

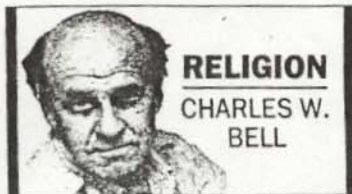
Black churches aim to overcome AIDS

USUALLY, THE SERMON AT St. Mark's United Methodist Church in Harlem is replaced on Communion Sundays by a meditation, but last Sunday, says the Rev. Walter Barton, a sermon seemed more appropriate.

It was the start of the week-long 10th annual Black Church Week of Prayer for the Healing of AIDS, and Barton, who arrived at St. Mark's in July from Grace United Methodist in St. Albans, Queens, knew well its significance.

"Last fall," he said this week, "I asked for a show of hands by anyone who knew anybody with AIDS. Nearly every hand in the church went up."

He estimates that 85% of his flock — about 1,600 men, women and children — has a relative or a friend suffering from HIV or AIDS. That's why he spoke



RELIGION
CHARLES W. BELL

Sunday on the topic "An Attitude to Heal."

Many of the black churches of New York, and across the country, report the same grim statistics as St. Mark's, and that's where Balm in Gilead Inc. enters the picture.

Balm in Gilead (the name comes from the Old Testament book of Jeremiah) is a New York-based nonprofit that works to mobilize black churches in the battle against AIDS.

Churches are the obvious place," says Parnessa Seele, who founded Balm in Gilead a decade ago and is its CEO. "They are the most influential and most respected institutions in the black neighborhood."

According to some studies, about 80% of black Americans claim affiliation with a church, which is another reason for churches becoming involved.

This is because AIDS is taking a dreadful toll in black America.

Most recent statistics show that nationally and locally, AIDS is the No. 1 killer of black men and women ages 25 to 44, and that 41 of every 100 New Yorkers with the disease is black.

Seele, who grew up in Lincolnton, S.C., is one of the pioneers in the AIDS trenches, with a background that embraces both health and spirituality. She founded the Week of Prayer and works closely with churches, but she also has degrees in biology and immunology.

"Sometimes," she says, "I feel like we're just getting started."

She has a couple of potentially important new programs in the pipeline.

One is a 13-week AIDS curriculum that Balm in Gilead would make available to churches. She expects some resistance from conservative churches, but this has not affected her plans to launch a 10-city pilot program this fall.

"It will put AIDS in a scriptural context," Seele says. "We've got a theological team helping to write the course, and I think churches will find that it meets their spiritual requirements."

The other program, which she plans



HELAYNE SEIDMAN

ARTIST Joyce McDonald (r.), who has AIDS, and Parnessa Seele, founder of Balm in Gilead, which sponsored art exhibit of works by AIDS victims, with samples of sculpture.

to launch next month, will set up AIDS education centers at 50 or so New York churches.

(St. Mark's already sponsors one. It has a Health and Welfare Ministry, with two nurses who provide counseling and referrals. Barton says he plans to expand the ministry with materials from Balm in Gilead.)

Hundreds of churches around the country joined in the week-long observance, and in New York, several conducted special services. At the Church of the Open Door in Brooklyn, an AIDS quilt made by members was dedicated, and tonight at Grace Cathedral Church in Uniondale, L.I., there's a special

workshop that includes a motivational speaker who has AIDS — and is only 9 years old.

One event was an art exhibit that featured painters and sculptors with HIV or AIDS, held at the Balm in Gilead offices just off Times Square.

ONE OF THE ARTISTS, Joyce McDonald, is a member of the Church of the Open Door, and at an exhibit press conference Thursday she spoke of the importance of art in defining her voyage from drug addiction and HIV to faith and art.

"I've come a long, long way," she said to applause. "I've come from the shooting gallery to the art gallery."