



1237 Ralph David Abernathy Blvd. SW
Atlanta, Georgia 30310-1731
Tel: 404.756.2680
Fax: 404.756.2684
Email: info@SisterSong.net
Website: www.SisterSong.net

African Americans Underrepresented in Anti-Abortion Movement

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In January 2006, the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* reported on the low representation of African Americans in the anti-abortion movement. Black women make up only twelve percent of the female population in the United States; however, one-third of abortions are performed on Black women. Currently, federal and state data show that Black women have about three times as many abortions as white women. Although statistics show that a growing number of Black and Latino men are opposed to abortion, few people of color (especially women) are active participants in the anti-abortion movement. According to Rev. John Ensor of Heartbeat International, Blacks believe the pro-life movement is “a white, Republican, conservative movement.” The *Post-Dispatch* also reported that some antiabortion supporters recommend that organizations position minorities in leadership roles and make a serious effort to diversify its membership in order to strengthen the movement.

(Sound familiar?)

Somebody in Virginia was apparently reading the St. Louis story. A month later, during the 2006 Pro-Life Conference held at Mount Gilead Full Gospel Church in Chesterfield County, Va., Black churches were urged to end abortion in the Black community. The two-day event, which took place in March 2006 and was attended by a reported 400 people and 20 organizations, encouraged pastors to join the anti-abortion movement. In 2003, the Virginia Department of Health data reported Black women had a rate of 30.2 abortions per 1,000 women ages 15 to 44, compared with white women who had a rate of 12 abortions per 1,000 women. Mira Signer, director of statewide organizing for Planned Parenthood Advocates of Virginia told the *Richmond Times-Dispatch*, “There is a real disparity in the health care system, in who can obtain preventive health care services.” While organizers considered the conference a successful event, Day Gardner, director of Black Americans for Life admitted, “Many pastors are afraid they will offend women if they talk about it.” In the opinion of SisterSong, they should be afraid – very afraid.

Black women are the backbone — foundation, whatever you want to call it — of the Black church. It may not be entirely wise for mostly male Black church leaders to tell their majority-female congregations what to do with their bodies and for their families. Women are not blinded by their faith, and they understand the connection of abortion to other critical issues such as economic justice, the environment, racism, and caring for Black children. In fact, as one SisterSong member put it, “Jesus died to save us from our sins, not to save us from our minds.”

Stories such as these highlight the urgency of SisterSong’s work to ensure that the African American community understands how the spectre of forced breeding (like during slavery) in the Black

community is resurrected by the anti-abortion and anti-birth control agenda of conservative Republicans and Democrats. The Black community must also understand that attacks on abortion and birth control are cynically used to mobilize a conservative base of voters who are hostile to civil rights, human rights, LGBTQ issues, women's rights and immigrants' rights. But mostly, they are hostile to our Black children, pushing them out of schools and into jails.

On the other hand, the Black Church Initiative of the Religious Coalition for Reproductive Choice, led by Rev. Carlton Veazey, sponsored its 10th Annual National Black Religious Summit on Sexuality in Washington, DC July 11-14, 2005 with hundreds of participants (www.rcrc.org/). The Summit brought together religious leaders to discuss critical issues such as teen pregnancy, sexuality and religion, domestic violence, HIV/AIDS and other issues of reproductive health. Their Clergy for Choice Network maintains a national registry of clergy of all faiths who are dedicated to preserving reproductive rights and freedom for all. SisterSong is thankful that these religious leaders stand on the frontline against those religious leaders who would return women to the "barefoot & pregnant" days.

For more information on the history of the 400 years of activism by African American women on reproductive justice issues, please visit www.sistersong.net/publications.html for an article on African American women and abortion. Knowing our history helps us understand why there are so few Black women in the anti-abortion movement. Hopefully, there never will be.