Nunn said religious leaders are willing to engage in dialogue and HIV prevention if it's done in a culturally appropriate and faith-friendly way.

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In a new paper in the journal PLoSOne, a team of physicians and public health researchers report that African-American clergy say they are ready to join the fight against HIV by focusing on HIV testing, treatment, and social justice.

"We in public health have done a poor job of engaging African-American community leaders, and particularly Black clergy members, in HIV prevention," said Amy Nunn, lead author of the study and assistant professor of medicine in the Warren Alpert Medical School of Brown University.

"There is a common misperception that African-American churches are unwilling to address the AIDS epidemic. This paper highlights some of the historical barriers to effectively engaging African-American clergy in HIV prevention and provides recommendations from clergy for how to move forward."

The paper analyzes dozens of interviews and focus group data among 38 African-American pastors and imams in Philadelphia, where racial disparities in HIV infection are especially stark. Seven in 10 new infections in the city are among Black residents. Nearly all of the 27 male and 11 female clergy members said they would preach and promote HIV testing and treatment.

That message would provide a needed complement to decades of public health efforts that have emphasized risky behaviors, Nunn said. Research published and widely reported last year, for example, suggests that testing and then maintaining people on treatment could dramatically reduce new infections because treatment can give people a 96 percent lower chance of transmitting HIV.

According to the paper's analysis, many religious leaders acknowledged that they struggled with how to cope with the epidemic, particularly with challenges related to discussing human sexuality in the church or mosque setting.

Many clergy members also said they face significant barriers to preaching about risky sexual behaviors while still emphasizing abstinence.

"It's my duty as a preacher to tell people to abstain," one pastor told the research team, "but if they're still having sex and they're getting HIV, there has to be another way to handle this."

Many clergy members suggested couching the HIV/AIDS epidemic in social justice rather than behavioral terms, Nunn said. They also recommended focusing on HIV testing as an important means to help stem the spread of the disease and reduce the stigma.

In 2010, Nunn worked with prominent pastors, local media and Mayor Michael Nutter's office of faith-based initiatives to promote and destigmatize HIV testing across the city. This year, she will partner with dozens of churches and community leaders to oversee an HIV prevention campaign that includes door-to-door testing in an entire zip code in Philadelphia with high infection rates.

Natalie Mitchem, pastor of Calvary AME Church and director of the First Episcopal District

Health Commission, has been supportive of efforts to engage faith leaders in the fight against HIV. She says HIV awareness and education is a comprehensive part of the AME church's health ministry.

"I feel like it's a very significant, vitally important ministry for churches of all denominations. It's important for us to share the messages about prevention and education in our congregations and in our communities — so that people know we care," Mitchem said.

Nunn said religious leaders are willing to engage in dialogue and HIV prevention if it's done in a culturally appropriate and faith-friendly way.

"This means that HIV prevention should be couched in social justice and public health rather than in exclusively behavioral terms. HIV testing should be the backbone of any strategy to engage African-American clergy in HIV prevention," she said.