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**For Immediate Release**

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### **Gathering of Women in Ministry in Baton Rouge to Focus on the Church's Role in Building Healthier Rural and Urban Communities**

The Visionary Leadership Institute (VLI) and the Foundation for the Mid South will present the 4th Mid South Gathering of Women in Ministry Leadership from September 13<sup>th</sup>-15<sup>th</sup> in Baton Rouge, Louisiana, at the Hilton Capitol Center and the Sheraton Convention Center. This Gathering will help women on the frontlines of ministry to connect, celebrate, and mobilize across race, denomination, and geography.

The theme of this year's Gathering—*The Church Rising from Silence to Action: Health Disparities*—will focus on the church as an important ally in change efforts to revitalize the region through community-based development. The VLI and its regional partners in Louisiana, Mississippi, and Arkansas hope to strengthen and expand the faith-based and nonprofit sectors of the Mid South where poverty and health disparities—such as heart disease, HIV/AIDS, obesity, cancer, diabetes, and mental illness—are among the highest in the country.

"The VLI hopes to build indigenous sustainable regional leadership in the Mid South and strengthen congregations, families, and communities," says Steven Cooper, Director of the Visionary Leadership Institute. "Our faith leaders are too disconnected and isolated from each other and key secular leaders to effectively serve their communities. When leaders in faith rise, our communities are destined to improve due to the support, resources, and networks of progressive, visionary men and women."

Partnerships for the Gathering include: YWCA of Baton Rouge; The American Heart Association; Louisiana Women in Ministry (LAWIM), the Mississippi Health Awareness Project; Victoria Rowell, advocate of children in foster care, award-winning actress (Drucilla from *The Young and The Restless*) and author of *The Women Who Raised Me*; and the trainee company of Ballet Magnificat!, world-renowned Christian ballet company. The event will also feature gospel recording artists Vanessa Bell-Armstrong and Brenda Ellis of Bishop T.D. Jakes' Potter's House Choir.

(more)

## **Friday, September 14<sup>th</sup>**

This regional training and networking event will feature many national and regional philanthropists, artists, and others committed to health and wellness, social justice, and building community. The “Pastors of Wellness Breakfast” from 7:30-9:00 a.m. will focus on the church’s role and responsibility to address health disparities. Bishop Hope Morgan-Ward—the first female Bishop of the Mississippi United Methodist Conference—will speak and address personal, congregational, and community health and wellness.

The “Bridge Over Troubled Water Award”—recognition of regional churches and other entities who have innovatively and boldly tackled health disparities in their communities—and the Mary Moody Finer Woman Award—honoring the 81 year-old African Methodist Episcopal pastor of St. Francisville, Louisiana, and another regional woman in ministry who embodies grace, compassion, resilience, and strong faith—will occur from 12:15 – 1:45 p.m. The luncheon keynote speaker will be Dr. Risa Lavizzo-Mourey, CEO/President of the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation—the nation’s largest healthcare foundation. Victoria Rowell, actress / humanitarian / author of *The Women Who Raised Me* will help present the awards.

Insightful workshops offered throughout the day will include a summit to address the role and status of women in the Baptist Church, effective building projects/church administration, youth and schools, global missions, the diversity of ministry callings, healthy marriages, making changes in your money, ministry etiquette, physical fitness, marketing, funding, partnership development, raising healthy children, and the disciplines of a visionary leader.

## **Saturday, September 15<sup>th</sup>**

Saturday culminates the weekend with an outreach day entitled “Women Suited for Success” to be held in the Renaissance Village—one of the largest Hurricane Katrina FEMA Trailer Communities housing more than 1500 individuals—at 8:00 a.m. This outreach will provide inspiration, training, and ‘a hand up’ to women and their families in the trailer community. This event will allow women leaders to spend time with those most affected by the storms and make donations of approximately 500 professional dress suits to the women and working-age teenage girls living in the Village.

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