

COLUMBIA SPECTATOR ARCHIVE

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[ARTICLE]

Panel: black church should offer help in fighting AIDS

By Holly Kessler

The black church community must lend a stronger hand in the fight against the AIDS epidemic, according to speakers at a panel called “Minorities and AIDS” last night at the Intercultural Resource Center.

“The schism between the black gay community and the church is a real one that, to combat the AIDS epidemic, must be overcome,” said Craig Harris, head of the Gay Men’s Health Crisis (GMHC) center, said.

The panel discussion, hosted by the People of Color Alliance, was one of a series of discussions entitled “Policy Challenges in a Changing Urban Environment.” The aim of the series is to highlight the particular problems that face city communities currently.

Last night’s discussion focused on

AIDS and the response of the minority community to the epidemic. The panelists were Harris, Ronald Johnson of the Minority Task Force on AIDS, and George Clifford of New York City's Office of Management and Budget. The panel moderator was Denise Gary-Robinson, founder and president of the Black Health Research Foundation.

The panelists agreed that the black church has immense financial resources which could aid in fighting the disease, but that conservatism and homophobia within the church must be overcome to promote unity and discussion throughout the entire African-American community.

The reluctance of the black church to commit funds to the fight against AIDS, the panelists agreed, was also preventing the possibility of a coalition being formed between gay people of color and the gay white community.

Harris said that when dealing with the clergy, the black community must "hit 'em with a brick and get their attention."

Clifford emphasized the financial burden of combatting the AIDS crisis throughout the nation and the New York metropolitan area.

The city already spends \$1.25 million a day on AIDS programs, he said.

Pointing out that the number of AIDS victims will triple to more than 60,000 in New York City alone by 1993, Clifford stressed that, as of now, "the city does not know how it will pay for the bill."

The panelists agreed that the public sector, particularly the white middle-class, will probably bear the majority of the expense.

Panelists expressed concern about further racial tensions resulting from the middle class paying for the expenses of poverty-stricken blacks and Latinos.

“The white middle-class isn’t going to like paying for the health-services of black junkies,” Johnson said.

Gary-Robinson said she viewed the AIDS crisis as a public policy crisis where “every community must stand up for itself—otherwise it won’t be recognized.”

To make any significant strides in the fight against AIDS, the panelists suggested that people of color, along with other groups, advocate a scattered-site housing program for AIDS victims and more accessible treatment and testing for the disease.

Tonight’s panel, on minority participation in the New York City mayoral election, will be held in room 1512 of the School of International and Public Affairs at 6 p.m.