



News Release

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Experts Discuss the Role of Faith Leaders in Economic Development at the Sixth Annual Affinity Health Plan Faith Leaders Awards Breakfast

Bronx, NY — No one could have electrified the crowd that had gathered for breakfast at the New York Marriott at the Brooklyn Bridge on April 13th, during Affinity Health Plan's Sixth Annual Faith Leaders Awards banquet, more than keynote speakers Rev. Dr. Calvin O. Butts III, Rev. Dr. James A. Forbes, Jr., honorary speaker William C. Thompson, Jr., and Brooklyn Borough President Marty Markowitz, did. In a room filled with over 300 attendees, WNBC-TV General Assignment Reporter Vivian Lee emceed the event in which Affinity honored eight faith-based leaders for their community service, leadership efforts and guardianship of spiritual values. The theme of this year's program was "The role of faith leaders in economic development" and speakers shared their experiences, advice and comments with the audience.

Keynote speaker, the Rev. Dr. Calvin O. Butts III, pastor of Abyssinian Baptist Church in Harlem, spoke extensively on what faith leaders can do to spur economic development in their communities. Drawing generously from his experience as one of the founders of Abyssinian Development Corporation, a comprehensive community-based organization responsible for over \$300 million investments in housing and commercial development in Harlem, Dr. Butts spoke of the practical steps in economic development, from visioning, planning through implementation to management, finance and accountability.

Through anecdotes and testimony, presented in an eloquent preach/teach approach, Dr. Butts stated that "all economic development begins with a vision." He saw community development as "an extension of the Civil Rights Movement" and urged faith leaders to "pool their human and material resources."

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In a brilliantly delivered message, the Rev. Dr. James A. Forbes, Jr., senior minister, The Riverside Church, said that “spiritual responsibilities will always require us to do something economic for our people.” He iterated that “sometimes preachers have to quit preaching and do something.” Amid a flurry of laughter and standing ovations, Dr. Forbes told relevant anecdotes, preached and then sang an original rap song in the traditional call-response gospel style whereby the audience uttered the refrain “no time for foolishness.”

New York City Comptroller William Thompson also kept the tone high as he talked energetically about the importance of economic development in New York City. Brooklyn Borough President Marty Markowitz, who said that “NYC begins in Brooklyn,” stressed the important role that faith leaders of all denominations play in communities. Even though presidents, CEOs and politicians come and go, “the teachings of the church, temples, synagogues and mosques are everlasting,” he said.

The eight distinguished members of the faith community on whom awards were bestowed for their commitment and work were:

- Debbie Almontaser, Multicultural Specialist and Director, Women in Islam
- Reverend Dr. Eugene Callender, Pastor, St. James Presbyterian Church
- Eugene Dobson, Regional Faith-Based Liaison, U.S. Department of Housing and Urban
- Harvey Gordon, Executive Director, Jewish Community Council of the Rockaway Peninsula
- Reverend David Gu, Senior Pastor, New York Lighthouse Baptist Church
- Luis Jimenez, Director, The Storehouse, World Vision-New York
- Uma V. Mysorekar, MD, President, Hindu Temple Society of North America
- Reverend Edward O. Williamson, Pastor, Bethel Baptist Church of White Plains
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The Faith Leaders Awards Breakfast now in its sixth year is a very public and high profile manifestation of Affinity’s mission, said Maura Bluestone, Affinity’s president and CEO. “This event has grown in size and stature to become one of the premier events in the metropolitan area that brings together leaders of many faiths to celebrate their mutual commitment to improving the quality of life for all New Yorkers.”

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Abenaa Abboa-Offei, Vice President of Public Affairs, Affinity Health Plan, Maura Bluestone, Affinity's President/CEO, and Rev. Dr. Calvin Butts, Pastor of the Abyssinian Baptist Church and President, SUNY College at Old Westbury.



Some of the honorees with Affinity executives. Sitting (l-r): Abena Abboa-Offei, Maura Bluestone, and Debbie Almontaser. Standing: Rev. David Gu, Luis Jimenez and Eugene Dobson.



New York City Comptroller Bill Thompson, Jr.



Brooklyn Borough President Marty Markowitz



Rev. Dr. James Forbes, Jr., Senior Minister of the Riverside Church