

Group aims to draw Black men to church

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After several years of examining literature about Black churches and the Black community, the National Black Church Initiative (NBCI) has come up with a seven-year plan to attract 1.5 million males to church and keep them.

The Rev. Anthony Evans, president of NBCI, said if Philadelphia churches participate in the plan, he expects 250,000 new male church members in the city. NBCI is a coalition of nearly 34,000 churches. It was founded in 1991 with an emphasis on addressing physical, mental, biological and emotional health issues within the Black community. The newest initiative to bring more Black men into church addresses these issues.

Churches participating in the effort will follow guidelines to address five areas of interest.

"The mental health issues that face African Americans, and physical health issues that face African Americans, holds them back from being responsible dads and good spouses," said Evans.

Steps include addressing what barriers stop men from attending church. Each church will have 25 designated men responsible for recruiting new male members.

"The coalition and churches will train those men how to effectively fish these African American men," said Evans.

Counseling will be available for mental, spiritual and martial health issues. Churches are asked to inform NBCI of health and counseling professionals in their congregation. These individuals will volunteer to help men who need it. Evans said member churches have already identified these professionals.

School dropouts will be addressed.

"This comes as a result because everybody from the prison to the school is yelling at the top of their lungs that they need help with African-American men," said Evans. By building confidence and getting encouragement from church members, this will encourage males to stay in the church, according to Evans. "Men don't stop coming to church when they're old, they start dropping out of church when they're small."

Evans said there are 70,000 small business leaders in the coalition. To address the high unemployment rate of Black males, these businesses are being asked to hire the men.

By addressing unemployment, education and providing counseling, the numbers of men in jail and killed will decrease, according to Evans.

Evans said the Black church is the only entity that can address and fix the problems the Black community faces. He recently reached out to NAACP and National Urban League for their support.

"It is a crisis," said the Rev. Lillian Smith, pastor of Tindley Temple United Methodist Church located on South Broad St. She said her church has an average of 400 members, and 40 to 45 percent are male.

Smith said the problems in the Black community can be solved and such a program could work.

"It will help to provide groups, small groups where men can be themselves and honestly say what's going on and receive the spiritual support so they can face the next day — to know that they have someone to call on and someone that is praying for them," said Smith.

When told about the initiative to get Black men in church, she said her church would join the effort.

The Rev. William Jefferies, pastor of First Baptist Church in Morton, Pa., said he's seen a decline in the male members in his church as well as other local churches, but has no explanation for it.

"The Biblical foundation is if you love God, and you fear God, and you serve God and obey God then you're bound to positively effect your family, your marriage and your children," said Jefferies, who agrees the program will positively effect the Black community.

"I think it will have an immediate effect on Philly if you look at the Black men on parole. If you look at those numbers in Philly and look at the numbers two years from now, those numbers will drop. They will now have a structured community helping them," said Evans.