

Involving the Faith Community in Teen Pregnancy Prevention

Why involve the faith community?

Programs to reduce teen pregnancy and faith communities are natural partners. A shared interest in strong families and the healthy development of young people provides an excellent foundation for mutually beneficial activities. This chapter describes a variety of ways that religious communities and programs to prevent teen pregnancy can work together productively.

There are at least five reasons to involve faith communities in preventing teen pregnancy. Faith communities:

- focus on values;
- have community credibility;
- have access to young people, parents, and potential volunteers;
- have skills in reducing conflict; and
- are willing to provide in-kind contributions.

Focus on values

Preventing teen pregnancy involves more than just biology. In fact, it touches complex issues of values, personal standards of behavior, power, parent-child relationships, feelings, and beliefs. These issues are at the

core of religious communities—what they teach about, pray over, and communicate. As such, they are natural allies for any program seeking to change the high-risk behavior of teens.

Interestingly, research is beginning to show what many have long known from working with teens—that religious faith and a strong moral sense play vital roles in protecting teenage boys and girls from too-early sexual activity and teen pregnancy. By teaching and preaching religious values, faith communities help shape the character of our children and give them answers to their most heartfelt questions.

- According to the 1995 National Survey of Family Growth, 48 percent of 15- to 19-year-old girls said that they were virgins, and nearly one-half of these young

WHAT DOES “FAITH COMMUNITY” MEAN?

In this chapter, the phrase is used in the most inclusive way to refer to churches, synagogues, mosques, meeting houses, and temples within a neighborhood, city, county, or state.

RESEARCH SHOWS...

Religious faith and a strong moral sense play vital roles in protecting teenage boys and girls from too-early sexual activity and teen pregnancy.

women said that the main reason they had abstained from sex was that it was against their religion or morals. No other single reason was cited more often (NCHS, 1995).

- Adolescents who feel religion and prayer are important are more likely to delay sexual

activity than are other teens (Blum and Rinehart, 1997).

- Adolescents reporting regular attendance in religious services are less likely to be sexually active than are other teens (Eklin and Roehlkepartain, 1992).

Community credibility

Many churches and other religious organizations are deeply involved in their communities.

CASE IN POINT

HEART of OKC

When Healthy, Empowered, And Responsible Teens of Oklahoma City (HEART of OKC) went looking for partners in the faith community, it was not disappointed. It involved the faith community through an intentional, respectful outreach.

During the planning phase of HEART of OKC, youth and adult members of the faith community were actively involved. They helped identify needs and assets, create neighborhood task forces, and outline a positive youth development plan. Their work focused on selected high-needs neighborhoods.

Through needs assessment activities, the project identified many inner-city congregations that were currently involved in youth development, or had the potential to provide significant and positive resources. HEART of OKC staff members also conducted a personal survey of congregational

leaders from different denominations serving central city neighborhoods.

The survey process showcased several particularly innovative programs that were already actively engaging youth. One included a collaborative sexuality education program co-sponsored by Temple B'nai Israel and the Mayflower Congregational United Church of Christ. Every two years these congregations combined their middle school youth groups and provided a four-week program on sexuality and growing up. The series also offered an orientation session for parents. The final session featured the senior clergy from both congregations. Together they talked with the youth about how sexuality and growing-up issues relate to their spiritual growth. The program has been offered for six years now, and rave reviews from youth, their parents, and their congregations follow each series.

Their leadership can help teen pregnancy programs strengthen their presence in the areas they already serve. Even more, faith communities can open doors to new groups. A recent study funded by the American Association of Retired Persons found that each American belongs, on average, to four community groups. The most commonly cited is a religious organization (Love, 1997). The networking potential is substantial.

Moreover, in some communities, religious organizations are some of the only institutions that still function well, have credibility, and can reach out to families with a values-based message.

This community credibility that faith communities bring to a partnership is crucial because it can broaden the perception of a pregnancy prevention effort from a limited, “special interest” project to one that is seen as more closely tied to the larger community.

Access to young people, parents, and potential volunteers

Faith communities typically have a variety of special programs for young people, both boys and girls, and for parents—just the groups that most programs to prevent teen pregnancy target. As such, faith communities should be at the top of any community outreach list.

Parents in particular have an important part to play in preventing adolescent pregnancy, and religious congregations are a good place to reach them. Parents who are active in a congregation also tend to be active in the lives of their children, and faith communities typically support parents who are concerned for and want to be involved with the lives of their teens.

Faith communities also can be a source of the volunteer help and expertise that many programs need. For example, many churches and other religious organizations have strong traditions of community service

IT TAKES TWO

The **IT TAKES TWO** pregnancy prevention program, which involves professional male and female presentation teams delivering lively, motivational presentations in local schools, began in Des Moines, Iowa, over ten years ago. As it expanded to communities across the state and country, many programs

looked to volunteers from the community. Several turned to the faith community for help. Numerous clergy, representing a variety of traditions and denominations, have been trained as program presenters. These clergy have taken the program to the community and to their own congregations.

FOR MORE ON HANDLING CONFLICT

See Chapter 17 (Volume 3), “Moving Forward in the Face of Conflict.”

and volunteering, and can help programs find mentors, public speakers, and other key players. There are few places a program could go to get better expertise or more diverse skills and professional abilities.

Skills in reducing conflict

One of the biggest stumbling blocks to reducing teen pregnancy is the amount of conflict and acrimony that this topic can cause among adults. Accordingly, finding ways to “turn down the heat” is often central to making any progress, and in this connection faith communities may be helpful.

Religious leaders are often skilled at finding common ground between people with diverse views and developing values of tolerance for differences. They strive to bridge differences and make personal connections even in difficult circumstances. These are all essential skills in decreasing the conflict that can surround community-based programs to prevent teen pregnancy.

Willingness to make in-kind contributions

Finally, faith communities can offer significant in-kind contributions, such as mailing lists, space in newsletters and newspapers, meeting facilities, child care, office support, help with transportation, and related services.

Getting started on a partnership

Local faith communities generally are structured around congregations, religious organizations, or

THINKING ABOUT THE MEANING OF CONGREGATION...

A congregation is a place where parents and their children can be found at regular weekly activities, such as worship times, religious education, family fellowship, and committee meetings, as well as at special faith-based family events.

individuals. In addition, many communities have a variety of “interfaith” or ecumenical councils where leaders of various faith groups come together for common purposes. Statewide, they may be represented by denominational offices, affiliates of national religious organizations, or public issue groups with religious affiliations. Some major faiths also have national and even international organizations. Programs may choose to focus on individual

congregations or pursue relationships with these larger entities.

Forming partnerships with faith communities requires some up-front research and some leg work. Here are several ideas of where to begin and what to do.

Learn about local faith communities

Programs can begin by learning about the number and variety of faith communities in the area or region. They should also be aware of the longstanding involvement of many religious organizations

in community action and social work generally. The YMCA, YWCA, Lutheran Social Services, B'nai B'rith, and Catholic Charities are among the oldest and best known youth-serving agencies. Other faith-based service groups, such as Habitat for Humanity, are more recent. Many individual congregations and faith communities are active in social service work and youth development activities, such as working with homeless families, outreach groups, religious education, athletics, child care and preschool programs, and scout troops.

FIELD NOTES

10 tips for program staff who work with faith communities

1. Believe that the work requires the involvement of the faith community as a whole.
2. Put faith communities on a list of key friends and allies.
3. Get to know the members of individual congregations, parishes, temples, mosques, and other faith communities. Learn and understand everything possible about the beliefs and practices of each.
4. Acknowledge and respect the values of a faith community, even if they differ from those of the program staff.
5. Ask members of a faith community to explain their traditions, beliefs, and perspectives. Staff should not act as though they know these traditions when they do not.
6. Acknowledge biases or stereotypes. Staff should ask trusted members of a faith community to speak up when they see them operating from these biases.
7. Receive a faith community as a full partner in the program's efforts. Allow it to inform staff just as staff would like to inform it.
8. Focus on the points of agreement the program has with a faith community. Do not let the points of disagreement prevent collaboration on specific activities.
9. Publicly and privately acknowledge and appreciate the work a faith community has already been doing with its own youth.
10. Consistently do all of the above with every member of a faith community.

WAYS TO LEARN ABOUT FAITH COMMUNITIES

- **talk to others in the program who may be active in various faith groups or know about this general area**
- **talk to community leaders**
- **seek the advice of local foundations, who typically know their community well**
- **use the library**
- **visit public meetings of various faith communities, including worship services**
- **read their publications (this is a good way to learn a lot about the membership and its faith and practices)**

Select potential partners

After developing a general understanding of the faith communities active in the area, programs will need to select a few as potential partners. The most promising possibilities will be those that already show signs of being interested in the issue of preventing teen pregnancy. For example, potential faith community partners are probably:

- known for their work with teens (for example, they might have a youth office and staff member assigned to youth work, activities and programs for kids and teens, youth serving in leadership roles); the more involved a particular faith community already is with youth, the more likely it is to become involved with a pregnancy prevention project;
- involved in community initiatives on other youth social problems, like drug and alcohol abuse, tobacco use, violence, poverty, and juvenile crime; and

- already partnering with other nonprofit organizations on issues involving youth.

A second, important step, forgotten by many of those seeking to work with the faith community, is to understand the faith context of that organization and how it might influence a group's approach to teen pregnancy prevention. Each faith community will have a different "starting point" on teen pregnancy—that is, its basic ideas and beliefs about young people, sexuality, and outreach to the community.

Programs also should learn about who makes decisions. Some faith groups are governed locally, with each individual house of worship or faith leader exercising autonomous decision-making. For others, a leadership group (such as a parish council or board) will be the decision-making body. Some faith communities involve the whole membership in decisions. Still others are guided by regional and national leadership groups that establish policy and set priorities within a denomination.

Reach out respectfully and carefully

With the basic research done, programs can make concrete overtures to specific faith communities by:

- asking to meet with faith leaders—the best place to start is usually one-on-one meetings;
- outlining the problem of teen pregnancy;
- explaining what the program is already doing; and
- raising the issue of the faith community becoming more involved in teen pregnancy prevention.

In beginning the process of establishing a relationship—and possibly even a concrete program—with one or more groups, there are two key ideas for programs to keep in mind.

If faith communities are to sign on as partners in preventing teen pregnancy, they must first agree that teen pregnancy is a problem. This may seem like stating the obvious, but it bears emphasis. Not all groups and individuals see teen pregnancy as a problem, or perhaps not as a very important one, so it is essential that any real relationship begin with some basic information and explanation. Points to cover:

- Why *is* teen pregnancy a problem?
- What are its consequences?
- How large a problem is it in the community?
- Is it getting worse or getting better?
- What is its relevance to this particular faith community and why should this group care?

KEYS TO SUCCESS WHEN SELECTING POTENTIAL PARTNERS

Recognize that faith communities have varied starting points on teen pregnancy:

- **basic ideas and beliefs about young people, sexuality, and community outreach will differ from community to community.**

Recognize that faith communities have varied decision-making structures. Decisions can be made by:

- **individual faith leaders;**
- **leadership groups, such as a parish council;**
- **the entire membership; or**
- **regional or national denomination leaders.**

At any initial meetings, staff should be prepared to cover this ground. Without a common understanding of the problem, little energy for a real partnership will develop.

To help reduce teen pregnancy, faith communities do not have to implement sexuality education programs or become family planning clinics. In particular, they do not have to change their position on the value of delaying sex until marriage. This may be the most important idea of all. Much of what faith communities already do is helping to reduce teen pregnancy, and at no point should it be suggested that unless they begin providing sex education or related services, they are not helping to solve the problem. It may be that a particular faith community *will* want to support contraceptive clinics or sexuality education, but many will not, and it is vitally important that whatever their take on sex education, they still be among a program's friends and colleagues.

Faith communities are already making an enormous contribution through their work with youth generally, their support of families and marriage, their efforts to improve parent-child communication, their child care services and after-school programs, their sport and recreational activities, and their direct engagement with values and moral choices. Make it clear that regardless of what specific activities are undertaken, programs and faith communities can support each other as each tries to reach the young people within their particular sphere of influence. The main message to faith groups is one of support and respect.

At some point, a program may want to ask a community to do something more explicitly aimed at preventing teen pregnancy, but in making such a pitch, it is essential for programs to honor what faith communities are already doing.

One model for faith-based youth development is **Uniting Congregations for Youth Development**. This is a multi-year project designed to equip faith communities to strengthen the developmental foundation that all children and youth need to grow up healthy. The project offers the opportunity for youth workers to participate in interfaith networks. They receive

REMEMBER...

Research increasingly suggests that broad youth development programs—some of the best of which are offered through faith communities—can make significant dents in teen pregnancy.

training and resource material. They also develop community-wide strategies for positive youth development.

The project is now being piloted in seven communities throughout the country.

As shown by the **Church Mentoring Network**, mentoring is a strategy that teen pregnancy prevention initiatives and the faith community may have in common. Formed in 1991, the Network believes that

congregations are key players in positive youth development. The Network's goal is to take a leadership role in starting mentoring and tutoring projects in faith communities. It also replicates successful mentoring projects in other faith communities. In addition, it serves as a resource center for organizations establishing their own programs. Volunteers trained by the Church Mentoring Network learn how to be mentors and how to train other mentors in their own faith communities.

CASE IN POINT

Fellowship of Friends

The **Chicago Fellowship of Friends** has a 22-year history of working in the Cabrini-Green Housing Project. For years, this Quaker congregation has been providing after-school programming for students in kindergarten through grade seven. Parents sign a release to allow some religious instruction. However, students are also taught basic social skills, friendship skills, and nonviolent conflict resolution skills.

The Chicago Fellowship of Friends originally started as a youth ministry in the 1970s. It has now become a faith community in its own right for people of all ages. Young men and women who grew up with the Chicago Fellowship of Friends are bringing their families back. They also

want to give back by offering to other youth what they received themselves.

The surrounding neighborhood turned to the Chicago Fellowship of Friends when violence nearly closed down a neighborhood school. The Fellowship and the local ministerial association created a plan to keep the school open and free of violence. The Superintendent of Schools agreed to let them try it. The plan included parents' meetings, Saturday activities for students, and escorts to accompany children to school. The school also provided a room where families could receive social services. The project quickly became a pilot program that will soon be expanded to several other schools in the district.

Be concrete

Once on firm ground, programs can offer some concrete suggestions about what the faith community might do to help reduce teen pregnancy and how such activities would fit in with other parts of the program. For example, in *Nine Tips to Help Faith Leaders and Their Communities Address Teen Pregnancy*, the National Campaign to Prevent Teen Pregnancy provides suggestions and resources to faith communities (see Appendix at the end of the chapter). A faith community will not join in an activity that conflicts with its beliefs and values, so programs should not require the church to support everything a prevention program does as a condition of partnership. However, a conflict in one area may still mean that a faith community can participate in other areas.

Offering a list of work needed, resources required, and activities to be undertaken gives a faith community the opportunity to choose activities that suit it best. Examples of tangible activities include:

- providing worship service bulletin inserts and flyers that draw attention to teen pregnancy;
- creating teen pregnancy-focused interfaith/inter-denominational worship services with clergy;

- offering to speak to religious education classes;
- sponsoring a coffee or brunch for clergy and other faith community leaders;
- visiting ministerial or clergy associations to raise awareness of the teen pregnancy problem;
- inviting faith community leaders to attend professional conferences, seminars, and training sessions;
- sponsoring seminars and other learning events just for the faith community or its leaders;
- using direct mail to keep the issue of teen pregnancy before the faith community;
- talking with faith community leaders to exchange information about each other's work; and
- writing, printing, and distributing placemats or other materials that provide facts and information about teen pregnancy for use at fellowship dinners.

An additional way to engage a given faith community is to ask for its participation in a community-wide coalition focused on preventing teen pregnancy. A faith community can actively participate in a coalition by:

- becoming full members;
- sending representatives to regular meetings;
- acknowledging coalition leadership at worship services and other public meetings of the congregation;
- printing coalition announcements in publications;
- bringing the concerns of the coalition before the membership through sermons, lessons, and other types of presentations;
- inviting coalition leaders to speak to groups, committees, and classes within the faith community; and
- publicly supporting the work of the coalition.

Some faith communities may be willing to help offer sexuality education and even family planning services within the context of their faith traditions. A strong case can be made that providing such information in the context of personal faith and spiritual values can be very effective.

Many young people are receptive to such education when it comes from their faith community. Parents in particular are unlikely to object because they are confident that the instruction offers good information in the context of their faith's teachings. Most important, sexuality education from the viewpoint of a faith community encourages young people to consider sexuality in the context of faith and spiritual values.

If a faith community is uncomfortable with highly visible roles, it can still be a vital "behind the scenes" player by, for example, offering volunteer leaders for

CASE IN POINT

Planned Parenthood of Metropolitan Washington

Planned Parenthood of Metropolitan Washington learned just how much a faith community can offer. Allen Chapel African Methodist Episcopal Church offered two day care centers for the community. But Allen Chapel's pastor saw a greater need. He had a vision for a family planning clinic that would offer on-site services. He brought together leaders of his congregation and of Planned Parenthood

of Metropolitan Washington to share his vision. The result was a successful collaboration that continues today. The church provided space and other basic support for the clinic. Planned Parenthood provided the expertise and staff to run the clinic for 15 to 20 hours each week. Together a congregation and a Planned Parenthood helped a community receive much-needed services.

events and programs, or providing meeting space for program activities and special events.

Define the relationship

It is important for programs to define the relationship between their initiatives and the faith community. Many questions need to be explored together:

- How will the faith community be affiliated? Will it be an active member? Does it prefer to simply offer support from a distance?
- Does the faith organization feel comfortable making referrals to other members of the coalition (where relevant)?

Is it appropriate to make referrals to the faith organization? For what services?

- How much direction over the characteristics and growth of the community program does the faith group expect to provide? How will this direction happen? Will representatives be appointed to a governing board, various committees, or both?

This discussion helps establish a trusting, respectful, and clear relationship. It also allows programs to get to know, and be known better by, the faith community.

CASE IN POINT

National Black Religious Summit on Sexuality

An extensive effort to increase the capacity of churches to deal with teen pregnancy is currently being conducted by the **National Black Religious Summit on Sexuality**. In the summer of 1997, over 250 people met in the first Summit, which was hosted by the Howard University School of Divinity and sponsored by the Religious Coalition for Reproductive Choice. The Summit addressed issues of sexuality, teen pregnancy prevention, and other matters of

reproductive health. Primarily it sought “to break the silence on previously taboo topics and develop a sound theological framework” from which to address sexuality issues within churches. This Summit is a valuable resource for facilitating similar dialogues at the local or statewide level. A second Summit took place in 1998, and additional Summits are planned. Videos and print materials are available from the 1997 Summit.

Sustaining a relationship with faith community partners

Several activities can help turn a new partnership with the faith community into a long-term relationship.

Make sure communication is regular and personal

A successful partnership needs to be nourished by an ongoing conversation that includes all those involved. This dialogue allows the entire group to find common ground as well as to understand what ground cannot be shared. In addition, programs should solicit feedback on

substantive issues from faith community partners. They are knowledgeable about youth and working in the community, and their feedback, observations, and suggestions can strengthen a teen pregnancy prevention initiative.

As programs establish and continue a dialogue, they need to remember that similar conversations also may be going on within the faith community itself. In many communities, teen pregnancy can be a controversial issue. The members may have agreed that teen pregnancy

CASE IN POINT

Our Lady of Guadeloupe Catholic Church

Members of **Our Lady of Guadeloupe Catholic Church** in Denver, Colorado, were concerned that uninsured people in the predominantly Latino neighborhood could not get decent, basic health care. They decided to establish a free health clinic. Exams, immunizations, and diabetes screening are among the services offered by Clínica Tpeyac. As the clinic's clientele grew, staff began to focus on the needs of the young people in the neighborhood and parish. In response, the clinic started **Nuestros Milagros** (Our Miracles) to provide regular activities for youth.

In September 1997, the clinic conducted a survey of more than 100 parish and neighborhood youth. In the survey, the youth identified two problems that they felt the clinic and the church needed to address—drug abuse and teen pregnancy. Clinic, church, and youth leaders from the Nuestros Milagros youth group agreed to focus on the issue of teen pregnancy. By the end of the year, they were preparing a training for peer educators and writing curricula for programs. By spring of 1998, the peer educators were ready for their programs.

is a problem, but may have serious disagreements about the best way to solve the problem. Just because congregations sit at one table does not mean they agree on all things. The nature and depth of these differences will affect efforts to unite the faith community on the issue of teen pregnancy. A program's intentional effort to create ongoing dialogue among members of the faith community will help them stay connected to the work.

Recognize the faith community's contribution

Appreciate the efforts made by the faith community to be a partner in prevention. Acknowledge its contributions to building

those personal "assets" that reduce the risks for adolescents. Programs should provide public acknowledgment of the efforts being made by their faith community partners, and express personal thanks to their partners.

Explore additional ways to work together

The more programs involve the faith community, the more opportunities for additional collaboration will materialize. As new ways open for programs and faith communities to work together, programs should be ready to explore the opening frontiers with faith community partners with the idea that it should be good for both.

Conclusion

The faith community is a key constituent in any community or state. When a teen pregnancy prevention program initiates and carries out a partnership with a faith community that is

characterized by positive intention, respect, and careful attention to cultivating areas of agreement and resolving potential areas of disagreement, it has everything to gain.

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Programs mentioned in this chapter

Allen Chapel AME Church

Rev. Leon Lipscombe
2498 Alabama Ave., SE
Washington, DC 20020
(202) 889-7296
Fax: (202) 889-2198

Chicago Fellowship of Friends

Steve and Marlene Pedigo, Co-Pastors
515 W. Oak
Chicago, IL 60610
(312) 944-4493

Church Mentoring Network

Bennie L. Scott, Area Mentoring Director
210 N. Community Center
3601 N. Broad St.
Philadelphia, PA 19140
(215) 223-8574
Fax: (215) 223-2105

Clínica Tpeyac, Nuestros

Milagros, and Our Lady of Guadeloupe Catholic Church
Florencia Gonzalez or Virginia Munoz
3617 Kalamath St.
Denver, CO 80211
(303) 458-5302
Fax: (303) 433-7452

HEART of OKC

Oklahoma Institute for Child Advocacy
Sharon Rodine, Project Director
420 N.W. 13th St., Suite 101
Oklahoma City, OK 73103
(405) 236-5437
Fax: (405) 236-1690
Email: sjrodine@aol.com

IT TAKES TWO and Worth The Wait Pregnancy Prevention

Legacy Resource Group
Tom Klaus, President
P.O. Box 700
Carlisle, Iowa 50047
(515) 989-3360
Fax: (515) 989-3391
Email: legacyrg1@aol.com
www.legacygl.com

Uniting Congregations for Youth Development

Search Institute
Ann Betz, Project Manager
Thresher Square West
700 South Third St., Suite 210
Minneapolis, MN 55415
Phone: (612) 376-8955 or
(800) 888-7828
Fax: (612) 376-8956
Website: www.search_institute.org

National Black Religious Summit on Sexuality

Religious Coalition for Reproductive Choice
Rev. Carlton Veazy, Executive Director
1025 Vermont Ave., NW, #1130
Washington, DC 20005
Phone: (202) 628-7700
Fax: (202) 628-7716
Email: info@rcrc.org
Website: www.rcrc.org

Other useful resources

SIECUS Report, October/November 1997 (Volume 26, Number 1)

Sexuality Information and Education Council of the United States (SIECUS)
Monica Rodriguez, Director of Education
130 West 42nd St., Suite 350
New York, NY 10036-7802
(212) 819-9770
Fax: (212) 819-9776
Email: siecus@siecus.org
Website: <http://www.siecus.org>

Every article in this issue of the bimonthly publication would be helpful to program planners. Of particular interest are "The Journey of Sexuality Educators to Faith Communities" by Maggi Ruth P. Boyer and Ann Marie Donohue, as well as "The Sexuality Education Programs of Religious Groups and Denominations" by Elma Phillipson Cole. Also, SIECUS has

numerous annotated bibliographies of resources related to spirituality, religion, and sexuality.

Roehlkepartain, Eugene C. (1998). *Building assets in congregations: A practical guide for helping youth grow up healthy*. Minneapolis, MN: Search Institute. (Cost: \$18.95. To order, call Search Institute at 800-888-7828.)

This resource offers practical ideas for congregations that want to engage in youth development through asset building. Chapter titles include: "Helping Youth Grow Up Healthy: A New Vision for Congregations," "Developmental Assets: A Framework for Focusing Congregational Life," "Integrating Asset Building into Programming for Youth," and "Reaching into the Community for Asset Building."

Nine Tips to Help Faith Leaders and Their Communities Address Teen Pregnancy

Introduction

Research is beginning to show what many of us have long known from working with teens—that religious faith and a strong moral sense play vital roles in protecting teenage boys and girls from too-early sexual activity and teen pregnancy. For example, according to the 1995 National Survey of Family Growth, 48 percent of 15- to 19-year-old girls said that they were virgins, and nearly one-half of these young women said that the main reason they had abstained from sex was that it was against their religion or morals. Clearly, the role of faith in preventing teen pregnancy is a vital and important one. By teaching and preaching religious values, faith communities can help shape the character of our children and give them answers to their most heartfelt questions.

To support faith communities in this regard, the National Campaign to Prevent Teen Pregnancy's Task Force on Religion and Public Values has compiled *Nine Tips to Help Faith Leaders and Their Communities Address Teen Pregnancy*. This brochure summarizes a wealth of experience and advice from faith leaders around the country. The members of the Task Force—religious and secular leaders representing a broad ideological spectrum and a range of faith traditions—hope these tips encourage religious leaders of all faiths and denominations to take on issue of teen pregnancy in the context of their religious beliefs. At the end of the tips, you will also find a list of helpful books, lesson plans, and other educational resources available from a number of religious and secular organizations.

Teen pregnancy and birth rates in the United States have begun to decline, although it remains true that our nation still has the highest rates in the industrialized world by far—with nearly one million teen pregnancies every year. Communities of faith know that teen pregnancy is a complicated problem. They also know that their work with young people must compete with messages from a wider culture

often at odds with the ethics and morality of their religious traditions and beliefs. That's why it's so important for faith communities to get kids when they're young—and to stay with them through their teen years. As teenagers yearn for spiritual guidance, faith communities are uniquely situated to minister to this need, and faith communities quite properly place questions about sex firmly within the context of religious values and moral traditions.

God bless you as you continue the good work of helping young people meet the many ethical and moral challenges they confront every day.

Sister Mary Rose McGeady

President and Chief Executive Officer, Covenant House International

Member, National Campaign Task Force on Religion and Public Values

November 1998

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The Nine Tips

1. Address the need teens have for spiritual fulfillment and help them find answers to the many challenging problems they face.

It is during the teenage years that many young people first struggle with the enduring questions of human existence, and the intensity and urgency of these questions can be very powerful to them. Many teens hunger for a framework of values and faith that can help them make moral decisions and manage the everyday problems of living that can be so stressful in these transition years. They also want help in seeing beyond the present moment. Because faith communities are uniquely able to provide the spiritual guidance that many teenagers crave, they should embrace this responsibility with energy and commitment.

2. Encourage parents to talk with their children about sex and morality within the context of your faith tradition.

Many parents are embarrassed and uncomfortable talking with their children about sex. This is not unusual, but it is unfortunate since parents are children's first and best teachers about values and moral expectations. A faith community is an ideal place for parents and children to learn how to talk with each other about these important topics. Consider sponsoring workshops for parents about how to talk with their children about sensitive subjects, such as human sexuality, according to the children's age and maturity and

within the context of your faith tradition. And help your parents set proper limits for their children's behavior.

3. Enlist adults in your faith community to help young people.

Teenagers develop character and personal values through interacting with respected and empathetic adults. Sometimes faith leaders themselves are available to work directly with teenagers, but often they carry so many responsibilities that they need help from others. If this is the case, ask highly trusted and knowledgeable adults in your faith community to assist in the important work with teenagers. Whether the adults create an organized mentoring program or something more informal, be sure they understand teenagers and can talk about values and relationships within the context of your faith's principles.

4. Make sure the children and teenagers in your faith community understand what your faith tradition says about sex, love, and marriage in general and teen pregnancy, in particular. Use clear and unambiguous language.

Young people need to know and understand where your faith tradition stands on matters of sexuality. Faith traditions can have a strong impact on helping teens avoid too-early sexual activity and pregnancy, but messages need to be clear, direct, and precise. Encourage open, honest, and frank discussions about the challenges—and choices—that young people face in their daily lives. Discussions about sex, love, and marriage within the context of religious faith should begin when children are young, rather than waiting until they're teens.

5. Learn about contemporary youth culture—what your young people are reading, listening to, watching, and doing.

Understanding the world of teens makes communicating with and caring for them easier. The influence of the entertainment media, in particular, on youth culture is extraordinary. Know the music that young people enjoy. Watch the television shows they watch so you'll know which characters they may be trying to emulate. Take a look at the magazines they are reading. With such information in hand, you can better explore with teens how the cultural messages they receive agree with or differ from what is expected of them as members of your faith community.

6. Organize supervised group activities for teenagers in your faith community.

Teenagers need things to say “yes” to, especially when we are asking them to say “no” to too-early sexual activity and pregnancy. Encourage the parents and other adults in your faith community to organize and lead group activities with teens. All the activities that you sponsor for young people—from prayer circles to field trips—are excellent opportunities for fostering fellowship and supportive friendships. By creating a positive and spiritually-oriented peer culture, you can help teens make the right decisions about sex.

7. Reach out to teenagers who are not involved in any faith community.

Though young people seek answers to spiritual questions, some are reluctant to find them in institutions of organized religion. And it is often the teens who are outside of faith communities and unattached to any positive group who are particularly likely to get in trouble. One dynamic youth minister in California reached out to neighborhood teens by encouraging them to structure their own youth program. He also moved his youth activities into a storefront center just a half-block from the church. A youth group of thirty teens that once met in the church basement now numbers in the hundreds.

8. Celebrate achievement and excellence.

By specifically supporting excellence and achievement of young people, faith communities can help to create an environment for young people that reduces the risk of early sexual activity and teen pregnancy. For example, research has shown that early school failure and dropping out of school are closely associated with becoming a teen parent. By encouraging educational achievement, faith communities may be able to help persuade teenagers to stay in school. Organize tutoring, homework assistance, and opportunities for community service. Encourage or offer scholarships for college and vocational training.

Celebrate spiritual and non-academic achievement as well, like volunteer work or excellence in the arts. Consider recognition ceremonies during regular worship services or designate specific days each year to honor teenagers for their accomplishments in a wide range of areas. Give the teenagers in your faith community a place to shine no matter what their abilities or interests.

9. Reach out to other faith communities, neighborhood organizations, and institutions that work with young people.

You don't have to go it alone. Working together, faith leaders can make a real difference in preventing teen pregnancy. Consider coordinating with fellow leaders to preach on the topic of teen pregnancy the same week. Or develop a particular prayer for all young people facing choices about sex and relationships. Look to clergy associations, ecumenical councils, and other local faith networks for support and collegiality in addressing this and other issues important to young people. And remember that other public and private institutions can be valuable partners in helping young people in your faith community—including schools, public health departments, YMCAs and YWCAs, Boys and Girls Clubs, libraries, and recreation centers.

Resources for Faith Communities On Talking with Kids About Love, Sex, and Relationships

To help faith communities talk more effectively about important issues like sex and pregnancy, the National Campaign has assembled this short list of faith-based resources. Although most of these materials are designed to be used within the setting of a faith community, they can also be helpful to others who want to teach and instruct young people about issues like sex, love, and marriage within a religiously-based context.

(NOTE: Inclusion in this list does not imply endorsement by the National Campaign. Look to local seminaries, religious schools, and ecumenical councils, as well as churches, synagogues, mosques, and temples, for materials that may be of use. In addition, many major denominations provide materials that can help explain sexuality within the context of their specific faith traditions.)

Hands-On Help for Youth Leaders: Addressing Sexuality—and Sexual Abstinence. The American Baptist Youth Ministry's four-page resource list provides an overview of a variety of print and audiovisual materials for educating youth and their parents about sexuality and the virtues of sexual abstinence before marriage. Contact: Educational Ministries, American Baptist Churches USA, P.O. Box 851, Valley Forge, PA 19482-0851. (800) ABC-3USA. Web: www.abc-usa.org.

Abstinence Education Resource Guide 1997. Not every listing in this directory is faith-based, but the guide identifies particular programs as appropriate for religious group settings. Contact: Americans for a Sound HIV/AIDS Policy, P.O. Box 16433, Washington, DC 20041. (703) 471-7350.

Parent-Teen Dialogue. Informal local dialogues between parents and their teens examine many contemporary topics, including sex, within a Jewish context. The B'nai B'rith Youth Organization (BBYO) also directs a national effort called "Mind, Body, Attitude" (M.B.A.), which equips teen girls with the tools to make healthy decisions about their bodies. Local chapters of BBYO also sponsor programs on topics like safe sex. Contact: B'nai B'rith Youth Organization, 1640 Rhode Island Ave., NW, Washington, DC 20036-3278. (202) 857-6600.

Web: www.hubris.net/bnaibrith.org/bbyo/.

The Catholic Chastity Curriculum Directory. A review of available materials that are acceptable under Catholic teaching. Contact: The National Conference of Catholic Bishops, 3211 Fourth St., NE, Washington, DC 20017. (202) 541-3070.

1998 Directory of Abstinence Resources. This up-to-date catalog of programs and curricula includes many that are identified as having Christian content. Contact: National Abstinence Clearinghouse, 801 East 41st St., Sioux Falls, SD 57105. (888) 577-2966. Web: www.abstinence.net.

FACTS. This value-based curriculum deals with many issues, including dating, abstinence-until-marriage, and character education. The curriculum has three separate tracts—one for parents, one for junior-high kids, and one for senior-high teens. The organization also offers the Catholic family-life program, "Project Genesis." Contact: Northwest Family Services, 4805 Glisan St., Portland, OR 97213. (503) 215-6377

A Promise To Keep: God's Gift of Human Sexuality. A Christian-based program using videos, peer ministry, and dialogue activities to teach teens to be abstinent outside of marriage. The peer ministry component is designed to have older, high school-aged students interact with 6th to 9th graders. Contact: A Promise to Keep, 1400 N. Meridian St., Indianapolis, IN 46202. (317) 236-1478.

The Role of Religious Congregations in Fostering Adolescent Sexual Health. A paper written by an experienced sexuality education leader that details how communities of worship can build adolescent sexual well-being. Contact: The Religious Coalition for Reproductive Choice, 1025 Vermont Ave., NW, Suite 1130, Washington, DC 20005, (202) 628-7700. Web: www.rcrc.org.

Religion, Spirituality, and Sexuality. This annotated bibliography includes a broad range of resources, including curricula for religious settings, that encourage a comprehensive approach. One of these resources, “Family Sexuality Education: A Course for Parents,” by Rev. Joe Leonard, is a five-unit, twelve-hour course that includes exercises for teenagers. Contact: Sexuality Information and Education Council of the United States (SIECUS), 130 West 42nd St., Suite 350, New York, NY 10036-7802. (212) 819-9770. Web: www.siecus.org.

Christian Sex Education Set. Published by the Southern Baptist Convention, the set contains *Boys and Girls—Alike and Different* (for ages 4-7), *My Body and Me* (for ages 8 and 9), *Sex! What's That?* (for ages 10-13), *Sexuality: God's Gift* (for ages 14-17), and *Christian Sex Education: Parents and Church Leader Guide*. Also available, “True Love Waits,” a popular abstinence campaign used in many faith settings. Teens sign commitment cards to abstain from sex before marriage. Supporting materials include promotional items, like t-shirts and jewelry, and religiously-based sex education information in four languages. Each item is also available separately. Contact: LifeWay Christian Resources of the Southern Baptist Convention, 127 Ninth Ave. North, Nashville, TN 37234, (615) 251-2000.