

By Valerie Schmalz

Black pastors use pulpit to fight abortion

They urge civil rights organizations and politicians to commit to protecting unborn

More black babies than any other ethnic group were aborted in the most recent year tabulated by federal statisticians, even though blacks comprise just 13 percent of total U.S. population.

The statistic doesn't surprise, but it affirms those in a small but growing movement to raise consciousness of pro-life issues in black Protestant churches and society.

Ties to community

"If we can turn around the African-American community, we can end abortion. Abortion is literally being funded by the African-American community," said Walter Hoye II, founder and president of the newly formed Issues4Life Foundation, based in Union City, Calif. Issues4Life's focus is converting preachers to the pro-life message.

"Every third abortion in America is on black women. It is the most common surgical procedure performed on Afro-American women," said the Rev. Clenard Childress Jr., a Montclair, N.J., Baptist minister and northeast director of L.E.A.R.N. (Life Education And Resource Network), a national network of Christian pro-life/pro-family advocates founded in Houston in 1993.

Childress was part of a group of black activists who held a rally outside a Washington, D.C., Planned Parenthood clinic April 24, calling for the federal government to "defund" Planned Parenthood and urging the NAACP and the National Urban League to boycott Planned Parenthood. Both civil rights organizations endorse abortion rights. Planned Parenthood received slightly more than \$300 million for various services in the last federal budget, although under the Hyde Amendment no money can go directly to abortion. With more than 250 clinics, Planned Parenthood is the nation's largest abortion-clinic chain.

"Before you go to bed tonight over 1,500 black babies will have been murdered inside a black woman's womb. This is evil, this is wrong. We are not going to stop until we end abortion in the black community," said the Rev. Jesse Lee Peterson, president of B.O.N.D. (Brotherhood Organization of a New Destiny), which has as its motto "Rebuilding the Family By Rebuilding the Man."

Appalling numbers

The rate of abortion for black women is three times higher than that of white women, according to the latest federal statistics. More than a third (37 percent) of pregnancies for black women ended in abortion, compared with 12 percent for non-Hispanic white women and 19 percent for Hispanic women in 2004, according to a report issued April 14 by the National Center for Health Statistics, a division of the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

Nationally, abortions have dropped 24 percent from 1990 to 2004, continuing a downward trend in abortions overall. Abortions dropped 11 percent among African-American women in the same time period, but the rate of abortions as a percentage of total pregnancies remained at 37 percent.

In 2004, 453,000 black babies were aborted while 418,000 white and 269,000 Hispanic babies were aborted, according to the federal report. That contrasts with 1990, when 507,000 African-American babies, 852,000 white babies and 195,000 Hispanic babies were aborted. White abortions dropped 51 percent from 1990 to 2004.

Swaying politicians

The newest federal numbers give more support to the black Protestant pastors and activists who have made it their mission to persuade fellow black pastors to actively discourage abortion. They are also working to persuade prominent civil rights leaders and black elected leaders to reject pro-choice ideology, most recently with a letter to the Congressional Black Caucus and the Washington, D.C., clinic demonstration.

"The key, in my opinion, is the pulpit, and we have got to reach people there," said Hoye, who is an executive elder of the Progressive Missionary Baptist Church of Berkeley, Calif.

"Never once have I stood in front of a congregation and had the congregation tell me I was wrong. It literally takes someone standing up in front," Hoye said, adding in a paraphrase of Edmund Burke: "All it takes for evil to flourish is for good men to do nothing. That has been happening in our pulpit."

Black media are silent on abortion, Childress said. "The places where African-Americans get their news do not talk about abortion at all," said Childress, who began blackgenocide.org in 2002.

There are no black elected representatives in Congress who are pro-life, Childress said. A call to the Congressional Black Caucus by Our Sunday Visitor for comment on the latest numbers was not returned. Democratic presidential candidate Sen. Barack Obama of Illinois has a 100 percent rating from NARAL ProChoice America and from Planned Parenthood, and his former, now disavowed, pastor, the Rev. Jeremiah Wright is involved in the Black Church Initiative of the Religious Coalition for Reproductive Choice.

Racist roots

Hoye and Childress note that the founder of Planned Parenthood, Margaret Sanger, believed in eugenics and reducing the "Negro" population.

Being invited to speak to a congregation is the key, Hoye said. "When I show them a photo of Margaret Sanger standing in front of a KKK rally -- the brothers are stopped dead in their tracks. They are woefully unaware of Planned Parenthood's history," he said. Hoye, Childress and other black religious leaders say Sanger's racist legacy continues today.

The April 24 demonstration was prompted by a University of California-Los Angeles student newspaper exposé on Planned Parenthood, which Our Sunday Visitor reported on in its March 16 issue. A man, purporting to be a donor, asked if he could donate for an abortion for a black woman to ensure there were fewer blacks competing against his son for college spots. The development director of the Los Angeles clinic was eager to accept the money, as were Planned Parenthood employees at other clinics who received similar calls from The Advocate, according to tapes posted on YouTube. Planned Parenthood has said the employees were not acting on behalf of the organization or its philosophy in agreeing to the racist donations.

At the rally, Dr. Lillie Epps, director of Preserving Life and Legacy, who had two abortions at the D.C. clinic, said: "We are tired of being targeted. We are tired of being called weak. If we don't stop abortion in the African- American community we will not have a generation to come."

Valerie Schmalz writes from California.