

## It's Not Right, But It's Ok: The Paradoxical Relationship of the Black Church in the Lives of Black MSM

**Introduction:** Griffin (2001) writes, “There may be no greater challenge than to speak against prevailing attitudes of one’s blood family, church family and primary community.” Specifically, Black gay men figure significantly in such a “speaking against” what is arguably one of the most revered institutions in the Black community—the church. The church spoken of here is primarily mainline Protestant and conservative in its theology, which is often deployed in heterosexist, homophobic, and sexist rhetoric. Paradoxically, however, is another view of the Black church, complete with a redemptive possibility based on a “theology of queerness”, “that uses the raw material of black social alienation to build bridges between gay and lesbian and straight black church members” (Dyson, 1996). These diverging positions form a dynamic tension through which Black gay men must attempt to navigate in order to participate in the religious life of the Black church. Importantly, this tension is also reflected in conversations about the role of the Black church in HIV prevention.

**Methods:** Eighteen focus groups with Black MSM were conducted nationally (6 cities, 3 focus groups each) as part of the HPTN 061 activities, a study with the overarching aim of decreasing the incidence of HIV among Black/African-American MSM through a cluster of intervention activities. Black MSM were defined as men who had had unprotected anal intercourse with another man in the past 6 months for inclusion in the focus groups. Following informed consent, focus groups were conducted in English using a topic guide that elicited information related to the role of community and perceptions of HIV prevention activities. All focus groups audio-recorded and transcribed. Transcripts were coded using Atlas.ti software using two raters. Passages that discussed the role of the Black church in HIV prevention and/or the lives of Black men were coded as such. Additionally, on the ACASI portion of the study, eleven questions were asked pertaining to participants’ experiences of religion and/or spirituality. For the purposes of this analysis, two questions are germane: what is your current religious affiliation, and to what degree does the religious/spiritual group you affiliate with accept MSM?

**Results:** In one focus group conducted at the Boston site, one participant noted his view of the Black church and its role in HIV prevention, “*Just out of curiosity, when you say churches, because they don’t promote homosexuality...I can’t see how the church would help.*” In response, another respondent noted, “*I would like to elaborate on his question, how the church would help? As a custodian of information.*” The above two quotes are illustrative of the paradoxical view of the role of the Black church in HIV prevention.

Note: National results from focus groups are needed in order to elucidate further relationships as well as an analysis of the two questions in the religion and spiritual measures. Key in the analysis is whether there is a correlation between religious affiliation and acceptance of MSM behavior. Furthermore, is this relationship consistent with the narratives contained within the focus groups?

**Conclusions:** While we need to actually conduct the analysis in order to draw conclusions, by examining further focus group data and ACASI responses on religion and spirituality measures (i.e., religious affiliation and that community’s acceptance of MSM behavior), preliminary evidence suggests that the dual perception of the Black church as both heterosexist and sustaining in the eyes of Black MSM may need to be taken into account to nuance HIV prevention activities and outreach, particularly for those men who are affiliated with more conservative religious communities whose acceptance of MSM behavior is lacking .