



**Faith is a Strong Medicine: Spiritual Practices of Rural AA Men Living with HIV/AIDS**

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## Background

- African American men have the highest rate of HIV in the US
- AIDS cases in the rural south account for 50% of rural cases
- Research is needed to develop HIV programs that support positive outcomes, including stress reduction, social support, and decreased stigma



## Religion and Spirituality in the African American Community

- While Black churches play a major, important role within African American communities, homophobia and HIV-related stigma have been reported to decrease the likelihood that African Americans will disclose their HIV status or seek support from clergy and church members.



## Purpose

- The purpose of this study was to describe the role of religion and spirituality in the lives of rural HIV+ African men.



## Methods

The design was an exploratory descriptive study using audiotaped interviews for data collection.

Participants were recruited from AIDS Service Organizations and clinics that served rural populations.



## Methods

During the interviews men were asked questions about their religion, spiritual practices, and the role of the church in their lives and their culture.

Interviews were transcribed and analyzed using constant comparative analysis. Categories were identified and coded into themes.



## Sample

Forty HIV+ African American men between 22-49 participated in the study. The majority of the men were high school graduates, unemployed and had an income less than \$10,000. 40% of the men had known that they were HIV+ for more than 10 years, and 35% had known for less than 5 years.



## Results

Four themes were identified from the interviews:

1. Having a strong Christian background
2. Drawing strength from spiritual practices
3. Non-disclosure to clergy and congregants because of perceived HIV stigma
4. Believing that a higher power (God) is a divine healer



### Having a strong Christian Background

The men talked about growing up in the church and how other family members (especially mothers) were “strong Christians”.

“Because of my religious background...as an Afro American male, I have that deep down belief in my heart and soul that is based on Jesus Christ.”



### Drawing Strength from Spiritual Practices

A number of religious and spiritual practices were described by the men: 1) going to church services, 2) praying, 3) reading the *Bible*, and 4) singing.

“I practice my religion everyday...it is a lifestyle for me.”

“I pray at night and I put God first in my life.”



### Non-Disclosure/Stigma

The majority of the men who attended church services had not disclosed their HIV status to the clergy or the congregants. They identified stigma as the reason not to share their diagnosis.

“For an African American male to go to church where he was raised...and tell the parishioners or the pastor, they disown you and then it becomes a crisis...”



### Non-Disclosure/Stigma

“An African American church would ridicule a gay man”

“The pastors and reverends, they don’t want to talk about it (HIV).”



### A higher power (God) is a divine healer

The majority of men talked about how their belief in a higher power helped them deal with not only their disease, but also other problems or concerns in their lives. They felt that God was a source of inspiration and strength. Several men had been very ill, but had gotten on treatment and were living healthy lives at the time of the interviews.



### A higher power (God) is a divine healer

"I believe in a higher power because that gives me strength to endure, whether it's HIV or anything I 'm going through."

"God, He's my everything, He's my rock and He's gonna see me through the whole situation."



### Discussion

Religion and spiritual practices provide resources for coping with HIV disease, even when people do not attend church services or tell church members about their disease. HIV related stigma in the church is a concern for rural African American men, and a barrier to them receiving emotional support. Anti-stigma interventions are needed in African American churches to address basic information about HIV and increase support, understanding and compassion for PLWHA.



### Implications for Practice

Health care providers need to understand the role of religious and spiritual beliefs and practices in the lives and health of PLWHA. Assessing and supporting these beliefs and practices can enhance the health and quality of life of PLWHA.



## Faith-Based Anti-Stigma Initiative Towards Health HIV/AIDS-Project FAITHH

**Goal:** To decrease HIV/AIDS-related stigma in African American (AA) faith-based communities in rural Alabama and improve HIV prevention methods to decrease the growing epidemic of HIV/AIDS in Alabama and better support people living with HIV/AIDS (PLWHA).



## Objectives

- To decrease individual and congregational stigma in rural AA congregations through use of an anti-stigma curriculum and compare to standard H/A curriculum and no H/A curriculum.
- To increase HIV/AIDS (H/A) knowledge, HIV prevention activities and affirming interactions with persons living with HIV/AIDS in AA rural pastors and church members through use of an anti-stigma curriculum and compare to standard H/A curriculum and no H/A.



## Overall Study Design

SFD HIV Prevention Framework



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