

# THE SPIRITUAL HERALD

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Poster for the "Black & Beautiful" campaign.

## Pro-Lifers Set Sights on Black Women

By Megan Larkin

LOS ANGELES—Abortion rights opponents, who suffered a setback with the "Black & Beautiful" poster campaign, is continuing to target African American women.

The well-known 60s civil rights phrase "Black is Beautiful" has been used on billboards nationally as part of a right-to-life campaign, inciting anger from many pro-choice groups. But the pro-life movement has no intention to stop or even slow down their attempts to raise awareness about the choices available to women.

According to Rev. Dr. Clenard H. Childress, Jr., founder of Black Genocide.org, in addition to the continuation of billboard campaigns, many venues will be used to educate such as secular groups like LifeNet, clergy groups like Metro Clergy, and even high schools.

Pro-life leaders maintain their stance that the campaign is both necessary and effective, despite the controversy surrounding their approach.

"We have to be creative in raising the consciousness of the community," stated Rev. Childress. "Even from people who are outraged and embarrassed by some of these campaigns, it allows them to investigate the information to determine if it is valid.

"We are right now far better off from these campaigns in raising the consequences to the community than we have been at any time during this movement."

However, many black women think the phrase—slightly modified as "black & beautiful"—has been hijacked by people with an anti-abortion agenda that some women of color find objectionable.

The Spiritual Herald conducted a series of interviews with black community leaders across the spectrum about the "black & beautiful" campaign—featuring pictures of black children—by a California right-to-life organization.

"We find some aspects of this campaign disturbing, especially the outward look of the billboards," said Lupe Rodriguez, director of public affairs at Planned Parenthood Mar Monte in San Jose, Ca.

"Not only us at Planned Parenthood, but a lot of the allies we have been working with in California—Trust Black Women CA and Black Women for Wellness—all know the billboards have been manipulating the phrase—a really beloved and cherished community mantra—in order to disempower the black community," she said.

Rodriguez claimed the campaign was "really a ploy to use a wedge issue to divide the community and to single out specific community members."

One of the original billboard campaigns ran in Oakland, California, and despite intense pressure from pro-choice groups for the billboards to be removed, the outdoor companies refused allowing the campaign to run to the end of its term in mid-July.

Ryan Bomberger, chief creative officer of the Radiance Foundation, who is responsible for running the campaign, confirmed Rev. Childress' opinion. Not only will campaigns against abortion continue, he said, but they have already proven to be extremely effective.

"We are continuing with the campaigns from state to state," he said. "In fact, we have another campaign coming up, but cannot announce where it will be yet."

In addition to billboards, the foundation has released videos. Its most recent is called "Number One Killer," and is being released in conjunction with the National Black Pro-Life Coalition. The foundation is also heavily involved in social media platforms to "highlight the defamation that abortion brings."

The foundation is stepping up the campaign, Bomberger said, "Because abortion is a frontline issue. There is no demographic more impacted and more targeted by the abortion industry than the black community."

Monica Simpson, development coordinator at Sister Song in Atlanta, is ambivalent about the campaign, recognizing the need to have reproductive justice conversations with black and minority women, but questioning its message about the black community.

"Almost Hypocritical"

"We are seeing an absence of conversation and information about reproductive justice issues and women," she said.

"The best way to move forward is to inform women about what is going on with their bodies and what their rights are—we have to get these women engaged in policy and reproductive justice issues," she said.

However, she is dismayed by some issues being highlighted on billboards by right-to-life organizations.

"These billboards contain very negative propaganda that looks to shame black women—there is nothing beautiful about that," she said.

"They have put black children's faces on major billboards and it feels like they are shaming the black community and black women in particular, who also have the human right to make the decision on what to do with their bodies for themselves."

Simpson calls the messages "almost hypocritical. If you believe black is beautiful, how can you do things like that?"

Simpson said it would be great to form a partnership with pro-life organizations so a wide range of topics could be brought out for discussion.

This viewpoint is shared by many women's groups, including the Catholics for Choice in Washington, D.C. Spokesperson Adrienne Burke said the organization supports women's access to comprehensive reproductive health care services, including abortion.

"That being said, we also believe that it is important to protect every woman's right to make personal decisions based on their own religious beliefs and individual conscience," she said.

A black woman's regard for her race, Burke said, "like believing black is beautiful, has nothing to do with her decision to have an abortion or continue with a pregnancy."

Burke thinks there should be more focus on preventing pregnancies and making contraceptives more available in minority communities.

Many clergy also believe that stopping young women from getting pregnant is the real way to reduce the high rate of abortions.

The Rev. Hickman Alexandre, priest-in-charge at St. James Episcopal Church in Brookhaven, Long Island, N.Y. told The Spiritual Herald: "Even greater than the abortion issue is what is behind the abortion issue—we have so many young people getting pregnant at an early age."

The priest said he would "not go as far as to say the billboards are abusing the black is beautiful slogan, but I don't think the billboards are the right way to address the issue.

"But at least they are raising the issue in the black communities that hasn't adequately been dealt with in the past."

"What else can we do—both in the church and the community—is the question. Be it abstinence or be it focusing on birth control and protection for those who feel that abstinence is not an option," Alexandre added.

The Rev. Walter B. Hoye II, founder and president of Issue4Life, an organization also responsible for putting on the campaign, stressed the need for the conversation to be had.

"This is the only issue that threatens to tear apart the U.S. government. Half the country is on one side, and half is on the other. We have to get those in the pro-abortion community engaged in the dialogue, as well as those in the pro-life community."

Hoye predicted the campaign will continue indefinitely.

"I am not done," he asserted. "We are going to take a look at the numbers and clearly present them just as they are. Then all of us have to ask ourselves the question—is taking the life of an innocent human being reflecting our values? I don't believe it does. There are better answers."

The minister claimed that pro-choice advocates stay away from giving a breakdown of the numbers of abortions being performed in the nation.

"That is very telling. They stay away from the data as much as they can," he points out. "And they will also stay away from the real issue, which is the question of what justifies the taking of an innocent human life?"

Rev. Hoye answered his own question: "I don't believe anything does."