

Atlanta Pastor Rebukes AIDS Group For Appointing Openly Gay Director

The decision by a religious AIDS awareness group, Balm in Gilead, drew fire from Darryl Foster, a minister to gays

Balm in Gilead—an organization that promotes AIDS awareness in African American churches—has come under fire for appointing an openly gay man as the director of its faith-based program.

The group appointed Maurice O'Brian Franklin as director of its Faith-Based National HIV/AIDS Technical Assistance Center in March. Franklin's remark to the Washington Blade, the capital's gay weekly, that his selection was a "statement" drew a rebuke from Darryl L. Foster, an Atlanta pastor and leader of a ministry to homosexuals.

Franklin told the Blade: "I feel like this organization has embraced me completely based on the professional skills and expertise I bring to the job. On the other hand, it also is making a statement that black gay people are part of the black community and have valuable skills the community can use."

Foster said that although Balm in Gilead described its role as encouraging "healing through prayer, education and advocacy," it was actually "poison for black churches." He also said that Franklin's appointment was "offensive" to traditional churches that had in the past supported the organization's HIV/AIDS-prevention efforts

in the black community, where the group says AIDS has reached "a national health state of emergency."

Among the 17 religious groups the organization lists on its Web site as endorsing its work are the African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church (AME Zion); the Church of God in Christ (COGIC); the National Baptist Convention, USA (NBC-USA); and T.D. Jakes Ministries.

Foster said that Franklin's appointment sent a message to churches that they should accept open homosexuals.

"[It] smacks of the new tolerance ethic espoused by the flesh-led thinkers of society," he said. Although Balm in Gilead presented itself as a healer, it actually is "injecting poison into the church's veins," he added.

Before joining Balm in Gilead, Franklin was director of the Gay Men of African Descent's Northeast Regional Capacity Building Assistance Program. Balm in Gilead founder and chief executive Pernessa C. Seele said Franklin "was not hired on the basis of his sexual preferences, but for the professional skills he brings to this organization." The organization had a "diverse" staff, she said, all of whom had been appointed for their professional skills.

However, Foster said he suspects that the Christian groups endorsing Balm in Gilead never knew of Franklin's appointment. He believes they should continue to support AIDS awareness efforts, "but they should demand that Balm in Gilead be accountable to them if they are to continue to receive their endorsement," he told Charisma.

The criticism comes as Balm in Gilead prepared for its 13th annual Black Church Week of Prayer for the Healing of AIDS, March 3-9. During the week, participating churches host AIDS

workshops, distribute AIDS-awareness information and devote sermons to the subject.

In a message posted on the organization's Web site, Seele said that the annual focus of the program was to launch the largest AIDS awareness effort that targets the African American community, reaching an estimated 2.5 million church members.

Since Balm in Gilead was formed, the week has mobilized more than 10,000 churches to provide AIDS education to their congregations and communities.

In January the New York City-based organization hosted the first African Diaspora HIV/AIDS Summit, attended by diverse religious leaders from the United States, the Caribbean and Africa, which saw the launch of a drive to help churches spread AIDS awareness in Cote d'Ivoire, Kenya, Nigeria, South Africa, Tanzania and Zimbabwe.

A spokesman for Bishop T.D. Jakes said that his ministry had not had any contact with the organization since 1999. Bishop G.E. Patterson, presiding bishop of COGIC, said: "The Church of God in Christ does not knowingly support gay ministries or gay activities. I've never heard of Balm in Gilead."

Representatives of AME Zion and the NBC-USA did not return phone calls.

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