$5M Grant Launches a Faith Center to Tackle HIV in the South [VIDEO]

With Gilead's COMPASS Initiative funding, Wake Forest University School of Divinity inaugurates a faith coordinating center to fight HIV.

February 23, 2021 By Trent Straube

The Wake Forest University School of Divinity received a $5 million grant from pharma giant Gilead Sciences to launch a faith-based center to address the HIV epidemic in the South, notably among vulnerable populations including African Americans, LGBTQ individuals and rural communities in Appalachia, according to an announcement from the school. Wake Forest University is located in Winston-Salem, North Carolina.

The grant, the largest in the divinity school's history, according to the Winston-Salem Journal, arrives from Gilead Sciences' COMPASS Initiative (the name stands for "COMmitment to Partnership in Addressing HIV/AIDS in Southern States").

> We're excited to announce that Wake Divinity is the newest coordinating center to join the Gilead COMPASS Initiative. Together, we're addressing the #HIVEpidemic, tackling stigma and increasing awareness in the U.S. South. https://t.co/7BM5KoeFPh @GileadSciences @BeOurCOMPASS pic.twitter.com/to2szAnXGn
>
> — Wake Forest Divinity (@WakeDiv) February 16, 2021

The grant will establish the COMPASS Initiative Faith Coordinating Center at Wake Forest University School of Divinity. “Part of our excitement about connecting with the Gilead COMPASS Initiative is this recognition that in the U.S. South, you cannot effectively address HIV and AIDS without thinking about faith communities,” said the Reverend Shonda Jones, EdD, in a Gilead announcement of the grant. Jones will lead the coordinating center’s activities and is senior associate dean of the School of Divinity. “Our enterprise for educating is not just for the sake of learning. We are doing the work that we do here at Wake Forest for humanity.”

> Get to know the Executive Director of the new Gilead COMPASS Faith Coordinating Center. We asked 5 questions and Dr. Mathews answered! https://t.co/wnz2Y4JLB1
>
> — Wake Forest Divinity (@WakeDiv) February 17, 2021

The faith coordinating center “will use a social justice framework, interfaith engagement and advocacy for LGBTQ communities as tools to equip faith communities to respond to the needs of those impacted by HIV/AIDS,” explains Wake Divinity. “The center intends to cultivate change in and through faith communities with strategic implementation of collaborative learning, grantmaking and training. One planned program is a cohort-based educational path for clergy and faith leaders that intends to build collaborative knowledge, capacity and expertise related to faith and HIV/AIDS.”

Allison Mathews, PhD, will serve as executive director of the faith coordinating center, according to Wake Forest Divinity, and Jones will act as principal investigator. (You can watch a TEDx Talk by Mathews above; Jones appears in the Gilead video at the top of this article.)

Gilead, which manufactures numerous blockbuster HIV medications, launched the COMPASS initiative in 2017, dedicating $100 million over a decade to tackle HIV in the South. Each year, the initiative awards millions of dollars in grants to local groups.

In general, the grantees receive COMPASS funding for programs that reduce HIV stigma, raise awareness of HIV, build organizational capacity, tackle substance use and promote mental health, trauma-informed care and well-being. The grantees have been selected by three organizations referred to coordinating centers. Wake Divinity will serve as a fourth.

The COMPASS initiative’s coordinating centers now include:

- Emory University Rollins School of Public Health
- Southern AIDS Coalition
- University of Houston Graduate College of Social Work
- Wake Forest University School of Divinity.

To learn more about COMPASS on POZ.com, read about the 2019 grantees, the 2020 grantees, the debut of the initiative and the launch of seven new interventions to reduce stigma.

> Wake Div's Dr. Shonda Jones & Dr. Allison Mathews will serve on the "Paths Shall Come Together: Intersections of Faith, Sexuality, and HIV" panel, Feb. 24 at 6PM @GLAAD HIV Stigma & Faith Summit. Register now to receive the latest updates: https://t.co/v5MRoMgU6j
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> — Wake Forest Divinity (@WakeDiv) February 19, 2021

In related news, grants from the COMPASS Initiative helped fund this week's HIV Stigma & Faith Summit, hosted by GLAAD, an LGBTQ advocacy group. The free virtual event takes place Wednesday to Friday, February 24 to 26. Jones and other leaders from Wake Forest Divinity will participate in the discussions. For more details, including how to register, see "Join Celebs for the First HIV Stigma and Faith Summit [VIDEO]."

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