Church wants to make sufferers of HIV/AIDS feel like they’re welcome

By COLETTE M. JENKINS

MEDINA, Ohio — Stephanie Morris believes the church should be a place where everyone is welcome. Because she knows that is not always the case, she is taking steps to eliminate bullying of a group of people who might not view the church as a safe haven with HIV and AIDS. “We don’t want them to feel like they’re not comforted. They don’t feel like they’re not welcome. And they feel like they’re not accepted,” said Morris, the HIV/AIDS ministry coordinator at Second Baptist Church in Medina, Ohio. “God is for everybody, and the church should be a place where we accept and love the community.”

On Feb. 9, the church will launch a Bible study called “Book of Miracles: Lessons from the Last Days.” The event will run from 5:15 to 6:30 p.m. at the church, 30 N. Wenatchee Ave. "I have friends who are (HIV) infected by HIV/AIDS," said Pastor Cornell Carter, senior pastor at Second Baptist Church. "We need to change the perception about HIV/AIDS. They’re not bad people. They’re not sick people. They’re not outcasts. They’re not criminals. They’re not demons. They’re not people who have to be shunned and cast out. What we adults have to be more aware of is that we need to have a facilitator. We need a facilitator. We need a person who can lead the group of people who have been infected with HIV/AIDS and those who have been exposed to HIV/AIDS." Carter and Morris believe that offering a facilitator will help the church overcome the stigma associated with HIV/AIDS.

Morris believes the church should be a safe haven for people with HIV/AIDS, not a place where they are stigmatized. "I have friends who are infected with HIV/AIDS. Because she knows that is not always the case, she is taking steps to eliminate bullying of a group of people who might not view the church as a safe haven with HIV and AIDS.

According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 23.3 percent of people living with HIV and AIDS are African-American. The non-profit organization that Morris trained with, The Sphere, reports that 40 percent of HIV/AIDS diagnoses and nearly half of the new diagnoses of African-American women who are infected contracted the virus through heterosexual contact with primarily African-American men. The agency reported its first two cases of AIDS in women — one Latino and one African-American. Both women were infected by the same intra- venous drug user.

In the same year, more than half of the people diagnosed with HIV/AIDS were African-American women, according to the CDC. The report also states that 15 percent of new HIV/AIDS diagnoses occur among adolescents and young adults. According to the U.S. Census Bureau, the African-American community and the church have a responsibility to bring the issue to their community about the disease.

Pastor Cornell Carter, are trying to educate the congregation and the community about the disease. "We need to get people to know their status because when you know your status, you can take care of yourself and not put others at risk. Just because we don’t hear about it every day, HIV is still here. And Second Baptist Church is here to help."