

Are Pentecostal Pastors Telling HIV Patients to Give Up Medicine?

Young people with HIV are allegedly giving up their medicine after Pentecostal pastors told them to instead rely on their faith in God, the BBC reports.

According to BBC News, medical staff said “a minority of pastors in England were endangering young church members by putting them under pressure to stop medication.”

The Children’s HIV Association surveyed 19 doctors and health professionals who work with babies and children in England after its members reported hearing about HIV patients stopping their anti-retroviral drugs because of their pastors’ advice.

Among 10 doctors who said they have witnessed this problem in the last five years, 29 of their patients said they were pressured to stop taking medicine; at least 11 had done so.

There were a variety of cases. Health care workers dealt with parents who felt pressure to stop giving their young children their HIV medicine—and some did so; some patients were breastfeeding mothers with HIV who declined the medicine that would stop the virus from being passed to their children; others were young people who made the decision for themselves.

The respondents also reported that some patients had been told by their pastors they would be healed by prayer or by drinking blessed water.

Some pastors, however, are refuting the claim.

Stevo Atanasio, a Pentecostal pastor from the East London Christian Church, says he has seen blind people recover their sight, deaf people hear again and those who were diagnosed

with terminal illness cured.

"We don't say to people, 'Don't take your medication, don't go to the doctor.' I mean we never say that," the BBC reports him saying.

"But we believe that the first healing comes from inside, it's a spiritual healing. Some people are hurt, they have broken hearts. If you are healed from inside, then you are healed from outside as well."

Pentecostalism is booming in the United Kingdom—the number of Pentecostal churches in London has doubled since 2005. But the amount of incidents of HIV patients being told to stop taking medicine is thought to be a small group of people from a minority of churches.

A former Pentecostal pastor says he has seen it happening.

"I've heard languages like that: 'Put your trust in God, don't put your trust in medicine,'" says the Rev. Israel Olofinjana, who is now a Baptist minister.

"Within the context of African churches, if you're coming from a culture where the pastor is like your fathers or mothers, like your community keepers, the word of your pastor becomes very important," he explains.

"It becomes very significant. ... There is a minority who say, 'Because God can heal absolutely ... what's the need for medicine?'"

Dr. Steve Welch, chairman of the Children's HIV Association, says it can be difficult to engage with some faith leaders.

"We need to stay engaged with the families and understand that ... their faith is an important part of the support they get in their condition, and engage positively with them and not make it a clash of cultures.

“I think it’s about engaging with the pastors and faith leaders who are giving this advice because that’s how we will actually address the root of the problem.”