

Spirituality, Religious Wisdom, and Care of the Patient

Rabbi Mychal Springer, MA
Rev. Doc. Leroy Gilbert, PhD

January 9, 2006
5:30pm - 7:00pm

Clark Conference Center
Milstein Hospital Building
177 Fort Washington Avenue
New York, NY 10032

The Center for Bioethics, in collaboration with Maimonides Medical Center and St. Vincent's Hospital Manhattan, co-sponsored an event featuring religious leaders Rev. Dr. Leroy Gilbert and Rabbi Mychal Springer. The purpose of the Spirituality, Religious Wisdom, and Care of the Patient Series is to provide a forum for religious leaders to share their perspectives, based on their religious teachings, on helping patients and their families face difficult medical situations.

The case presented involved a young mother who had contracted HIV from her sexual partner. The mother became pregnant and passed the disease to her infant daughter through childbirth. As the child matured, the mother refused to tell the child of the child's or her own positive HIV status. Doctors and other health care providers became concerned when the daughter became a teenager and began a relationship with an adolescent male. They considered whether they had the obligation to inform the daughter about her HIV status or whether they were obligated to respect the mother's right to make the decision regarding what the child is told.

Rev. Dr. Leroy Gilbert spoke from the Baptist perspective. He proposed finding the true motivation in the mother's refusal to disclose the news to her daughter. He also advocated for church congregations to work to break down prejudice and stigma within their members so patients would see the church as a place of support and safety. He suggested that if the mother felt embraced by the congregation, and no longer feared ostracism that could come with admitting her positive HIV status, she could then focus on making the best decision for her daughter.

Speaking from the Jewish faith, Rabbi Mychal Springer proposed approaching the question through the perspective of the Jewish bat mitzvah. The child was now at the age where she would be receiving her bat mitzvah, which signifies reaching physical, sexual, emotional, and spiritual maturity. Helping the mother conceptualize the daughter as a mature, autonomous agent would help the mother realize the necessity of disclosing vital health information. Rabbi Springer also emphasized how teaching of redemption and forgiveness could help the mother's struggle with guilt and that support from the religious community could lessen her fear of being ostracized.