

Good Morning. My name is Bishop Yvette Flunder. My ministry work is primarily located in the United States inner city with and among African/American pastors and faith-based organizations and in the seminaries, where I teach. I also serve churches in three countries in Africa and in Tijuana MX. I am a Gospel Music artist, and I was born into a family of fundamentalist Pentecostals. It is this context and experience that informs my positions, recommendations and conclusions regarding the role of faith in the Human Rights and religious values movement surrounding the AIDS pandemic.

Experts at the Centers for Disease and Control and Prevention (CDC) have long estimated that 20% of people infected with HIV don't know it. After 30 years of battling this epidemic we continue to see people dying because...One-third of those infected are diagnosed so late in the course of their infection that they develop AIDS within one year. African Americans are disproportionately represented in these numbers

"There are tens of thousands of people in the U.S. who are diagnosed late, sometimes too late to save their lives, and certainly too late to help them avoid transmission to others," says Jim Curran, dean of Emory University's Rollins School

of Public Health in Atlanta.

The issue has taken on new urgency in light of a study released last month by the [National Institutes of Health](#) showing that HIV therapy cuts by 96% the risk that an infected person will pass HIV to a sexual partner.

The testing gap persists 30 years after the first cases of what would become HIV/AIDS were reported by the CDC on June 5, 1981, two decades after the creation of the first HIV test and 15 years after the introduction of effective therapy.

Health officials say people fail to get tested for many reasons, from tight HIV prevention budgets to a lack of awareness of personal risk. I know from my experience, that people often do not want to know their status and the shame, fear and guilt that often accompanies a positive test result is still a reason why many will not get tested even when testing is accessible.

The incidence and prevalence of HIV increases exponentially in the presence of religious based shame. What is evident here today, is a growing movement toward the importance of life and compassion taking precedence

over all of the issues, politics, power-struggles and religious differences that have hindered our ability to put an end to AIDS. Love is a family value that exists in virtually every religion. Thanks be to God. A large percentage of the health infrastructure in many countries is carried out by Faith Based Organizations, while there still exists some religious aversion to condom distribution and needle exchange. This disparity suggests we continue to struggle with how we can provide care that translates as prevention in ways that are in keeping with our religious beliefs.

We need to be reminded to scale-up social, emotional and spiritual support; and to act in order to eliminate the root causes of vulnerability and the further spread of HIV

What is the Role of Faith? We can and must provide care, comfort and self-esteem building but also HIV education, treatment adherence and counseling regarding the concomitant issues surrounding HIV such as substance abuse, unprotected sex and the need for testing and treatment in this atmosphere of tight HIV prevention budgets. Our religious organizations may not be able to perform the comprehensive direct services needed but we can certainly

be the entry point to a network of connections to services for the most vulnerable among us.

We have enormous capacity to reach people through our extensive national and international networks

We have enormous capacity to serve people through our large and willing volunteer networks

We have enormous capacity to influence our congregants, their families and our communities through our respected voices and spheres of influence

Poor people are often religious people. Poor people are disadvantaged globally and the poor are the most vulnerable to death from AIDS

I would encourage global leaders, including religious leaders, politicians, business people and people living with HIV to partner in a collective, active Theology of Healing...

Healing, without judgment...and increased understanding of the moral value of persons most marginalized by religion and society, as these are often the persons at highest risk for HIV transmission. My experience has taught me that faith

communities must reach out to the farthest edge where ideologies, theologies and pejorative assumptions of people lie and seek to increase understanding for these communities. We have an active ministry with and to the Transgender community in our church in San Francisco. This ministry includes support groups, case management, housing, and spiritual support for this community that has the highest incidence and prevalence rates in our city. As a result we have an oasis of a sort where Transgender sisters and brothers are adhering to treatment, practicing safer sex, procuring and sustaining housing and thriving. And now they have their own gospel choir!

**We believe it is our task to heal and to mitigate suffering in a way that is untied to judgment and tied to justice**

A few years ago we were graced with a visit to our ministry by a gentle and caring man...Father Jose Luis Mendez Davalos, Delegate for Healthcare Professionals from the Pontifical Council for Pastoral Health, visiting on behalf of The Holy See and The Vatican. Our afternoon together gave us an opportunity to share our work of serving people in this horrific pandemic.

We concluded that the human family has many faith paths, many polities and politics, many definitions of family but a clear and consistent mandate to love one another with a particular heart for those who are the most disadvantaged...those who Jesus called the least of these my little ones.

This is what we, the Faith community must bring to this commitment to redouble our efforts to serve, work, love and pray until there is a cure. God Bless You.