

“If you change even the smallest of life’s details, you completely change its outcome.”

—The Butterfly Effect

BACKGROUND African American Religious Affairs (AARA), a program of People For the American Way Foundation, is a growing alliance of 1,500-plus faith leaders committed to encouraging African American houses of worship to become more civically engaged in a wide range of economic and social justice issues, including women’s reproductive rights and sexual identity and expression.

To enhance the leadership role of women within AARA, in a way that complements their emerging roles within their communities and religious denominations, AARA established the VASHTI Initiative for African American Women and Girls – a value-driven, faith based transformative communications project, conceived to strengthen the presence and voices of African American women and girls, as progressive facilitators, teachers, trainers and advocates, and to assist communities impacted by issues related to women’s reproductive health, rights and justice, sexuality (identity and expression), sexual and domestic violence, and the prevalence of HIV/AIDS.

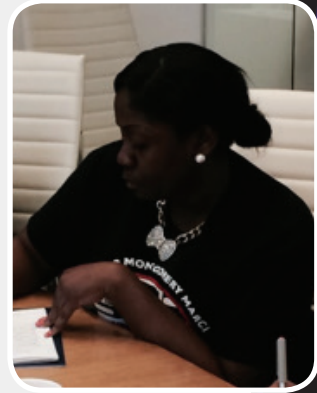
With generous support from Arcus Foundation, AARA over the past year has been advancing the work of VASHTI. Our primary goal was to bring together a core group of 20–25 African American women in order to develop a women’s faith-based leadership

agenda for civic engagement and social justice by 2015. With this report to the Foundation, we are pleased to offer highlights from our work during the grant period.

PROGRESS

Outcome #1: Created over 20 opportunities for transformational women, faith leaders and communicators to gain the capacity to organize, teach, train, and facilitate dialogue with diverse intergenerational audiences on the issue of sexuality (identity and expression) and reproductive rights within a context of African American culture and religion. At the end of the first year of this pilot project, these leaders indicated they felt better equipped and engaged in addressing issues related to civil rights including sexuality (identity and expression).

Outcome #2: VASHTI Core Leaders and 500 participants became stronger communicators on social justice, democracy matters that have an impact on women of color and African American women directly. At the end of the pilot project’s first year, VASHTI participants assisted in the development of training, teaching, preaching, advocacy tools for an intergenerational audience to begin advocating for one to two democracy/public policy initiatives such as safe schools, voting rights, religious liberty, reproductive justice and sex trafficking.



VASHTI "Sister Friend"

Partnerships:

- * **Black Women's Roundtable**
- * **The Imani Group** * **Sharp Sisters**
- * **Sister to Sister**

ACTIVITIES

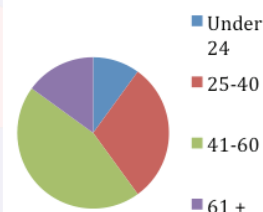
JULY 2014-JUNE 2015

- **July** - Held a one day VASHTI convocation planning committee retreat with three (3) AAMLC members to identify prospective participants and to create proposed agenda.
- **August** - Convened two conference calls to address opportunities to increase awareness about the importance of recent Supreme Court decisions, such as *Burwell v. Hobby Lobby*, *Shelby County v. Holder*, and the then-forthcoming decision on marriage equality and 3 day training with 38 female pastors at Progressive National Baptist Convention, Inc.
- **September** - Convened a VASHTI Convocation of 30 women of faith (September 21-23, 2014) in Columbus, Ohio - to obtain input and ownership by the participants of the year-long activity and public policy awareness timeline of the VASHTI Women and Girls project.
- **October** - Launched the first set of VASHTI activities (5) under the theme "Where and When I Enter Things Change" based on an 1892 quote by Anna Julia Cooper, the fourth African

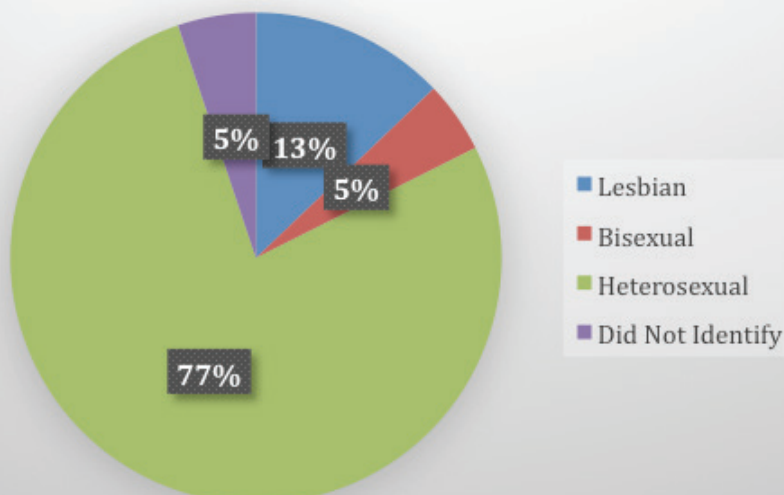
American woman to earn a doctoral degree: "Only the black woman can say 'when and where I enter, in the quiet, undisputed dignity of my womanhood, without violence and without suing or special patronage, then and there the whole Negro race enters with me.'" The butterfly was selected as the logo for VASHTI.

- **November** - Held 14 women-led, women-focused voter education and mobilization activities (as part of the AAMLC's VESSELS Vote campaign) in cooperation with the Black Women's Roundtable of the National Coalition on Black Civic Participation.
- **December** - Led World AIDS Day conference call for VASHTI leaders on the feminization of AIDS and the cultural, racial, identity challenges and opportunities in partnership with female-focused local, community based agencies and others including Howard University Divinity School (Washington, DC) and the Reformation Project (also Washington DC).
- **January** - Hosted "My Voice" civil, human and women's rights presentations (4) at places of worship and community centers and used the anniversaries of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., *Roe v. Wade* and Citizens United to raise awareness about issues related to human and women's rights and reproductive justice.

Age Groups = 500



Participant Identity



- **February** – Facilitated 5 small group meetings of 5-10 women at the Samuel DeWitt Proctor Conference on the value of strengthening cross cultural communication, awareness, dialogue and storytelling within the context of race, class, gender and identity; in addition, VASHTI women participated in other awareness-building activities and submitted proposals for presentations at several state and national faith and civil rights upcoming conferences.

- **March** – Actively advocated, along with Black Women’s Roundtable on the confirmation of Loretta Lynch as U. S. Attorney General and worked with other women’s groups on specific issues such as pay equity and pregnancy discrimination. Briefings were held with 1 young women’s community group and 2 churches on the release of the report on the “Status of Women in the States 2015: Poverty and Opportunity”.

- **April** – Held second VASHTI Convocation at the AAMLC’s Spring Clergy Institute in Columbia, South Carolina with 60 women ages 21 to 81.

- **May** – Launched the VASHTI Speakers Bureau with presentations at Bell Grove Missionary Baptist Church Women’s Retreat for 60 women in White Oaks, GA; the May gathering of 280 women of Delta Sigma Theta in Syracuse; Virginia Beach Interfaith Alliance monthly meeting; Princeton Theological Seminary Black Church Institute (20 attended); and various churches around the county for Mother’s Day. List-serv members were informed on the Justice for Victims of Trafficking Act and the defunding of public education.

- **June** – Conducted an evaluation of the goals and outcomes of the 2014 VASHTI convocation with 25 participants. A gath-

ering held during the annual Hampton Ministers Conference allowed for a review, evaluation and input of this pilot project by 22 members. Using a SWOT analysis, the needs assessment informed of education and awareness obstacles that must be addressed individually to empower women in the pulpit and the board room.

ISSUE AREAS

Family Medical Leave Act * Incarcerated Women * Paycheck Fairness Act * Confirmation of Loretta Lynch * Status of Women in States 2015: Poverty and Opportunity * Presidents Proclamation on National Slavery and Human Trafficking * Religious Freedom Restoration Acts * Millennials, Sexuality and Reproductive Health * Affordable Care Act * Citizens United – Money Out Voters In * Ending Racism * Gun Violence Prevention * Elementary Secondary Education Act Reauthorization * Marriage Equality * Voting Rights Advancement Act * Defunding of Planned Parenthood * Criminal Justice

LESSONS LEARNED

The VASHTI Initiative served to provide over 500 African American women with a vision for what it means to be agents for change in our homes, neighborhoods, communities, schools, and places of worship. With flexibility and a willingness to meet women where they were, trusted conversations were held and trusted relationships were formed as we explored and examined our theological, cultural and societal viewpoints about issues from immigration, LGBT relationships and marriage equality, to defining family to expanding the concept of #BlackLivesMatter.



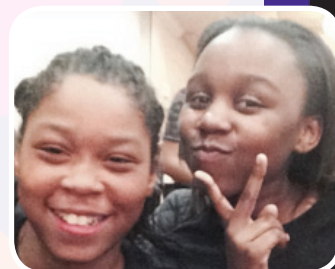
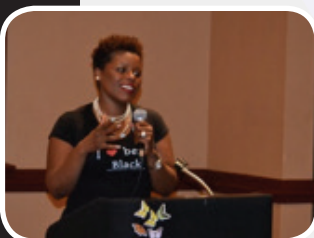


During the length of time of this grant, we have been quite enlightened through our national Convocations, workshops, plenary sessions, classroom, kitchen and living room gatherings, dialogues and discussions. The following lessons learned speak volumes about the sexuality issues and concerns that African American women encounter and what more we have to do to increase awareness, skills and knowledge starting with the 310 women who now make up the VASHTI listserv. We learned that we:

- must be visible and vocal in our support to eliminate all forms of discrimination with apology.
- even in places where not fully confident, where still questioning, the fear of rejection outweighed the urging for writing, speaking, teaching or preaching if no more than for clarity about who is the 21st century church.
- did not see all the opportunities that existed in every setting where two or more women gathered to take advantage of education on social, political, judicial matters relating to women until we came together and shared.
- cannot forget and must tell our stories about chosen or coerced abortions, miscarriages, full term pregnancies for adoption, experiences with new reproductive

technology, etc.

- must address individually and collectively our prejudices, biases, homophobia, heterosexism, if we are to be the instruments for change we entered the room to be.
- have so much more to share, be exposed to and learn about being spiritual and sexual beings, as Black women rooted in the values of our faith where tradition conflicts with contemporary.
- are not and must be better equipped to combat the rhetoric of right wing conservatives and religious extremist in their “war against women.”
- have shared values, but we are not monolith and therefore must recognize, embrace and respect our differences in thought, culture, faith traditions, sexual expressions and sexual identities.
- are required to give voice for the voiceless and move from silence to shouting in the pulpit, the pew and the polls.
- have an absolute connection between spiritual, physical, emotional and sexual well-being and this serves as motivation and affirmation to continue together for our faith and faith to be SMART and “change even the smallest of life’s details” so that together we can “completely change its outcome.”



VASHTI (beautiful women) Core Leaders

Reverend Lois Barksdale, Toni Bond-Leonard, Reverend Brendolyn Boseman, Merceil Burkhalter, Theresa Caldwell, Dr. Carolyn Clark Carlisle, Reverend Dorothy Chaney, Dr. Nesa Chappelle, Reverend Beatrice Hemmings, Dr. Tanya Henderson, Glenda McCullough, Dr. Lisa Allen McLaurin, Minister Leslie Watson Malachi, Sheena Meade, Reverend Dr. Judith Moore, Reverend Dr. Susan Newman Moore, Dr. Claire Nelson, Reverend Wanda Outlaw, Dr. Lynette Pennington, Reverend Dr. Geraldine Pemberton, Jackie DuPont Walker, Dr. Mercuria Chase Williams, Reverend Jane Wise