

# UNDER THE RADAR: AIDS MINISTRY IN THE BIBLE BELT

JEROME R. KOCH  
TEXAS TECH UNIVERSITY

ROBERT E. BECKLEY  
WEST TEXAS A & M UNIVERSITY

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*This is a case study involving a religious congregation affiliated with the Churches of Christ (Campbellite Tradition). A key component of their ministry is a program entitled Outreach. In addition to providing food, clothing, shelter, substance abuse education, and counseling through the church, Outreach also includes direct intervention and education to those who are HIV+ or who are suffering from AIDS. This facet of the program includes providing bleach kits for disinfecting needles as well as facilitating condom distribution. The present paper provides a qualitative report of this congregation's work. We have interviewed the congregation's Evangelist/Director and other church leaders; we have reviewed the church's promotional and teaching materials; we have also included several references to sermon transcripts from which we derive a synthesis of this congregation's sense of its mission. We are able to show that, despite its ties to a fundamentalist denomination and its strong adherence to a morally conservative ideology, all of the components of Outreach are consistent with the congregation's central values, and, paradoxically, work to enhance their material and social interests in the community.*

## INTRODUCTION

Religious congregations typically engage in a set of similar activities, chief among which include worship, education, evangelism, and social outreach. This study concerns itself with the latter of these—social outreach—and describes a congregation which regards this work as its primary objective. However, this particular case study involves a dramatic and controversial AIDS ministry within a congregation affiliated with the Churches of Christ, a denomination from the Campbellite tradition of nineteenth century America that is highly evangelical and embraces the basic principles of Protestant fundamentalism. Churches within these types of denominations also tend to be very conservative in their approach to issues related to homosexuality, sexual behavior, and to addressing the consequences of sexually transmitted disease (Ammerman 1987; Beckley and Koch 2002). Although certain congregations within these denominations sometimes reach out to members and non-members who are homosexual or whose sexual behavior is publically condemned by a fundamentalist-oriented theology, such outreach is usually more conditional than that found in mainline Protestant congregations (Beckley and Koch 2002).

This type of ministry in a fundamentalist church would appear, at the outset, to be at least controversial and potentially divisive to the overall health of a fundamentalist congregation.

Case studies of other churches acting contrary to the values and interests of their larger constituencies show that this is sometimes done at great risk. While rare, controversial outreach ministries have been the catalyst for intervention by denominational authorities and even the police before congregations have been forced to dissolve (Hadden and Longino 1974; Long, 1991). But even more generally, as Becker (1999) reports, congregational conflict typically revolves around issues of values and identity, the most salient of which often focus on how to define the limits of personal and collective moral behavior.

The church in this study benefits from being part of a denomination that respects congregational autonomy with regard to decisions as to the direction of its programs and ministries. On the other hand, the potential for conflict regarding those decisions opens the way for internal division without the support of denominational mediation as would be the case in more mainline Protestant denominations.

While the church in this case-study could not be strictly classified as an African-American congregation, its pastor and most prominent lay leaders are Black and its membership is about evenly split demographically between Anglo and African-Americans. Ammerman (1991) stated that although African-American churches generally express liberal social and political ideological views on most social issues, they tend to be conservative and fundamentalist in doctrinal positions and traditionalists on issues of personal morality. There is a strong leadership tradition within African-American churches for civil rights (Bartkowski and Regis 1999; Chaves 1999; Hug 1983; Kenrick 1962; O'Connor 1963; Webber 1960, 1964). However, there is only limited evidence that this tradition still manifests itself in African-American church ministries to other marginalized groups, and especially to gay men. Efforts to do so are often mitigated by higher levels of both homophobia among African-Americans and by the overall conservative nature of Black religiosity (Brandt 1999; Lewis 2003; Schulte and Battle 2004).

This paper examines the ways in which the leadership of "ABC Church of Christ" weighed the costs and benefits of adding a prominent and significant AIDS ministry to the church's outreach profile. We also detail the process by which they have gathered support from within the larger community of churches, both within and apart from the Churches of Christ. This congregation frames this particular work as a ministry to valued constituents in a manner consistent both with the basic values which underlie their conservative Christian theology and the tradition of civil rights activism within African-American congregational religiosity.

## **THEORETICAL FRAME: VALUES AND INTERESTS**

Organizational values emerge from what church members and leaders believe is right and proper, or wrong and improper, for them to promote. These beliefs lead to actions which are intended to create the world in which these individuals want to live and want their children to inherit. Organizational interests emerge as church members and leaders weigh what they stand to gain or lose in the way of power, prestige, or material goods and services from acting in one particular way versus another. Decisions are made in congregations as pastors and lay leaders act based on the convergence toward or conflict over the mix of central values and interests of the congregation (Davidson and Wood 1989; Davidson and Pyle 1993; Van Eck, Davidson, and Wood 1991, Wood 1981). For example, Carroll and Roozen (1990) showed that members of "evangelical" congregations valued "born-again" conversion experiences more than other types of conversions. This group was least tolerant of theological

diversity and tended to define outreach ministry as “sharing the Gospel with the unchurched.” They also tended to minimize “acts of charity and service to the needy” (1990: 363).

Roof, Hoge, Dyble, and Hadaway. (1979) conceptualize differences such as those noted above in terms of the extent to which they produce congregational harmony or conflict:

Social involvement . . . can have both positive and negative effects. Involvement in controversial actions can lead to congregational divisions and disharmony, and if so, it will likely lead to membership decline; yet, some types of social action attract newcomers and offer members a sense of religious and social responsibility (1979: 222).

Thus, values and interests may converge and conflict around any and all ministry initiatives, and the church may gain or lose members in the process. When values and interests converge with reference to a social issue, activist-oriented congregations may thrive in the public arena as like-minded individuals are drawn to them (Reitz 1969; Webber 1960, 1964; Kenrick 1962; O’Connor 1963; and Hug 1983). However, values and interests regarding outreach ministries may conflict, and congregations may ultimately be forced to disband or even be closed by denominational decree (Hadden and Longino 1974; Long 1991).

Four sets of outcomes are possible as church members and pastors negotiate outreach priorities based on their collective and/or competing values and interests, especially as these come to the fore in the decision-making process over the extent and nature of social involvement. Figure 1, below, illustrates these possibilities.

**Figure 1**  
**Organizational Decision-Making**

<b>Interests</b>	<b>Values</b>	
	<i>Support</i>	<i>Oppose</i>
<i>Support</i>	Support Values Support Interests	Oppose Values Support Interests
<i>Oppose</i>	Support Values Oppose Values	Oppose Values Oppose Values

Outcome 1: Values and interests support a particular program initiative.

Outcome 2: Values and interests oppose a particular program initiative.

Outcome 3: Values support while interests oppose a particular program initiative.

Outcome 4: Values oppose while interests support a particular program initiative.

Outcomes 1 and 2 predict straightforward organizational decisions; when values and interests both favor or oppose a program initiative, the decision to go ahead or hold back is

obvious. However, when values and interests are in opposition to one another, which set of motivational factors will prevail?

This paper examines a congregation whose core values initially would seem conceptually opposed to its fundamentalist identity. Church leaders in this congregation have implemented a visible outreach ministry to Persons With AIDS (PWAs). This program has become part of the congregation's identity in the larger community. Other congregations affiliated with the same denomination are well aware of what most would consider a program that would be very difficult to duplicate in any other Church of Christ congregation in the area.

This particular congregation initially seems to fit the profile identified above as "Outcome 3," that is, where ABC Church's values support Outreach, but may work against their material and social interests. We would expect that such seemingly maverick ministries within the Church of Christ community may work against the interests of a congregation that needs a stable constituency and monetary support to stay active and grow. How does this congregation make it work?

We examine below three types of data which reveal that values are negotiated and interests met by the very program which seems to operate at cross purposes to both. We first examine how the congregation presents itself to the community. Promotional literature is cited to highlight its profile as an activist congregation. The organization has re-framed a seeming liability into an asset: a collective identity that draws in a supportive constituency. Second, we show that the charismatic leader who is the Pastor/Evangelist of the congregation regularly preaches and teaches a set of foundational Biblical values that, through his interpretation, outline an orientation that supports the church's outreach to PWAs. Finally, we interview the Pastor and two key lay leaders, one of whom is herself living with HIV. The other is a high-profile member of the medical society in the community-at-large. By focusing our interviews on their stories, and of their re-telling how the AIDS ministry came into existence and now persists, we learn how "ABC Church of Christ" actually fits the profile identified above as "Outcome 1." The outreach ministries which are central to the congregation's core values, and which give it a recognizable identity in the community, also serve to advance its interests as well. People and money are drawn toward the program in surprising ways that become, for the leaders, evidence that they are doing what God has called them to do.

## METHODS AND RESULTS

We use three qualitative strategies to assess and analyze ABC Church's central *values*, and to learn how an expression of those values in their ministry profile works for or against the organization's social and material *interests*. These strategies are:

1. A report of the congregation's history, current activities, and mission statements as they are presented to the public in the form of promotional and inspirational materials.
2. Titles, excerpts, and descriptions from sermons and teachings of the pastor.
3. Interviews with the pastor and two key lay leaders.

The historical report and sermon excerpts are primarily examples of the stated values on which the church's ministry is based. Data from the interviews provide a more in-depth report of the history and context of how those values developed and are brought to bear on the AIDS ministry. The interview process also enabled us to detail how the AIDS ministry and other facets of how this congregation does its work might impact upon its social and material interests.

***Assessing Values: The Congregation, its History and Mission:***

ABC Church of Christ is located in the center of a medium-sized city (population approximately 200,000) in the southwestern United States. The community at-large is dominated by a decidedly conservative religiosity (Roberts, Koch, and Johnson 2001) and is also the largest metropolitan area within a 300 mile radius in any direction. It is at the center of the region's commerce, education, healthcare, and entertainment. The neighborhood immediately surrounding the church is characterized by low-income single-family rental houses and apartment dwellings. Drug use and drug-related criminal activity are common in the neighborhood. The church building is large, open, and well-maintained; visitors are always welcome. Worship and educational events run into the evening and throughout the week.

One of the first artifacts or symbols of identity one encounters when entering ABC Church are brochures and posters that detail and document "Our Values." The organization states at the outset what are the most essential elements of their belief system. These values are listed below:

***Our Values ". . . we have as our ambition . . . to be pleasing to Him" (2 Co 5:9)***

- We value the expository preaching and teaching of God's Word.
- We value the celebration and worship of God in spirit and truth.
- We value the privilege of prayer to God and Christ.
- We value authentic ministry among all people.
- We value the individual worth of every person.
- We value the unchurched, and those who no longer attend a church.
- We value the interdependent relationships among all believers in Christ.
- We value the family and seek to strengthen all marital and familial relationships.
- We value the similarities and differences in the body of Christ.
- We value tradition and heritage that harmonize with God's Word.
- We value cultural relevance and community involvement.
- We value giving generously and sacrificially to ABC Church.
- We value creativity and innovation compatible with God's Word.
- We value competent, and capable, Biblical leadership.
- We value character, consistency, commitment, and consecration.
- We value growth, both numerically and spiritually.
- We value excellence in every area of life.
- We value every believer's giftedness.

These values have come to be institutionalized over time through the leadership of the pastor and the lay leadership teams he assembled. ABC Church came into existence in 1994 when an Evangelist named James Wilson Smith<sup>2</sup> founded the congregation, beginning with 35- 40 mostly African-American members. The congregation's promotional materials now characterize the church as follows:

Currently, the congregation has a membership of about 150 that spans a variety of social, cultural, racial, and economic backgrounds. James Wilson Smith, Evangelist of ABC church from its inception says, "I think we are a unique church in all respects . . . Many times people see me and because I'm African-American assume the congregation where I serve is all black. ABC Church is about fifty percent white, forty percent African American and ten percent Hispanic and others. In addition, the wealthy worship right beside homeless—the pews are littered with ex-pimps, ex-prostitutes, ex-drug addicts, ex-hustlers and even former murders; society's most unwanted are welcome at ABC church." Smith adds, "Contrary to what many people may think, there are also many people in the congregation who have never experienced the harmful effects of illegal drug

use, alcoholism or life on the streets of America. The fellowship at ABC includes countless everyday people' who bring a healthy balance to our fellowship." Smith said, "God has assembled a unique fellowship at ABC to accomplish a vital and urgent ministry in His church."

### **Outreach**

Part of that "urgent ministry" is a multi-faceted program called *Outreach*, the urban ministry of ABC Church. Its mission statement is as follows:

Our mission is to provide genuine help, authentic hope, and gracious healing to men, women, and children impacted by the issues of life. The Outreach staff is comprised of trained and dedicated servants and volunteers who really care about people. . . . Every year thousands of individuals and families in the city . . . and surrounding areas find help, hope, and healing from the comprehensive ministries offered at Outreach.

The many components of *Outreach* include food and clothing distribution, transitional living assistance, substance abuse and addiction counseling, Bible study, personal and family counseling, and opportunities to volunteer.

To this point, the outreach ministry of ABC Church is comprised of programs for which virtually any religious organization would claim Biblical, theological, and traditional support. However, there is one more component to *Outreach* and described as follows in their promotional literature:

**HIV Education and Prevention:** Free, confidential testing, results and counseling are available Monday through Friday. Community Outreach Specialists work among the at-risk community to provide individuals with HIV/STD prevention education.

That brief description does not quite tell the whole story. ABC Church does not distinguish between those persons infected with HIV based on the manner of acquisition. IV drug users and those who were infected sexually, whether by opposite sex or same-sex partners, are offered care, counseling, and support. Moreover, distribution of bleach-kits for disinfecting needles, and facilitating the procurement of condoms are all part of "HIV/STD prevention education" at ABC Church. These particular components of the program are done without fanfare or publicity, but are well known among ABC Church's constituents.

"Society's most unwanted are welcome at ABC church." This is the core value that supports the *Outreach* ministry and which enables a conservative and Biblically based theology to be brought to bear on all aspects of congregational life, and most especially, outreach to Persons With AIDS.

### **Assessing Values: James Wilson Smith, His Preaching, and His Teaching:**

Mr. Wilson-Smith is a relatively high-profile leader within the religious community. He is well-known among local clergy. Leaders in virtually all of the other more than forty Church of Christ congregations in town know of his ministry. Leaders in most other congregations have at least heard of the church that serves poor people in the center of town. ABC Church promotes its leader's identity as follows:

James Wilson Smith is the Evangelist at the ABC Church of Christ, an urban ministry that offers many community-based outreach services including food and clothes distribution to the homeless and hungry; a transitional living center for men and women; substance abuse and addiction coun-

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- seling; biblically-based personal and family counseling; HIV/AIDS prevention education and testing; and daily support groups for people in recovery from alcohol, drugs and other addictive behaviors.

James is the founder and Executive Director of *Outreach*, a church-based substance abuse, addiction and HIV recovery program. James is a Substance Abuse and Addiction Specialist, who along with the *Outreach* staff, conducts workshops and seminars concerning urban ministry and the development of biblically-based strategies for recovery from substance abuse and other addictive behaviors, and implementing HIV/AIDS prevention services in the community of faith. James is a past-recipient of several distinguished awards including the Humanitarian Award from the City of \_\_\_\_\_ acknowledging his dedication, service and generosity to the community.

Mr. Wilson-Smith is also the preacher and chief teacher of what he believes, which then becomes the mission, marching orders, and core values of the congregation. We were given a representative collection of his sermons and educational lessons. We use three of these to summarize the values which generate and support ministry decisions that focus on *Outreach* at ABC Church of Christ. Mr. Wilson-Smith understands these values as the manifestations of his conservative, Biblical, and fundamentalist theology. These are:

“Inside-Out: Where Real Change Takes Place.” The scripture passage on which this sermon is based comes from Matthew 23: 25-28, the essence of which is, “Woe to you, scribes, Pharisees, hypocrites.” Mr. Wilson Smith writes:

God wants us to be honest, committed, consistent. Jesus wants to more than clean up, dust off and paint the exterior of your life with a Christian veneer; he wants to do something about the filth, the grime, the life below the surface of external appearance! More than ever Jesus is in search of a church comprised of real people, committed to real change, to impact a world that really needs him!

“The Conundrum of City Life.” Here, Mr. Wilson-Smith presents an essay, the point of which illustrates how he sees the role of an urban church implementing an urban ministry. He makes this point very personal at the end:

When you look at Jesus He never ran from “bad” situations or “bad” people. In fact, throughout His ministry, He ran toward the outcast, the poor, the sick, the afflicted, the hungry, the dying, the blind, the bleeding and the rich too! You see, Jesus understood that everybody needed the Father, from the obvious “down and out” ones to the more secretive and self-reliant “up and out” ones. Tax collectors, fisherman, Pharisees, demon-possessed, prostitutes, drunkards—the so-called “bad” people comprised an arsenal of dedicated disciples that would change the face of Jerusalem and the world forever. It is no mystery that the composition of the urban church must adequately reflect the urban demographic to be effective at changing the face of the city for Jesus.

Someone has said, “*I have but one candle of life to live and I would rather burn it out in a place where people are dying in darkness than in a place that is flooded with lights.*” To that I say, “Me Too!”

“Feeling God’s Pain.” This sermon is based, in part, on Matthew 11: 28-30, “Come unto me all ye that labor and are heavy laden, and I will give thee rest.” This represents what we have come to know as the essence of Mr. Wilson-Smith’s understanding of a Biblically based mandate to serve the most needy and the most outcast. He writes:

If we dare look at a world struggling w/sin and deep needs and say, "I don't see the need; I don't feel what they feel," or even, "We are doing our fair share"—we have succumbed to passivity! Even when we do our best we have done only that which we *ought* to have done. We are morally and spiritually *obligated* to dispense authentic ministry among all people! . . . When you can look at a world that is hungry, homeless, naked, afflicted, troubled, abused, infected, oppressed, neglected, and lost, and turn your back and sleep comfortable—you are turning your back on Jesus too!

For Evangelist James Wilson-Smith, *Outreach* ministry, and especially *Outreach* to Persons With AIDS, is a calling that turns his congregation toward Jesus, and the people like those for Jesus himself had special affection.

### ***Assessing Values and Interests: Interviews with Mr. Wilson-Smith, Mr. Campbell, and Ms. Washington<sup>3</sup>***

In order to more fully understand the theological and social values which support, and the interests which compete with, *Outreach*, we interviewed Mr. Wilson-Smith (JWS). We also subsequently interviewed Wesley Campbell (WC), a prominent local health care professional and volunteer leader, and Alice Washington (AW), a former client of *Outreach* and now a staff member at ABC Church. Their responses to interview questions are preceded by their initials.

We began each interview by asking these individuals to summarize the central values which support the ministry of ABC Church:

*With regard to Outreach, and specifically the work you do in HIV education and prevention: What central values or theological/Biblical principles motivate your work in this program?*

**JWS:** Our Mission statement says we are to provide "genuine hope" and "authentic help" to anyone affected by the issues of life. . . . We value unchurched people. We just see that in Jesus' ministry. When he fed the 5000, he didn't require anything of them; he just helped them. He healed blind people, or lepers, or whatever.

I think of Luke, Chapter 4. The Spirit of the Lord is upon us to carry out the ministry among the poor, the oppressed. . . . It's imperative; it's an assignment. It's not an option for us. Whatever he would be doing in 2002, that's what we **HAVE** to be doing. We have to be. You look at his ministry in context, who he dealt with, primarily it was the outcasts. The spiritual elite were the ones rejecting him.

Mr. Wilson-Smith is absolutely unequivocal on this point. While he does not say so specifically at the outset, the values he expresses above make the AIDS ministry vital response to the Biblical imperative to engage who he believes God most directly calls him to reach. Alice Washington echos these sentiments:

**AW:** We have a saying that "It's hard to go to Hell in the city." We minister to everyone who comes in the door. It's just hard to watch somebody's soul be lost. I know that mine was. I know the look in (people's) eyes and, you know, OK, we need to talk. We need to share some things. The drive for is the people that come in everyday. It's knowing that people need help every day. We've got all this stuff and it's like, 'Where did all this stuff come from?' We know it comes from God. We've been blessed by so many people sponsoring us to help so many different people. . . . Some of the people come in the morning just to get a cup of coffee and get warm. . . . And if they just want to counsel with somebody, 'cause normally after you've met the needs for food and clothing, things like that, they they'll talk to you, they really will.



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We were next concerned with whether and to what extent the leaders' Biblical values and beliefs supporting the Outreach program and AIDS ministry might be at odds with the values of the church's larger constituency. It is clear from what follows that the more controversial aspects of the outreach ministry were begun and continued quietly. While not kept secret by any means, this beginning outlines a strategic process that keeps the details out of others' faces. We then asked:

*To what extent did you have to "sell" this idea as a viable ministry of ABC Church?*

**JWS:** Believe it or not, we just started doing it. Quietly. Believe it or not, there's a lot of people who don't know all of what we're doing. We really didn't ask permission. One of my mottos is it's better to ask for forgiveness than permission. So we just started doing it. . . . We had a couple of people who came up (HIV) positive in our close circle and that kind of spurred it on. It really wasn't a hard sell to do it.

**AW:** There were a lot of homeless people, and a lot of people that were HIV+, and it's just a neighborhood with poverty all over it and people were in need of everything. Clothes, food, . . . some love.

This generated a discussion in each interview about what impact of this type of work has on what the congregation stands to gain or lose.

*To what extent does having that program work against the interests of the congregation? What, if anything, does it "cost" you in terms of image, prestige, or even materially?*

**JWS:** Internally, nothing at all. We enjoy a healthy rapport with many other Churches of Christ. And many other churches. If we have any strained relations, its not just because of our HIV ministry, but probably because of some of our theological positions, the people we might embrace are believers who other Churches of Christ might not.

Alice Washington is even less equivocal:

**AW:** This ministry needs to happen. There needs to be a lot more of it. People out there that just want to know that somebody cares about their lives. If I'm on drugs and I want to make a change in my life, it's like "Hey," right around the corner is *Outreach*. If you want to get off drugs, you want to go to treatment, you want some counseling, you can just go there and find out.

**JWS:** There might be people who would say about me, "I don't think he's going to hell, but he might be a little singed, you know (laughs). Hair singed!"

**AW:** *Outreach* deals with the person holistically. We believe that it's hard to get through to a person that's homeless, or on drugs or something like that if they're hungry or if they need a place to stay. So we have our food and clothes pantry that assists them with food and clothes. We offer counseling, HIV testing, and counseling.

At this point, we introduce the comments of the church's key lay leader. Wesley Campbell is a man of strong personal faith commitment through which he also sees the Biblical imperative to reach out to the "least of Jesus' brethren." Again, however, he conceptualizes the continued success of the program in terms of its relatively low profile.

**WC:** From the worldly perspective, it is a risky ministry. I often share my experiences in ABC Church's ministry with my brothers from all over the city and from several different denominations. Many of them, much to my dismay, are very negative about the ABC ministries. They'll say . . . "So you're working with 'those' people, huh?" And I'm thinking "Man, what Bible are you reading?" But it comes down to a question of "are we going to do what . . . God encourages us to do (or not?)"

As we discussed the risks of doing the AIDS ministry further with Mr. Wilson-Smith, he related a rather humorous exchange he had with a fellow minister in which it became apparent that, in terms of Church of Christ theology, Mr. Wilson-Smith's occasional guitar playing at worship was more problematic to his colleagues than providing bleach kits to People With AIDS. Mr. Wilson-Smith then related how the AIDS ministry became an asset to the congregation rather than a liability as he talked to us about his (and his congregation's) relationship with the leaders of other Church of Christ congregations in town.

**JWS:** But we enjoy relationships with many traditional and conservative churches. (Names a prominent local Church of Christ congregation). This is one of our largest financial supporters. Largest since the beginning. They gave us \$50,000 just to start this work. They don't agree with everything we do. We clap during worship and their elders will tell you "We don't like that." But then they've supported us over the years. They've given us over \$90,000.

Next Sunday is \_\_\_\_\_'s Mission Sunday. Every year they raise some \$200,000 and we're one of their flagship ministries that they support. They've given us \$10,000 every year since '94 and last year they bumped it up to \$12,000. And \_\_\_\_\_ (another larger Church of Christ congregation), gives us \$18,000 a year. They advertise it!

However, it also serves their interests to provide funding for what becomes, in effect, a contract ministry that could not be done in any other way.

**JWS:** The three largest Church of Christ congregations in (town) support us significantly, but we take all their referrals. Say for example you went to \_\_\_\_\_ (the largest one) and said you needed some food, they'd send you to us and we'd help you out of our food pantry. They don't have the capacity to do what we do because they're not set up for it. Some of their values say they want to do it, but you walk into a facility like a \_\_\_\_\_ or a \_\_\_\_\_, I mean you're intimidated immediately if you're homeless.

Mr. Campbell makes essentially the same point in his interview:

**WC:** The more tangible ones that the world I think could measure, is that even these churches that are very critical of us are supporting us. I can't think of a better affirmation of the work that is done. . . . And people who even don't support us publicly are supporting us behind the scenes with resources. And we'll take it. Some of these folks I've heard criticize us publicly. . . . But my sense is that, in their heart of hearts, they know that God is doing what He wants done through ABC.

ABC Church gains resources from other Church of Christ congregations to do work that may very well be at odds with the other congregations' stated values. But as long as the work is "farmed out" as it were in a manner that is more or less under the radar, it serves the interests of the larger church community to be able to direct people in trouble to at least one place where they may find help. This, however, begs the most controversial question of all as it relates to the application of a conservative theology to the issue of HIV.

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*What about the notion that AIDS is "the wrath of God" brought upon sinful people?*

**JWS:** I don't believe that a all. None of my elders believe that. We did have some members who believed that and they left. No one that I know of in our particular fellowship believes that. The overall mood is that people are more understanding. I'm sure that there are people that feel that way.

I think its out there, more than we'd like to imagine. You can see that in the aversion to any real healthy dialogue about sexually transmitted diseases in the religious community.

Wesley Campbell gives the question into a local context:

**WC:** One of the big things in (town) is sex education, or lack thereof, in school. So whenever the issue comes up, my Christian brothers rightfully stand up and say "Abstinence is what the Bible says." And anything else is against that. Well, I'm certainly not contrary to that. Clearly that's what the Bible promotes. But my point is that the way folks *learn* about abstinence is by being *fellowshipped* into the Body of Christ, so that they then learn *why* God talks about abstinence. . . . That's exactly what Christ did as I understand it. Christ didn't lower the standards of what He wants us to accomplish in God's kingdom. The standard is still here. Christ went to them and said, "Let me show you how to get to that standard." And that's what I see ABC doing.

Mr. Wilson-Smith addresses occasional rejoinders to the program:

**JWS:** You have some conservative camps where there's fire and brimstone, you know, that feel the only ones going to heaven are Church of Christ people. That's where you find some of that wrath of God mentality. Then you have a mix of people that say it probably is a punishment but that's because of the behavior, not because God hates them. Then there are people who are more socially conscious like for example in our fellowship that are just totally opposed to that idea at all. It's a complex mix of views.

Mr. Campbell summarizes:

**WC:** Sin is sin is sin. And that's a real big deal within the Church of Christ, too. They knock us because we accept homosexuals into our congregation. And our view is that we don't accept homosexuality. We accept homosexuals. Just like we accept adulterers. Just like we accept liars. Or drug users. If you want to get right with God, come on!

These issues were very personal for each of our respondents:

**JWS:** Because of the stigma, of course, in the '80's, if you had HIV it meant you were gay. I think it has to do with a misunderstanding of the disease and how it's transmitted. I would venture to say that many of the people in churches, maybe a large percentage of people, have been promiscuous before, either prior to conversion or after, and didn't contract HIV. But yet somebody who does, they look at them as being under the wrath of God. And that doesn't wash with me. Why did God pick them and not me?

**WC:** In my life I've engaged in very risky sexual behavior. . . . I can't look at these folks and say, "Gee, my goodness, you dirty this, that, and the other because you've got HIV. Because what got them HIV I've been engaged in too. We'll have someone come down front to be baptized. . . . he'll be a homeless guy or some criminal from the community that everybody knows. And then some of us will look at that guy and say, "Goodness, look at him! *He's* coming to get what the church has to offer?" That's the way God looked at us at one time! "Look at him. Full of sin? He needs my Son's blood to clean him up!"

**AW:** Actually, I was a crackhead. And a friend of mine (who was on probation and been mandated) had been to *Outreach* before. I had been on crack for about eight years, feeling really bad. I weighed only about 90 pounds. A friend introduced me to *Outreach*. . . . *They literally saved my life.* I came in there a broken person—broken in every area of my life. . . . I realized that I had finally made it to the right place in my life. And since September the 23<sup>rd</sup> of 1997, I've been sober. . . . Before I went to *Outreach*, I thought there was no hope for me.

In very practical terms, Mr. Wilson-Smith tells the story of how the church navigates the details of the most controversial aspects of the AIDS ministry:

*What about the bleach kit and condom distribution components of the program?*

**JWS:** Again that's something that is done very discreetly. We don't have big signs, "Bleach is Here." We call them barriers to infection. You're not talking 'condoms.' You know, there is a view out there—"Would Jesus hand somebody a bleach kit?" Would Jesus hand somebody a condom?" That's a stretch. You look at like it that you say, 'Whoa!'

One time we had an incident where we had a really aggressive outreach worker who decided to put condoms in a fishbowl on the desk (in the reception area of the church). We had a supporter from a conservative church come in . . . (laughs). .. You just don't have condoms in a fishbowl. We developed a distribution system and get them to the crack houses, beauty parlors, and places like that.

We do have the bleach kits. Bleach kits don't have any needles or works in them. Bleach kits just have a container with an instruction sheet, a container for the bleach where you can cook and heat your rig up and dip it in bleach. . . . We try to be discreet. Our point is to help. I don't want to argue with people about the details. It's just like with Jesus. Sick people knew where to go. News about Him spread. There's this guy out there healing people. And that's how it is with us.

*How much detail is put up-front to your benefactors?*

**JWS:** I think they know, but they choose to—they have confidence in me that we'd do the right thing. I don't think it's a secret, but if I went over there and said "ABC Church is a condom distribution center," I probably don't get the check. And it would be stupid to do that. I don't need to grandstand like that. They know what we're doing. Whether they agree with every single component and would sign off on it, I know they don't. I know they don't agree with us theologically on every single point. But they agree with enough of it—enough consensus—to say we can support your overall program.

**WC:** The HIV stuff, and the need for housing, is just a starting point. I mean, if you have a spiritually strong man, God will cut him loose in the world.

*The AIDS ministry doesn't work against you in any meaningful way?*

**JWS:** It may . . . I don't know. You might have to talk to other people. There may be some who didn't come because of our AIDS ministry. Or who saw our ad and said I'm not going there because the church shouldn't be doing HIV ministry. I got an email about two months ago and a guy said he didn't think we needed to be in the business of HIV prevention.

**WC:** About the AIDS ministry—folks from the outside think that the focus is that we provide these folks with medical stuff and education and blah blah blah. No, that's just the beginning, dealing with just the surface issues. The real issues is, "What is it that led to your being homeless? What is it that led to your getting into drugs? What is it that led to the behavior that ended up with your

being HIV positive? So the idea is certainly to deal with their immediate needs, but to really get to the core of the issue through spiritual growth.

At the end of the day, Outreach at ABC Church of Christ is something of a balancing act. In order to apply the core values which these leaders believe emerge from the Biblical imperative to serve the needs of the most needy, much of their work (and particularly the AIDS ministry) goes on under the radar. This does not mean it is invisible or that there is any attempt to maintain secrecy. Rather, the focus is on meeting a need that will not go away, and which even other churches in town, holding to the most conservative moral theology, must acknowledge is present in their midst.

## DISCUSSION

Alice Washington declares: "We're making it hard to go to Hell in the City!" She is actually echoing a slogan that appears in the Yellow Pages listing for ABC Church of Christ. It's a compelling image of refuge for those whose lives have, through outside circumstance or their own doing, become a living Hell. James Wilson Smith echoes the slogan now familiar on wristbands, T-shirts, and pencils: "What would Jesus do?" The answer to that question is the *Outreach* ministry program.

We began this study by seeking to understand what seemed like a paradox. A congregation affiliated with a strongly conservative and fundamentalist tradition has a clearly defined and more or less public identity as a group of Christians called especially to a ministry to People With Aids. Moreover, as we began to talk to the individuals whose work comprises this ministry, it quickly became clear that they understand this work as an expression of that strongly conservative and fundamentalist tradition. This program is supported by a set of values that ground the church's work at the street-level in a manner reminiscent of Jesus' work with prostitutes and lepers. This means significant interaction with individuals who are, in a theological sense, living with the consequences of the sins of drug use and reckless sexual behavior that is at odds with the moral frame of a fundamentalist ideology. We wondered initially how the leaders of this congregation managed to put this type of work out front while maintaining their conservative moral values and without alienating the necessary constituency of supporters who would provide the resources to do this work.

James Wilson Smith is the founding charismatic leader of ABC Church of Christ. He was called by the denomination to come to the area and establish an urban ministry in a Church of Christ congregation. The identity of this congregation began to form as Mr. Wilson Smith put an activist-oriented spin on the conservative theology that characterizes the Churches of Christ. He recruited (Evangelized) a leadership group and drew neighborhood residents into his congregational constituency. The early leadership of this congregation put forward a collective identity as an activist church and gathered sufficient like-minded members and volunteers to form reference networks that supported this style of ministry. They created a niche within what they intuitively understood to be an open social system in the community (Koch and Johnson 1997). These leaders understood that they would need to gain resources from the larger community and also negotiate the rationale for this ministry in the context of a theologically and morally conservative tradition.

When the need for a ministry to Persons With AIDS surfaced, the leaders negotiated a way to make this work part of what they believed to be a Biblical imperative. They negotiated a congruence of incongruent ideologies that now goes well beyond "love the sinner but

hate the sin." While Mr. Campbell stated in his interview that homosexuality was behavior he regarded as similar to adultery and lying, this ministry to PWAs does not hinge on individuals renouncing who they are. The church does what they believe their values compel them to do and they are content to let God's Spirit (working through the congregation to be sure) work any change in the behavior of the "sinner." Nowhere to they state, nor did we ever intuit, that any type of ministry or service to any person was contingent on a change in their behavior. They do believe that their ministry ultimately does help individuals' change the more destructive aspects of their behavior such as drug use and reckless sex, but it never seems to be quid-pro-quo for the service. (See Thumma 1991, for a case study of a similarly-styled negotiation of an incongruent identity for a group of Evangelical gay men.)

However, reconciling a ministry to sexual sinners and drug abusers with a morally conservative theology is more complicated when the organization depends on its ability to assemble significant monetary and volunteer resources to stay in business. Bolman and Deal (1992) note the intensely political nature of organizational decision-making. Especially with regard to controversial decisions, leaders must account for the interests of the coalitions they represent and balance their activities with reference to the interests of those on whom they depend for resources.

Two essential features of ABC's way of navigating this process come to the fore. First, *Outreach* is done with very little fanfare or promotion. Mr. Wilson-Smith aptly noted that those who needed to know about ABC Church got the word and figured out how to get there. Second, ABC Church works through an equally quiet partnership with other Church of Christ congregations who share the values associated with an *Outreach* type of ministry, but whose more rarified constituencies prevent them from actively initiating such work on their own. Instead, a coalition is forged such that, in exchange for monetary support, ABC Church provides services to the needy on behalf of the benefactors. Everybody is doing what they consider to be the right thing, but the street-level interaction occurs across town from where much of the money comes that supports it. ABC Church is left then, at the end of each day, with a mandate for doing the ministry that is consistent with their values, and a process which makes it in the best interests of many Church of Christ (and other) congregations to keep it going.

We can only speculate the degree to which this type of support from larger, wealthier congregations and community constituents carries a kind of vicarious appeal for those who are grateful for the presence of the HIV/AIDS ministry, but would very much rather it not occur in their own back yards. Be that as it may, ABC's involvement with drug users, prostitutes, and gay/lesbian individuals is well known and understood by both insiders and outsiders as an extension of "What Jesus Would Do." While the details of *how* this is done may not be widely known, the benefactors seem content not to ask. As long as there aren't any "condoms in the fish-bowl," ABC Church is simply one church doing the work of many in a difficult context. Moreover, the exact details of the HIV/AIDS ministry are a relatively small part of a much larger whole. *Outreach* is a comprehensive program which provides food, clothing, shelter, tutoring, and substance abuse counseling, and Bible study in addition to the bleach kits and condoms.

This case study is but one of many possible examples of how religious congregations seek to make a meaningful impact on the social and moral issues which confront them. Values and interests converge and compete in a myriad of ways, leading some churches to reach out and others to retreat. We find it most noteworthy that at ABC Church of Christ, values and

interests converge throughout the varieties of ministries which comprise its *Outreach Ministry*. The core values of the charismatic leader have been fully institutionalized in the congregation, the denomination, and the community-at-large. And the congregations's ministry is served and supported by other individuals and organizations within the denomination and the larger community as well.

Address all correspondence to: Jerome R. Koch, Department of Sociology, Anthropology, and Social Work, Box 41012, Holden Hall 158, Texas Tech University, Lubbock, TX 79409

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup>This is a pseudonym to protect the identity of the congregation.

<sup>2</sup>James Wilson Smith, as well as the names used for the other two other interviewees (Wesley Campbell and Alice Washington), are pseudonyms.

<sup>3</sup>While the interview responses are presented as a kind of dialogue among the three respondents, the interviews themselves were conducted separately but within the same thirty-days' time. We have combined the respondents' answers to the same questions such that it appears they were in dialogue when, in fact, they were not. Even so, there is a remarkable convergence of insight throughout.

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