

Black Churches and HIV/AIDS: Factors Influencing Congregations' Responsiveness to Social Issues

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The ambivalent response of many black churches to current social issues has caused some scholars to question the centrality of black churches within African-American communities. Using a nationally representative sample of black congregations, this study engages the debate about the institutional centrality of black churches by focusing on their response to HIV/AIDS. Although many congregational studies treat black churches as a monolithic whole, this analysis identifies heterogeneity among black churches that shapes their responsiveness to social issues. Contrary to prior claims, a congregation's liberal-conservative ideological orientation does not significantly affect its likelihood of having an HIV/AIDS program. Beyond assessing churches' internal characteristics, this study uses institutional theory to analyze churches as open systems that can be influenced by their surrounding environment. It demonstrates that externally engaged congregations are significantly more likely to have a program. These results indicate that black churches maintain institutional centrality by engaging their external environment.

Keywords: *black churches, HIV/AIDS, congregations, social services.*

INTRODUCTION

Historically, black churches have served as institutional hubs within their communities. During the 20th century, sociologists consistently demonstrated the central role black churches played in addressing the challenges facing African Americans (DuBois 1903; Mays and Nicholson 1933; Thompson 1974). These findings led Lincoln (1974) to conclude that black churches have been at the forefront of virtually every movement for social change within black communities. However, as early as the 1960s, scholars began questioning the contemporary role of black churches (Frazier 1964; Lewis and Trulear 2008; Mukenge 1983; Wilmore 1998). They argue that black churches' ambivalent response to current social issues (e.g., domestic violence, substance abuse, high unemployment) has undermined their status as the hub of social support for African Americans. On the other hand, many scholars argue that the factors that made black churches institutional hubs still operate and serve to maintain black churches' central role within their communities (Billingsley 1999; Chaves and Higgins 1992; Laudarji and Livezey 2000; Lincoln and Mamiya 1990). They claim that black churches continue to be important institutions that confront African-American issues by providing social services and advocating structural reform.

This study engages the debate about the institutional centrality of black churches by focusing on their response to HIV/AIDS. This crisis serves as a helpful indicator of black churches' responsiveness to current social problems because the stigma associated with HIV/AIDS makes it an especially controversial issue for many churches (Douglas 1999; Lindley et al. 2010).

Acknowledgments: The author thanks David Brady, Mark Chaves, Marie Cornwall, and the three anonymous reviewers for their helpful comments on earlier versions of the article.

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Deciding how to respond becomes complex because the predominant modes of infection often violate church teachings. Additionally, HIV/AIDS remains a growing problem within black communities. Despite a decline in the overall HIV incidence rate, the rate for African Americans continues to rise. Although African Americans represent only 12 percent of the U.S. population, they now account for over 50 percent of new HIV cases, and currently over 500,000 African Americans are living with HIV (Center for Disease Control 2009).

Given the spread of HIV/AIDS within black communities, coupled with the historical role of black churches in confronting social issues, it is particularly important to understand the factors influencing church responsiveness to this public health crisis. Using data from a nationally representative sample of black congregations, this study examines how a congregation's ideological orientation and external engagement affect its likelihood of sponsoring an HIV/AIDS program. More broadly, it provides insight into the diversity among black churches, their changing roles within their communities, and the factors influencing their responsiveness to social issues.

Ideological Orientation and External Engagement

A common view within the sociology of religion has been that a congregation's liberal-conservative ideological orientation strongly influences its priorities. The perception among sociologists and the general public is that conservative congregations tend to emphasize moral chastity over social advocacy, and this becomes particularly salient when assessing a congregation's social service activity. Researchers consistently find that conservative beliefs undermine social activism (Hoge, Perry, and Klever 1978; Kanagy 1992; Will and Cochran 1995), and that conservative congregations are less involved in providing social services (Ammerman 2005; Chaves and Tsitsos 2001; Wuthnow 2004). Evidence also suggests that the controversial moral issues often associated with becoming HIV positive may further undermine church responsiveness to this particular issue (Leong 2006). Thomas and his colleagues (1994:578) find that "many churches struggle with moral issues related to the sexual and drug behaviors at the root of health problems such as HIV/AIDS." Even though Douglas (1999) observes many black churches becoming generally more tolerant toward people living with HIV/AIDS, she notes that some of these churches remain conflicted about the controversial aspects of the disease.

As the negative relationship between conservatism and social activism has become evident, several scholars have attempted to explain this relationship. Wilson and Janoski (1995) attribute the lack of social engagement among conservative congregations to their "other-worldly" focus, suggesting that it causes them to be less concerned with "this-worldly" issues (see also Johnson 1967; Roozen, Carroll, and McKinney 1984). Hollinger (1983) argues that conservative congregations espouse an individualist orientation and view personal transformation as the key to changing society. Because they believe that an aggregation of individual conversions will lead to broad-scale social transformation, they emphasize personal salvation over structural reform (see also Bartkowski 2004; Smith and Emerson 1998).

Although many scholars focus on a congregation's liberal-conservative orientation to explain its responsiveness to social issues, some scholars suggest that it may be a poor indicator when analyzing black churches. Pattillo-McCoy's (1998) ethnography of a black neighborhood in Chicago analyzes the role of churches in facilitating community activism. She finds that a congregation's liberal-conservative orientation does not influence its level of community involvement. McRoberts (1999:52) analyzes conservative, black Pentecostal churches in Boston and he observes some becoming more socially active despite maintaining "a biblical literalist, morally strict, conversionist faith." This research suggests that ideological orientation may operate differently in black churches. Consequently, this study assesses the influence of liberal-conservative ideological orientation on the likelihood of black churches having an HIV/AIDS program by testing the following hypothesis:

Hypothesis 1: Conservative black congregations will be less likely to have an HIV/AIDS program.

Organization theory offers another framework for explaining congregations' responsiveness to social issues. According to institutionalism, organizations are not isolated, autonomous units driven solely by internal characteristics. Instead, they are open systems that are embedded within a network of interrelated institutions that can influence their activity (Scott and Davis 2007). Institutional theory proposes that the external environment establishes standards of legitimacy and pressures organizations to adopt its interests (DiMaggio and Powell 1983). The amount of pressure an organization faces depends on the degree of interdependence between the organization and its environment (DiMaggio and Powell 1991).

Because congregations are organizations embedded within a social environment, they also are susceptible to environmental pressure. Likewise, the pressure they experience will vary since congregations vary in their engagement with the external world (Roozen, Carroll, and McKinney 1984). Some congregations are insular—they view the world as corrupt and avoid interacting with it. By minimizing their attachments to the world, these congregations reduce the influence of external demands. Other congregations are externally engaged—they value interacting with the world and choose to cultivate external ties. By establishing interdependent relationships with their environment, these congregations face greater pressure to adopt its priorities. Among black churches, McRoberts (2003) observes that externally focused congregations are more aware of community needs, and he suggests that environmental pressure contributes to their increased social service activity. Similarly, Billingsley (1999) finds that some black churches are choosing to be more outward oriented, and as a result, they are becoming more responsive to social concerns. Consequently, since HIV/AIDS among African Americans has become a high-priority issue, and since HIV/AIDS programs have become an institutionalized social service (Eke, Wilkes, and Gaiter 2010), institutional theory suggests that black churches that interact with their surrounding environment will be more responsive to this issue and more likely to sponsor a program. This leads to the following hypothesis:

Hypothesis 2: Externally engaged black congregations will be more likely to have an HIV/AIDS program.

METHOD

Data

To assess the influence of ideological orientation and external engagement on program sponsorship among black churches, this analysis uses data from Wave II of the National Congregations Study (NCS). Conducted in 2006–2007, this nationally representative survey of religious congregations had a response rate of 78 percent and collected data from key informants on 1,506 congregations (Chaves and Anderson 2008). Because this study focuses on black churches, it restricts the sample to congregations that report having a member base greater than 60 percent African American.¹ The resulting sample includes 203 congregations representing approximately 100,000 regularly attending adults.

¹ Using a percentage threshold to define a congregation as “black” is consistent with previous research (see Barnes 2005; Cavendish 2000; Chaves and Higgins 1992; Dudley and Roozen 2001). Additional analyses that shift the percentage threshold for qualifying as a black congregation do not generate significantly different outcomes.

This study analyzes the data from the perspective of church attenders because of its focus on congregation-based social services (Chaves 2004).² When researchers want to know the social impact of congregational activity, it is more meaningful to analyze the number of churchgoers exposed to an activity rather than the number of churches sponsoring the activity (Wuthnow 2004:42). For example, a social service program in a large congregation affects many more people than the same program in a small congregation. In particular, while only 4 percent of black congregations have an HIV/AIDS program, 19 percent of churchgoers attend a black congregation that has a program. The reason for this substantial difference is twofold—larger congregations are more likely to have a program and they account for a much larger share of the church-going public than smaller congregations. Because this study concerns the role of black churches in responding to HIV/AIDS, analyzing the data from the attendee level provides qualitatively more meaningful results. However, analyzing the data from the congregation level produces results with similar patterns of significance and nonsignificance among the key independent variables.

MEASUREMENT

The dependent variable for this analysis—*HIV/AIDS program*—is a dichotomous measure drawn from the NCS question, “Does your congregation currently have any program or activity specifically intended to serve persons with HIV or AIDS?”—“yes” responses are coded 1 and “no” responses 0.³ Table 1 displays the descriptive statistics for the dependent variable as well as all of the relevant independent variables.⁴

Researchers face several challenges when attempting to measure a congregation’s ideological orientation. Given the multidimensional nature of ideological orientation, five dummy variables are constructed to operationalize the congregation’s liberal-conservative ideology. *Theologically conservative* is constructed from the question: “Theologically speaking, would your congregation be considered more on the conservative side, more on the liberal side, or right in the middle?” The variable is coded 1 for congregations that report being “more on the conservative side” and 0 for congregations that report being “more on the liberal side” or “right in the middle.” *Politically conservative* is constructed from an identical question related to the congregation’s political orientation (coded 1 for congregations that report being politically “more on the conservative side” and 0 for congregations that report being “more on the liberal side” or “right in the middle”)⁵ *Bible is inerrant* is constructed from the question, “Does your congregation consider

² The NCS constructed two types of weights that enable users to analyze the data from either the congregation level or attendee level. Deciding which level to analyze depends on the focus of the study. The congregation level is more appropriate for studies that assess trends among congregations (e.g., Do congregations located in urban areas tend to be more liberal?). This type of research benefits from using weights that treat each congregation as one unit regardless of its size. On the other hand, the attendee level is more appropriate for studies concerned with the social impact of congregational activity. This type of research benefits from using weights that treat congregations in proportion to their size.

³ An anonymous reviewer noted a critical limitation of this question. Because of its wording, it can only identify whether congregations have an HIV/AIDS *treatment* program; it cannot identify whether congregations have an HIV *prevention* program. Because treatment programs (e.g., support groups, food distribution, hospice care) can be less controversial than prevention programs (e.g., safe-sex education, condom distribution, needle exchange), this may dampen the effect of liberal-conservative ideological orientation on program sponsorship (Cunningham et al. 2009; Hernández, Burwell, and Smith. 2007; Weatherford and Weatherford 1999).

⁴ Missing values for the independent variables were imputed using the Amelia II program (King et al. 2001). Neither the dependent variable nor any of the significant independent variables had any missing values, and additional analyses indicate that the cases with imputed values do not significantly affect the outcome.

⁵ Alternative coding schemes were used for *theological orientation* in other analyses not reported here. In one, the variable is coded 1 for congregations on the conservative side or in the middle and 0 for congregations on the liberal side.

Table 1: Descriptive statistics of black congregations^a (N=203)

Variable	Mean/Proportion	Standard Error
HIV/AIDS program sponsorship	.19	.034
<i>Theological orientation</i>		
Liberal	.11	.025
Moderate	.41	.039
Conservative	.48	.040
<i>Political orientation</i>		
Liberal	.13	.028
Moderate	.53	.040
Conservative	.34	.037
Bible is inerrant	.92	.026
No statement welcoming homosexuals	.96	.015
Forbids homosexual leaders	.94	.026
Has a group assessing community needs	.69	.037
Collaborates with outside organizations	.53	.040
Promotes political participation	.42	.040
Seeks government funding	.14	.029
Has outside speakers	.49	.031
Total # of participating adults ^b	5.07	.126
Total # of volunteers ^b	2.65	.144
Total # of full-time staff ^b	1.19	.087
Clergy graduated	.61	.039
Age of congregation ^b	4.07	.069
South	.72	.035
Urban	.67	.038
Suburban	.15	.028
Rural	.18	.032

^aAttendee level weights applied (Chaves and Anderson 2008).

^bLogged values.

Source: National Congregations Study, 2006–2007.

the Bible to be the literal and inerrant word of God?” (“yes” responses are coded 1 and “no” responses 0). *No statement welcoming homosexuals* comes from a question asking informants if the congregation has a statement that officially welcomes homosexuals (1 for congregations that do not have a welcome statement and 0 for congregations that have a statement). *Forbids homosexual leaders* is constructed from a question about whether the congregation would allow an openly gay or lesbian person to hold a volunteer leadership position (“yes” is coded 1 and “don’t know” and “no” are coded 0).⁶

Five dichotomous variables measure a congregation’s engagement with the external environment. Each of these variables is coded 1 if the congregation has the particular characteristic and 0 if it does not. Congregations that engage their surrounding community by surveying its needs are often better positioned to recognize and respond to social issues (Ammerman 1997;

In another, two dummy variables were created (liberal and conservative) and theologically moderate was the reference category. The same alternative coding schemes were used for political orientation. None of these alternative coding schemes produced significantly different results.

⁶ Sixteen (8 percent) of the informants responded “don’t know” to this question. “Don’t know” responses are coded as 0 because the variable is used to identify congregations that explicitly forbid homosexual leaders.

McRoberts 2003; Wuthnow 2004). The variable *has a group assessing community needs* is coded 1 if informants reported their congregation had a group that assessed community needs. Many congregations develop external ties by collaborating with outside organizations to provide social services (Ammerman 2005; Chaves and Tsitsos 2001; Thomas et al. 1994). *Collaborates with outside organizations* is constructed from the questions that asked respondents if they run their programs in collaboration with other organizations. Congregations that promote political participation are more likely to influence and be influenced by their external environment (Brown 2006; McAdam 1999; Wald and Calhoun-Brown 2007). *Promotes political participation* is drawn from the question that asked informants if the members of their congregation had been informed of opportunities to participate in political activities within the past year. Congregations that apply for government funding must comply with certain conditions that can constrain and influence the programs they sponsor (Bartkowski and Regis 2003; Chaves 1999). *Seeks government funding* comes from the question that asked respondents if their congregation had applied for a grant from any government agency within the past two years. Congregations can increase their interaction with the external environment by inviting outside speakers (Chaves 1999). Visiting speakers can expose congregations to community needs and influence their responsiveness to these issues (Wood 2002). *Has outside speakers* is constructed from the questions that asked informants if their congregation had any visiting speakers address their members within the past year.

The analysis also incorporates several control variables that both sociological theory and prior research suggest would influence a congregation's likelihood of having an HIV/AIDS program. Numerous studies demonstrate that large congregations tend to have more resources, which increase their ability to provide social services (Barnes 2004; Brown 2008; Chaves and Tsitsos 2001; Tsitsos 2003). To control for a congregation's access to financial and human resources, the index variable *congregational size* is constructed using continuous variables indicating the congregation's total number of participating adults, volunteers, and full-time staff.⁷ Because clergy's education level is an important predictor of a congregation's social service activity (Chaves and Tsitsos 2001; Thomas et al. 1994), the analysis includes the dichotomous variable *clergy graduated*, which is coded 1 for congregations with a senior clergy person who has graduated from a seminary or theological school and 0 if not. The analysis also controls for the congregation's age, its geographic region (southern vs. nonsouthern), and its community context (urban vs. nonurban).

Modeling Strategies

The first analysis assesses the bivariate relationships between congregations having an HIV/AIDS program and each variable measuring ideological orientation and external engagement. The subsequent multivariate analyses perform logistic regressions of congregations having an HIV/AIDS program.⁸ Models 1 and 2 regress the dependent variable on the variables measuring ideological orientation and external engagement respectively. Model 3 regresses the dependent variable on both the ideological orientation and external engagement variables, and Model 4 includes all of the control variables. Model 5 retains the variables that significantly affect having a program to produce a more parsimonious model and the best model fit. To illustrate the effects of external engagement on having a program, the final analysis uses the results from Model 5 to

⁷ Because the distribution for each of these variables is skewed, their values were logged when constructing the index (Cronbach alpha = .82). The congregation's total income variable could not be used because of missing values for 45 percent of congregations. The congregation's size serves as adequate proxy for the congregation's financial resources.

⁸ The diagnostic tests recommended by Winship and Radbill (1994) indicate no misspecification related to the probability-proportional-to-size feature of the sample; thus, each model is estimated using unweighted data.

calculate the predicted probabilities that a semi-large, urban, nonsouthern congregation will have a program given the presence of particular external engagement characteristics.⁹

RESULTS

Figure 1 shows the bivariate relationships between having an HIV/AIDS program and each of the variables measuring ideological orientation and external engagement. Each pair of bars displays the likelihood that a congregation will have a program when the particular characteristic is present and absent. Most noteworthy, the percentage of theologically conservative congregations that have a program is almost the same as the percentage of nonconservative congregations.¹⁰ In addition, based on the other ideological dimensions, even though conservative congregations appear to be slightly less likely to have a program, chi-square tests reveal that none of these differences is statistically significant.¹¹ Contrary to the hypothesis, this zero-order analysis indicates that conservative congregations are just as likely to offer an HIV/AIDS program.

On the other hand, chi-square tests indicate that congregations with any of the external engagement characteristics are significantly more likely to offer a program. Among congregations that have a group assessing community needs, 27 percent have an HIV/AIDS program. In comparison, only 2 percent without such a group have a program. Thus, congregations with a group assessing community needs are 13 times more likely to have a program. Similarly, congregations that seek government funding are almost four times more likely to offer a program, and congregations that collaborate with outside organizations, promote political participation, or have outside speakers are each three times more likely to offer a program. Each of these results supports the hypothesis that externally engaged congregations are significantly more likely to have an HIV/AIDS program.

Table 2 reports the odds ratios from logistic regressions modeling whether a congregation has an HIV/AIDS program. Model 1 regresses program sponsorship on the ideological orientation variables. Contrary to the hypothesis, none of these variables has a significant effect; the odds of having a program are not significantly different for conservative congregations. Model 2 regresses program sponsorship on the variables measuring external engagement. Consistent with the hypothesis, each of the variables, except having an outside speaker, has a significant effect. Having a group that assesses community needs, collaborating with outside organizations, promoting political participation, and seeking government funding increase the odds of having a program by factors of 10, 2.5, 4, and 3, respectively. Model 3 regresses HIV/AIDS program sponsorship on both the ideological orientation and external engagement variables. The results demonstrate that the ideological orientation effects remain insignificant and the effects of external engagement remain significant with the magnitudes of its coefficients remaining relatively stable as well. A congregation's ideological orientation does not influence the effects external engagement has on program sponsorship.

Model 4 demonstrates that the effects found in the previous models remain robust even when controlling for other factors that may influence having a program. Including the controls does not alter the nonsignificant effects of the ideological orientation variables; yet, it increases the

⁹ Semi-large refers to a congregation that is one standard deviation above the mean for the index variable *congregational size*.

¹⁰ 19.13 percent of theologically conservative congregations compared with 19.52 percent of nonconservative congregations ($\chi^2 = .0049$).

¹¹ It appears that having a statement welcoming homosexuals doubles the likelihood of having a program. However, because the percentage of people in congregations with a welcome statement is relatively small (4 percent), the standard errors for this variable are large, and the difference is not statistically significant. Nevertheless, of the people in churches with a welcome statement, 37 percent are in a church that has a HIV/AIDS program.

Figure 1
Bivariate analysis of congregations with HIV/AIDS programs comparing conservative with nonconservative congregations and externally engaged with insular congregations

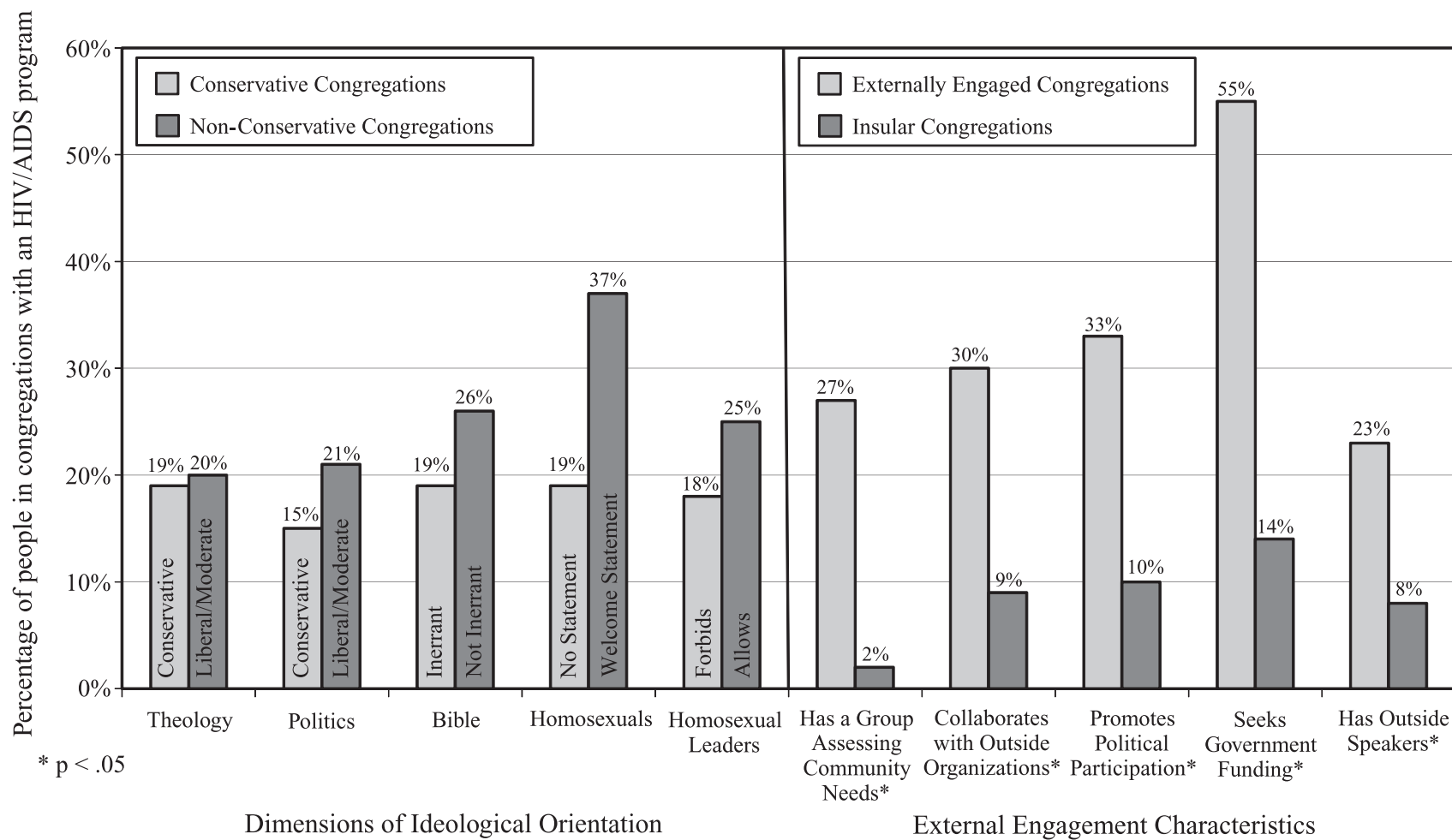


Table 2: Odds ratios from logistic regression models estimating whether a congregation has an HIV/AIDS program

	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4	Model 5
Theologically conservative	1.175 (.418)		1.318 (.589)	1.363 (.540)	
Politically conservative	.669 (-.933)		.595 (-.980)	.711 (-.558)	
Bible is inerrant	.784 (-.332)		.998 (-.002)	.745 (-.269)	
No statement welcoming homosexuals	.410 (-1.210)		.595 (-.576)	.301 (-1.225)	
Forbids homosexual leaders	.989 (-.020)		.625 (-.725)	.794 (-.286)	
Has a group assessing community needs		10.031** (2.972)	9.995** (2.936)	11.397** (2.730)	11.977** (2.992)
Collaborates with outside organizations		2.685* (2.147)	2.591* (1.998)	3.662* (2.160)	3.442* (2.255)
Promotes political participation		4.222** (3.222)	4.383** (3.191)	5.593** (2.957)	6.393*** (3.458)
Seeks government funding		3.161* (2.168)	3.524* (2.335)	2.647 (1.531)	
Has outside speakers		1.386 (.529)	1.249 (.355)	1.249 (.298)	
Congregation size ^a				1.563*** (3.303)	1.560*** (3.818)
Clergy graduated				2.072 (1.025)	
Age of congregation ^b				.658 (-1.358)	
South				.081*** (-3.833)	.090*** (-3.881)
Urban				.129* (-2.395)	.214* (2.029)
Constant	.663	.005***	.014**	.723	.045**
BIC	219.119	172.257	196.414	188.870	146.808

* $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$; z scores in parentheses.

Number of congregations = 203.

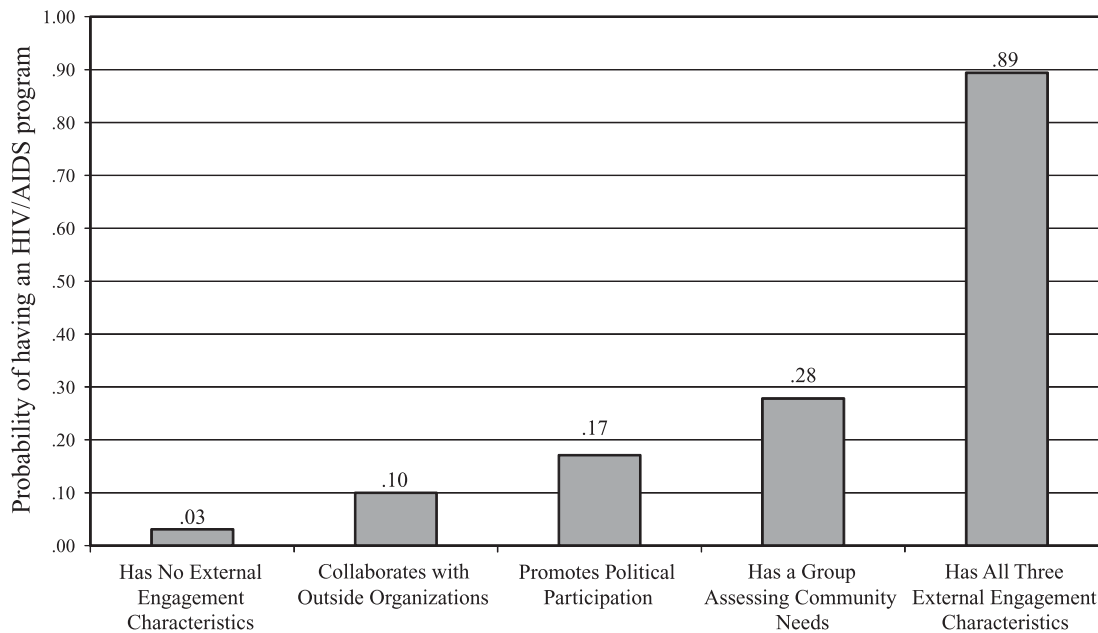
^aIndex created using number of participating adults, volunteers, and full-time staff.

^bLogged values.

magnitude of the coefficients for three of the external engagement variables. In this model, having a group that assesses community needs, collaborating with outside organizations, and promoting political participation increase the odds of having a program by factors of 11, 3.5, and 5.5, respectively. On the other hand, the effect of seeking government funding becomes insignificant, perhaps because the congregation size mediates this effect. The only other external tie that fails to demonstrate a significant effect is having outside speakers. Its nonsignificance may be explained by Chaves's (1999) research, which distinguishes between secular and religious speakers and identifies their varied effects on congregational behavior. As expected, increasing the size of a congregation increases the odds of having a program. However, contrary to expectations, clergy

Figure 2

Predicted probabilities of a semi-large, urban, nonsouthern congregation having an HIV/AIDS program given the presence of particular external engagement characteristics



education level and the congregation's age have no significant effect. Finally, the results indicate that a congregation's geographic region and community context have significant effects. Not being in the south increases the odds of having a program by a factor of 12, and the odds for program sponsorship are about 8 times greater for nonurban congregations.

The next analysis uses results from Model 5 in Table 2 to calculate the predicted probabilities that a semi-large, urban, nonsouthern congregation will have a program given the presence of particular external engagement characteristics. Figure 2 illustrates how being externally engaged increases the probability that this type of congregation will have a program. When the hypothetical congregation has no external engagement characteristics, its predicted probability of having a program is .03. Collaborating with an outside organization increases the probability to .10, promoting political participation increases the probability to .17, and having a group that assesses community needs increases the probability to .28. When the congregation has all three external engagement characteristics its predicted probability of having a program is .89.

Additional analyses assess the robustness of the significant and nonsignificant findings. The first analysis regresses each external engagement characteristic on the ideology variables to determine if they influence a congregation's likelihood of being externally engaged. The results (not displayed) indicate that a congregation's political orientation significantly affects the odds of collaborating with an outside organization, but does not significantly affect any other external engagement characteristic. Moreover, none of the other ideology variables significantly affects any of the external engagement characteristics. Contrary to previous research, these results consistently demonstrate that a congregation's liberal-conservative ideology does not influence whether it will be externally engaged. The second analysis divides the sample into two subsets based on the congregation's theological orientation and regresses the dependent variable on the external engagement variables to see if their effects are significant among both theologically conservative and nonconservative congregations. The results (not displayed) demonstrate that external engagement characteristics significantly increase the odds of program sponsorship independent of theological orientation. The final analysis tests for interactions and the results (not

displayed) indicate that theological orientation does not significantly interact with any of the external engagement variables.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

As complex social issues confronting black communities persist, scholars are questioning whether black churches are maintaining institutional centrality. During times of crisis, many African Americans have relied on black churches as sources of social support. Thus, understanding the current capacity of black churches and the factors influencing their responsiveness to social issues has serious implications for effectively addressing the challenges facing black communities. HIV/AIDS is an important issue to which black churches have displayed mixed responses—although many congregations remain unresponsive, a few are actively addressing this crisis (Eke, Wilkes, and Gaiter 2010). This study demonstrates this variation and indicates that a congregation's responsiveness to HIV/AIDS depends more on its engagement with the external environment than on its ideological orientation.

These findings highlight the importance of analyzing heterogeneity among black churches when assessing their responsiveness to social issues. Although it is common to differentiate among white churches, the prevailing scholarly practice is to treat black churches as a singular, homogenous unit. For example, when Tsitsos (2003) studies congregations providing social services, he compares black churches to non-black churches, but neglects to analyze the variation that may exist among black churches (see also Brown 2008; Cavendish 2000; Chaves and Higgins 1992; Chaves and Tsitsos 2001; Wuthnow 2004; for exceptions see Barnes 2004; Thomas et al. 1994). Analyzing heterogeneity among black churches reveals that a congregation's degree of external engagement influences its responsiveness to HIV/AIDS and ability to maintain institutional centrality.

The most consistent and most surprising result is that none of the variables measuring ideological orientation has a significant effect on HIV/AIDS program sponsorship.¹² This finding differs from several studies demonstrating that a congregation's liberal-conservative orientation significantly influences its social service activity. However, it agrees with ethnographic research, which reveals that a black congregation's commitment to social service provision can operate independent of its liberal-conservative orientation. This suggests that the relationship between a congregation's liberal-conservative ideology and its social service activity may be salient only for white churches. To test this hypothesis, a replication of this entire analysis was conducted for the white congregations in the NCS sample. The results (not displayed) reveal that a white congregation's liberal-conservative orientation significantly affects its likelihood of having an HIV/AIDS program. The bivariate analyses indicate that each of the conservative characteristics significantly reduces the likelihood of having a program. Moreover, in each of the logistic regression models, ideological conservatism significantly reduces the odds of program sponsorship. This analysis demonstrates that liberal-conservative ideology operates differently and generates different outcomes in white churches than it does in black churches. This difference may be the result of a methodological artifact created by the smaller sample of black congregations, which would be less likely to produce significant results; however, the extensive sensitivity analyses and the stable significant effects found among the other variables suggest otherwise. While

¹² This nonsignificant finding may be explained by the fact that the dependent variable measures only treatment programs (i.e., caring for those who are already sick), which can be less controversial than prevention programs. However, some congregations stigmatize certain types of sickness more than others, which can affect the degree of controversy associated with particular health-related programs. Consequently, a program for people with HIV/AIDS will likely be more controversial than one for people with a less stigmatized sickness and thus the distinction between treatment and prevention programs does not adequately explain the nonsignificant finding.

explaining differences between black and white congregations exceeds the scope of this study, future research could explore if they view HIV/AIDS differently and if these differences influence the ways ideological orientation affects responsiveness.

Placed in a broader context, the findings challenge research that makes causal claims about the effects of liberal-conservative religious beliefs on congregations' social service activity. Rather than being rigid predictor variables, religious beliefs can be malleable tools used by innovative black congregations (McRoberts 1999). The flexibility of religious beliefs suggests that theologically conservative beliefs need not impede the development of social service programs within black churches. Viewing religious ideas as a resource rather than a constraint, McRoberts reveals how pastors use elements of their conservative faith to promote social activism. He finds pastors of conservative congregations who "mold and shape [their religion] to justify their own activist imperatives" (McRoberts 1999:61). Cavendish (2001) describes how a predominantly black Catholic congregation uses theologically conservative themes, such as "spreading the seed of God's Word," to mobilize its members for social action. Just as individuals can select religious ideas to justify their actions, congregations can emphasize certain religious ideas to support their organizational imperatives. Because congregations have autonomy in deciding which religious ideas to employ, they can incorporate new activities without undergoing a fundamental theological transformation. Consequently, the flexibility of religious beliefs undermines the ability of liberal-conservative orientation to predict black congregations' responsiveness to social issues.

Alternatively, institutional theory provides a compelling explanation for congregations' responsiveness to HIV/AIDS. Congregations that interact with their surrounding environment face greater pressure to embrace its concerns, and externally engaged congregations are significantly more likely to have an HIV/AIDS program. Although applying organization theory to congregational research is not new (Demerath 1998), it is an underdeveloped practice. Despite DiMaggio's (1998) assertion that recent trends in organization theory have made it more amenable to religious organizations, relatively few studies use these theories to explain congregational behavior (e.g., Ammerman 1997; Chaves 2004; Edgell 1999). Although many studies analyze congregations as closed systems and focus primarily on their internal characteristics, a more expansive approach would analyze congregations as open systems that can be impacted by their surrounding environment. Scholars adopting this model could assess congregations' relationship with the external world and how it influences their responsiveness to social issues.

When seeking to explain a black church's responsiveness to social issues, rather than determining where it fits along the liberal-conservative continuum, a more helpful approach would be to focus on the congregation's interactions with the external environment. Even though this analysis is limited to HIV/AIDS programs, the findings have implications for congregation-based social services in general. Future research could analyze how environmental pressures influence externally engaged congregations and the types of social service programs they offer.

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