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What Is Black America's Endgame to Stem HIV/AIDS? Inclusion By The Reverend Irene Monroe BC Editorial Board

On July 10th, PBS's "Frontline" aired the anxiously awaited documentary, "Endgame: AIDS in Black America."

The documentary opened with this sobering message:

"Today in America, 152 people will become infected with H.I.V. Half of them will be black. Today in America, two-thirds of the new H.I.V. cases among women will be black. Today in America, 70 percent of the new H.I.V. cases among youth will be black."

"Endgame" was written and directed by Renata Simone who, in the 1980s, created the first national TV series about HIV/AIDS titled, "The Age of AIDS." Simone's documentary explores why rates of AIDS and H.I.V. infection is still disproportionately higher among African Americans. While there is no one answer to the question, the silence that still surrounds the epidemic is highlighted throughout the film.

"And that's not just about the fact that people who have the virus are keeping silent, but it's also the silence of others unwilling to push the issue or to talk about it," Terry Gross of "Fresh Air" pointed out. But those willing to speak up illustrate the toll and trajectory the epidemic has taken.

In the film, Phil Wilson, executive director of the Black AIDS Institute, cites from his organization's August 2008 report titled, "Left Behind," that the number of people living with HIV in Black America exceeds the HIV population in seven of the 15 focus countries in the U.S.

President's Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief (PEPFAR) initiative, an initiative helping to save the lives of those suffering from HIV/AIDS around the world in countries like Haiti, Dominican Republic, India, South Africa, to name a few. In other words, if black America were its own country, standing on its own like Haiti or Nigeria, black Americans would rate 16th with the epidemic in the world. And the epidemic is heavily concentrated in urban enclaves like Detroit, New York, Newark, and the Deep South. The hardest hit is D.C., the nation's capital, where the prevalence of HIV last year among black Americans was higher than in African nations like Rwanda, Kenya, Ethiopia and the Congo.

"The film is about race in America as much as it is about HIV - how a virus has exploited our inability to deal with our problems around race," stated Simone. "In part I hoped to show how the big, abstract social issues come to rest on people every day, in the limited life choices they face. The story of HIV in black America is about the private consequences of the politics of race."

There are many persistent social and economic factors contributing to the high rates of the epidemic in the African American community - racism, poverty, health care disparity, violence, to name just a few - but the biggest attitudinal factor still contributing to the epidemic and showing no sign of abating is homophobia.

And while we know the epidemic moves along the fault lines of race, class, gender and sexual orientation, and HIV transmission is tied to specific high-risk behaviors that are not exclusive to any one sexual orientation, religious homophobia still continues to be one of the major barriers to ending the AIDS epidemic.

"One day my roommate, he asked me to come to his church and there was a minister standing in front of me and he said: There's a demon here, a homosexual demon. And I thought, I mean, you know, usually in church often you will feel it's you and they're not talking about you directly. But he was talking about me," Joe Hawkins, a social worker, tells "Frontline" in the film.

"And he said we learned that there is a homosexual demon here. He walked right in front of me and put his hand on my head and started trying to cast the homosexual demon out of me. And I felt so crushed and so betrayed by my roommate. You know, I literally got up and I grabbed the guy's - the evangelist's arm and twisted it and I said

there's a demon in here and it's you. And I just walked out of the church."

Those black churches that attempted to address the problem proselytized to its parishes an abstinence-only view of sex education. Realizing the inefficiency of an abstinence-only approach, Hawkins opened a bar and the nightclub became a place where he did outreach, having literature about the virus and a huge basket of condoms at the door.

And leadership from non-religious historically black organizations like the N.A.A.C.P. was conspicuously absent. "I didn't do what I could have done and should have done," Julian Bond, renowned civil rights activist, BlackCommentator.com Editorial Board Member and a former Chair of the N.A.A.C.P., states in the film.

Although famous HIV-positive heterosexual African Americans, like tennis great Arthur Ashe, news anchorman Max Robinson, and rapper Eazy all died of AIDS, and basketball giant Earvin "Magic" Johnson, who tells his story in the film and who is still living with the virus, highlight the fact that anyone can contract the virus, many still see the epidemic as a "white gay disease," suggesting being gay or having sex with someone of the same gender puts you immediately at high risk.

There are many invaluable messages to glean from the documentary, and one of them is this: As long as we continue to think of HIV/AIDS as a gay disease, we'll not protect ourselves from this epidemic.

BlackCommentator.com Editorial Board member and Columnist, the Rev. Irene Monroe, is a religion columnist, theologian, and public speaker. She is the Coordinator of the African-American Roundtable of the Center for Lesbian and Gay Studies in Religion and Ministry (CLGS) at the Pacific School of Religion. A native of Brooklyn, Rev. Monroe is a graduate from Wellesley College and Union Theological Seminary at Columbia University, and served as a pastor at an African-American church before coming to Harvard Divinity School for her doctorate as a Ford Fellow. She was recently named to MSNBC's list of [10 Black Women You Should Know](#). Reverend Monroe is the author of [Let Your Light Shine Like a Rainbow Always: Meditations on Bible Prayers for Not'So'Everyday Moments](#). As an African-American feminist theologian, she speaks for a sector of society that is frequently invisible. Her website is irenemonroe.com. Click [here](#) to contact the Rev. Monroe.



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