

# Leading Ladies

## Northeast Oklahoma City church women are helping moms, babies through health initiative

Carla Hinton  
[chinton@oklahoman.com](mailto:chinton@oklahoman.com)



Members of the “Leading Ladies for Healthy Babies” initiative are shown in the sanctuary at Mount Triumph Baptist Church in Oklahoma City. They are, from left to right, Carla McCarrell-Williams, the Rev. Octavia Lindsay, Stacy Dykstra, Barbara Colbert, Karen Jacobs, Lisa Dorn and Rhonda Mitchell. [PHOTO BY SARAH PHIPPS, THE OKLAHOMAN]



### HOW TO HELP

For more information about the “Leading Ladies for Healthy Babies,” contact Barbara Colbert at the Oklahoma City-County Health Department at 425-4427 or email [barbara\\_colbert@occhd.org](mailto:barbara_colbert@occhd.org).

Often known as the “first lady” of their churches, pastors’ wives are typically some of the busiest women in their congregations.

There are also women who are church pastors in their own right.

A group of pastors’ wives, female pastors and other female leaders at several northeast Oklahoma City churches recently have expanded their leadership roles to include a pilot project aimed at helping pregnant women and new moms in their community.

They call themselves “Leading Ladies for Healthy Babies.”

The new initiative is a partnership between women at 26 churches, the state Department of Human Services' Office of Community and Faith Initiatives and the Oklahoma City-County Health Department.

Karen Jacobs, administrator for the Office of Community and Faith Initiatives, said the project is aimed at reducing the infant mortality in predominantly black northeast Oklahoma City and improving the health of black women.

She said infant mortality is twice as high for black babies than any other minority, and northeast Oklahoma City has one of the highest infant mortality rates in Oklahoma.

Jacobs, 58, and Rhonda Mitchell, co-chairs of Leading Ladies, said their program's goal is to: create awareness and education on infant mortality issues; improve pregnancy outcomes for black families; prevent unplanned repeat pregnancies; provide structured health, prenatal, parenting and childbirth education.

Jacobs wears two hats with the group. She represents the DHS component, but she also is the wife of a pastor. Her husband, the Rev. Ronnie Jacobs, is pastor of Jesus First Baptist Church in Stroud.

Mitchell is "first lady" of Tabitha Baptist Church, 1219 NE Grand Blvd., where her husband, Jeff, is senior pastor.

She said the program now has turned its focus to developing a mentoring curriculum that would pair pregnant women and new moms in the community with mentors from the community.

Mitchell, 58, said she and other women in the group are actively recruiting mentors among the caring women they know who would like to help guide other women through the first phases of motherhood. She said the mentors will include women who want

to share the wisdom they've

gleaned and also women who have had a miscarriage or lost a child in infancy.

"Being a

mom, we have

this instinct within us

to help another mother," Mitchell said. "We believe that all children are a gift from God. Jeremiah 29:11 says He has a plan for all of us."

Carla McCarrell-Williams, 44, a Leading Ladies member from St. Mary's Christian Methodist Episcopal, said she thinks the mentoring portion of the group's initiative is perhaps the most valuable.

"Support is very important in the community," she said. "Yes, we can have the resources, but if you don't have the relationships and the support there, that family is still struggling."

### **Lifesaving information**

The women said one of the most important aspects of the initiative is sharing statistics and distributing information to help the community make lifesaving changes.

Barbara Colbert, an outreach specialist with the Oklahoma City-County Health Department, and Kelli McNeal, the department's supervisor of fetal and infant mortality review and maternal child health outreach, said they think a concentrated focus on reducing infant mortality rates in Oklahoma County, which includes the Leading Ladies initiative, helped bring about reductions

from 2015 to 2016.

The pair said a

March of Dimes grant helped provide funding for a summit held on the issue in March 2015. A task force evolved from the summit and then

the Infant Mortality Alliance was officially launched in March 2016.

Infant mortality is the death of a live-born infant before his or her first birthday, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. The infant mortality rate is the number of infant deaths per 1,000 live births.

Colbert and McNeal said the Oklahoma County infant mortality rate decreased 22 percent from 13.8 (almost 14 babies per 1,000 births) in 2015 to 10.8 in 2016.

“We’ve been doing a lot of things, and we’ve been able to sustain a sense of urgency,” McNeal said.

The two said three main factors contribute to the high infant mortality rate in northeast Oklahoma City and Oklahoma County: infant prematurity, sleep-related death and congenital anomalies. They said low economic status and poverty are risk factors.

Meanwhile, the duo said one of the ways the urgency of the situation has been conveyed to the community is simply in sharing the statistics with members of the Leading Ladies group, who have in turn shared them with their congregations.

Mitchell said she learned that some people in the community didn’t know what the infant mortality rate meant. She said she has seized the moment to explain what infant mortality is and what the rate is for the community and how it can be affected.

Another Leading Lady, the Rev. Octavia Lindsay, 29, said she didn’t hesitate to share the statistics with members of St. Mary’s Christian Methodist Episcopal Church, 1201 N Martin Luther King Ave., where she is senior pastor.

“The statistics get your attention,” Lindsay said. “As Christians, if our concern is not for humanity, then we’re off.”

Lisa Dorn, 55, first lady of Mount Triumph Baptist Church, 1716 Abram Ross Ave., said she and her husband, James, thought the initiative would fit well with the mission of the church, where he is senior pastor. She said they are big proponents of education and youths ideally need healthy beginnings to help propel them to academic success.

“I thought it was a worthy cause because before our children can get to education, they have to be healthy and their mother has to be healthy,” Dorn said.

Stacy Dykstra, executive director of Smart Start Central Oklahoma, said she came on board because helping children and families become more healthy fits with her agency’s mission. She said lack of good prenatal care has been linked to adverse outcomes is

She said the women in the Leading Ladies group are making an impact because they are trusted members of their congregations and their community.

Jacobs said a Healthy Babies Brunch was held earlier this year, and other activities are planned in addition to the mentoring program.

She and other Leading Ladies said there are plans to host churchwide drives for diapers and other baby necessities that will be presented to the Stork’s Nest nonprofit.

Colbert said the group also will participate in the Safe Sleep initiative in September, in which individuals, families, child care centers and churches are presented with information about keeping infants safe while they sleep. This includes crib safety tips and other information.