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The Body

New York City Religious Leaders Pledge to Fight HIV/AIDS

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More than 50 faith-based entities and AIDS service organizations are partnering on "Interfaith for HIV/AIDS: A Call to Take Action in 2009," a campaign to support HIV prevention and testing efforts across the five boroughs of New York City. Clergy, elected officials, and community representatives came together on the steps of City Hall for the July 8 kick-off of the outreach, which is being coordinated by the NYC Faith in Action for HIV/AIDS Prevention, Care and Education Coalition (NYCFIA).

Earlier this year, Pope Benedict XVI generated controversy when he stated, while visiting Africa, that distributing condoms will not stop HIV and could worsen the AIDS epidemic. "Not everyone believes or follows that philosophy in the Christian world," said Oliver Martin, NYCFIA committee secretary and board president of the United Church of Christ HIV/AIDS National Network. "Our table is open for anyone to follow the philosophy they choose to. It's not us competing with each other." All people of faith are welcome in NYCFIA, Martin said.

When Gay Men's Health Crisis partners with faith communities, it articulates the importance of addressing "all the issues of HIV prevention and care services, which include sexuality, homophobia, and other social injustices," said Krishna Stone, assistant director of community relations in GMHC's communications department. "There may be theological and religious challenges that have to be addressed, but this work is about addressing a public health emergency," said

Stone, who is also an ordained non-denominational minister.

Toward that goal, Stone said the training manual "A Time to Speak: Faith Communities and Sexuality Education" -- produced by the Religious Institute on Sexual Morality, Justice and Healing -- advocates ensuring that "the clergy person is not shaming someone because they are LGBT, or using shaming language in their sermons; that they are affirming and welcoming to LGBT folks within their community."