. Seele, “I don’t push my agenda on them. That’s not what I’m there for. I’m there to meet them where they are and to look for ways in which I might open a door. For instance, if my faith leader says the church is abstinence

based I’ll say, ‘Pastor, I think that’s wonderful. I agree with you.’ ”

“Nine times out of ten, they’re not teaching abstinence; they’re preaching abstinence.” And nearly every time says Dr. Seele, the topic of abstinence can serve as a portal – an opening that can lead to a discussion about how many young people in that church are sexually active.

“The thing is to understand that the pastor is human,” says Dr. Seele. “Oftentimes it’s not that pastors don’t want to address HIV. They don’t know how to address HIV and AIDS. It is my role to find out what they know and to partner with them. I want them to be able to talk to me, to feel safe enough to say, ‘You know what Sister Seele, I need help myself to understand how to help my congregation.’ ”

“The Week of Prayer has been successful over the years because it opens the conversation. I have not found one pastor who refuses to pray for HIV. If they can’t do anything else, they can and will say a prayer. And what we now know is that when the church prays for the healing of AIDS, somebody is going to come to the pastor and say, ‘Pastor, thank you for the prayer; I have HIV.’ ‘Pastor, thank you for the prayer; I lost my son.’ ‘Pastor, thank you for the prayer; I have someone at home.’ ”

Faith and HIV *continued. . .*



“Prayer is the great equalizer,” says Dr. Seele. “When prayer goes forth, most pastors will come back and tell me that they need help; that they had no idea there was so much HIV in their congregation. Because the congregation is silent” until the pastor makes it safe to break that silence.

“So I want to encourage HIV workers to engage their own churches and to reach out to the houses of worship that their clients attend - big or small. Don’t be intimidated by a big church. And don’t imagine that any church is too small. Most smaller churches are ministering to the very people who are at greatest risk.”

“I am a scientist,” says Dr. Seele. “I am a scientist and I am also a person of faith. And the greatest lesson of my life is that what matters is knowing that I am living out my purpose.”

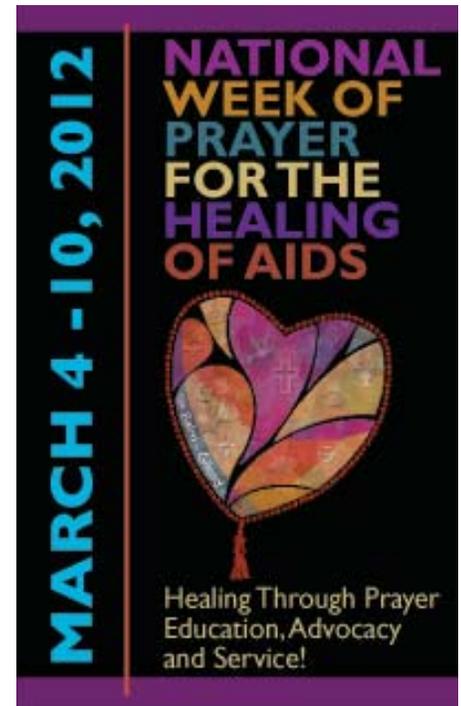
HIV Early Intervention Services (EIS) workers know the value of using national events like the Week of Prayer for the Healing of AIDS to raise awareness, combat stigma, and promote HIV testing.

Some have partnered with faith leaders who inspired parishoners by taking an HIV test from the pulpit.

Dr. Seele shared a story about Wilmington, Delaware where HIV workers realized that people who would not go to an HIV clinic would return to their church week after week. Out of that realization grew a partnership between Beautiful Gate Bethel AME Church and a public health agency.

On Sunday mornings, the choir room is filled with the voices of the choir. During the week it serves as an HIV counseling and testing room. Monday through Friday Beautiful Gate is a full-fledged HIV testing site with nurses and doctors providing prevention counseling, HIV testing, and for those who test HIV-positive, case management.

No two communities are alike, so EIS workers tailor their efforts to meet the unique needs of their clients and those at greatest risk. The National Week of Prayer



for the Healing of AIDS can be a starting point for dialogue with faith leaders, providing an opportunity to bridge differences and work together.

For resources, visit the Balm in Gilead website, www.balmingilead.org.

HIV Early Intervention Services (EIS)
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