

Matter of Faith: Support for Comprehensive Sex Education Among Faith-Based Organizations

By Heather D. Boonstra

Since colonial times, religious institutions in the United States have played a major role in providing social services to the needy. In doing so, churches and synagogues for most of the nation's history either operated without significant support from the government or set up separate nonprofits for their charity work. Over the past few decades, however, a growing movement has developed to expand partnerships between faith-based organizations and the government. The "Charitable Choice" provisions in the 1996 welfare reform law effected the most significant legislative changes to the relationship between government and faith-based organizations in recent history (see box, page 18). President Bush has sought to build on Charitable Choice by establishing the White House Faith-Based and Community Initiative and Centers for Faith-Based and Community Initiatives across several government agencies. Through these initiatives and an array of policy reforms and outreach, Bush has promoted broader involvement of faith-based organizations in social programs as a core component of his "compassionate conservative" agenda.

The movement to strengthen and expand the role of religious groups in social services has had a significant effect on sex education in this country. Indeed, one of the early examples of a policy that actively pursued partnerships with religious institutions is the Adolescent Family Life Act (AFLA). Enacted in 1981, AFLA was created to "promote chastity and self-discipline" to teenagers, effectively establishing the first federal program dedicated to restrictive abstinence-only education. Conceived as the conservative "alternative" to comprehensive sex education

and contraception-based pregnancy prevention efforts, AFLA was consciously constructed to steer funds toward conservative "profamily" groups and required that projects make use of "religious and charitable organizations, voluntary associations and other groups in the private sector" to promote abstinence-only messages.

Similarly, the current federal definition of what constitutes a fundable abstinence education program—which is enshrined in Title V of the Social Security Act and which governs allocations now approaching \$215 million annually—reflects socially and religiously conservative ideals. Some of the more controversial components of this definition include teaching that "a mutually faithful monogamous relationship in context of marriage is the expected standard of human sexual activity" and that "sexual activity outside of the context of marriage is likely to have harmful psychological and physical effects." Because these programs by law must have as their "exclusive purpose" the promotion of abstinence outside of marriage, they are barred from providing any information that could be construed as promoting or advocating contraceptive use. This virtually ensures that abstinence education funds go almost entirely to ultraconservative groups, whether religious or secular. In FY 2005, one-third of all grants awarded under the Community-Based Abstinence Education Program went to faith-based organizations.

In part because of the government support they receive, religious conservatives have come to dominate the public discourse on faith and sexuality. This obscures the fact that other, more progressive faith traditions favor more comprehen-

Charitable Choice

“Charitable Choice,” signed into law as a key provision of the 1996 welfare reform legislation, paved the way for broader involvement of faith-based organizations in federal social programs. The provision allows states to contract with religious organizations and allows these organizations to accept government certificates or vouchers on the same basis as any other nongovernmental provider “without impairing the religious character of such organizations, and without diminishing the religious freedom of beneficiaries of assistance funded under such program.”

Going further than simply making faith-based organizations eligible for funding, the law was designed so that congregations and local ministries—and not just national religious charities—could compete for federal grants. The law explicitly:

- *prohibits the state or federal government from discriminating against faith-based organizations in contracting decisions: the law does not require that states use nongovernmental agencies to provide social services, but, if they choose to do so, they must allow religious organizations to participate (or compete for grants) on equal terms;*
- *allows faith-based organizations to retain their religious identity: the law prohibits the government from requiring a religious organization to alter its governance structure (i.e., its mission and criteria for selecting officers and board members) or to “remove religious art, icons, scripture, or other symbols”—in effect, allowing the provision of government services in places of worship;*
- *allows faith-based organizations to consider religion as a factor in hiring decisions and employment practices: the law allows religious organizations*

to retain their right, under Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, to employ people of a particular religion.

Importantly, the law prohibits the use of government funds for “sectarian worship, instruction, or proselytization” and requires religious organizations to serve all persons without regard to their religious beliefs. Moreover, it requires the government to offer an alternative service provider to any client who objects to the religious character of the organization.

As originally enacted, Charitable Choice applied to the Temporary Assistance for Need Families, Supplementary Security Income, Medicaid and food stamp programs. Since 1996, similar provisions have been added to other federal programs, including the Community Services Block Grant in 1998 and the Substance Abuse Prevention and Treatment Block Grant in 2000.

sive approaches to sex education. Many denominations within these traditions have become involved in sex education, both within their congregations and within their communities. Some have gone so far as to develop their own curricula. Although program implementation at the local level is not widespread and challenges remain, churches, synagogues and other places of worship that offer sexual ethics and comprehensive education programs play a critical role in the lives of young people. They also are important advocates for full and honest information in the public debate over sex education.

Faith Matters

Religion plays an important role in the lives of many American teens. According to the National Study of Youth and Religion, a nationally representative survey of almost 3,400 13–17-year-olds conducted in 2002–2003, 84% of adolescents identify as having a religious affiliation. Six in 10

adolescents say they attend religious services at least once per month, and about half say that religion is extremely or very important in shaping how they live their daily lives (see chart).

Synagogues, churches and other local ministries, relative to other community groups, are among the most significant in connecting with teens and are an important resource for adolescent socialization and development. Outreach to youth is an important mission of many religious institutions, and a large number offer a range of activities organized by and for young people, from support groups to sports clubs to drama groups. Many congregations and local ministries routinely offer some kind of service project that involves young people: for example, delivering food to the elderly or traveling to needy communities in the United States or abroad to build housing. At their best, faith-based organizations help young people build self-esteem and decision-making

skills, in an environment in which youth can comfortably talk with each other and with adults about issues that matter to them.

Moreover, congregations may be ideally positioned to reach out to parents of teens with information and spiritual direction on matters of adolescent sexuality. Churches and other places of worship frequently involve both parents and children, and families commonly turn to these communities for guidance on sexuality, contraception, relationships and intimacy—all within the framework of the family’s moral and religious values.

Finally, the evidence suggests that involvement in a faith-based community may, in itself, be protective against a range of negative health behaviors. For example, according to a review of the literature on adolescent spirituality and health published in 2006 in the *Journal of Adolescent Health*, religiosity (i.e., higher levels of spiritual connectedness, a strong relationship with God

and use of spiritual coping) is associated with delayed sexual activity and reductions in alcohol use and illicit drug use among adolescents. Other studies show that religious involvement, such as church attendance, is associated with delaying sexual intercourse and with fewer sex partners. Researchers say, however, that these findings must be interpreted with caution. Most studies on religion and sex have serious limitations such as small or nonrepresentative samples, restricted religious measures and little attention to possible pathways through which religiosity might affect sexual debut (e.g., family relations or peer groups).

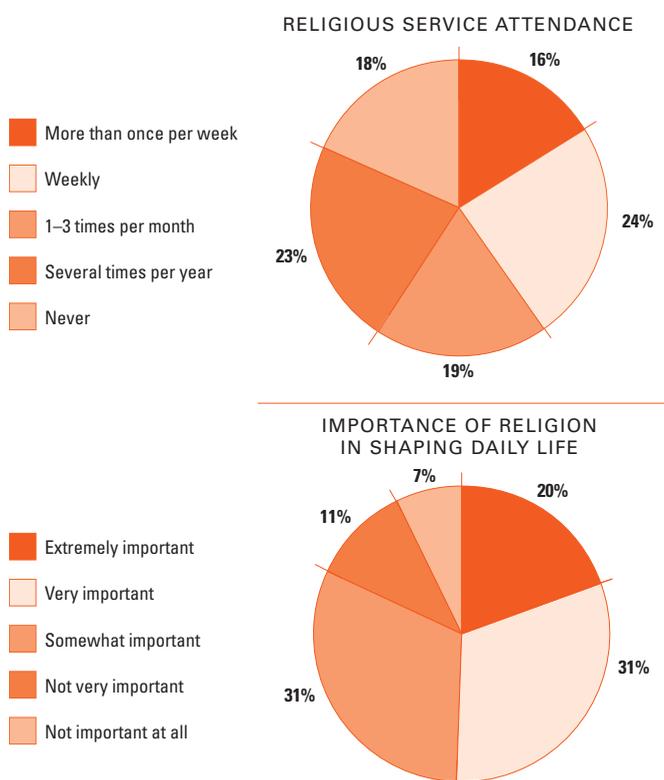
Progressive Voices on Sex Education

Religious institutions have long grappled with such issues as sexual ethics, intimacy, childbearing and marriage. Only in recent decades, however, has there been a more open dialogue about sex education in the modern sense of the term. Forty years ago, the National Council of Churches’ Commission on Marriage and the Family, the Synagogue Council of America’s Committee on Family and the United States Catholic Conference’s Family Life Bureau issued an interfaith statement on sex education, affirming that human sexuality “is a gift from God, to be accepted with thanksgiving and used with reverence and joy.” The 1968 statement calls upon communities of faith to provide resources, leadership and opportunities for sex education and recognizes the vital role that schools play, reaching large numbers of young people who need to understand their own sexuality and their role in society.

Since 1968, many faith-based organizations have joined the public discussion about sex education. Some of these institutions, driven by a theological framework that supports giving young people full and honest information about sexual and reproductive health, actively support comprehensive education. The Episcopal Church, for example, appeals to church leaders to “provide and promote the use of materials on human sexuality, birth control and family planning” as part of the church’s ongoing Christian education curricula and calls for AIDS education models that “promote abstinence or monogamy as well as candid and complete instruction regarding disease prevention measures, such as the use of condoms.”

RELIGIOUS YOUTH

Six in 10 adolescents attend religious services at least once per month, and half say that religion is “very” or “extremely” important in shaping their life.



Source: National Study of Youth and Religion, 2002–2003.

In 2005, the president of the Union for Reform Judaism, Rabbi Eric Yoffie, called on members to tackle destructive teenage sexual behavior by teaching adolescents what Judaism has to say about sex, love and relationships. To help synagogues impart these lessons, the Union has created a life-skills curriculum, Sacred Choices: Adolescent Relationships and Sexual Ethics, that speaks plainly and openly about the real issues teens confront. Importantly, the curriculum does not take a “just say no” approach. “We are not naïve,” said Yoffie at the Union’s biennial convention in 2005. “We do not promote abstinence from all forms of physical contact. But we do take on the issues [such as] oral sex and hooking up. We tell both boys and girls that sex is not about controlling or servicing the other. And we tell girls in particular that their worth is not defined by what they do for boys.”

Similarly, other progressive faith-based communities have developed curricula for their congregations or local chapters that emphasize the moral and ethical aspects of sexuality and decision-making. The United Church of Christ and the Unitarian Universalist Association have jointly published one of the most extensive sex education programs. Our Whole Lives (OWL): A Lifespan Sexuality Education Series provides young people with information about human sexuality and reproduction and helps them understand their responsibilities by addressing abstinence as well as contraceptive use. OWL is based on the Guidelines for Comprehensive Sexuality Education, which were produced by a group of leading health, education and sexuality professionals assembled by the Sexuality Information and Education Council of the United States (SIECUS).

Building Local Support

National leadership, statements, curricula and other denominational expressions of support for comprehensive sex education are meant to guide local community or congregational activities and are critical to building political will. Most decisions about whether to actually offer a sex education program, however, are left to local churches or synagogues.

Research suggests that there is a considerable gap between national policies and actual implementation of programs at the local level. In 2003, the Religious Institute on Sexual Morality, Justice and Healing—an interfaith organization that advocates for sexual health, education and justice in faith communities and society—surveyed youth ministry departments in 28 of the largest denominations and religious organizations that serve Jewish, Christian and Unitarian Universalist youth to understand the extent to which youth development services are being implemented by congregations at the local level. The survey found that although 84% of the national respondents reported encouraging sex education, less than one-third reported activities in this area. According to a 2000 survey of more than 2,000 clergy, conducted by the Christian Community (a nonprofit organization that supports congregations through research and programs), only 14% of congregations offered a “reasonably comprehensive” sex education program; about half offered a limited amount of sex education, and 37% close to nothing.

Moreover, teens themselves report that the information they receive is even less comprehensive and salient than what clergy believe. The Christian Community in 2000 surveyed more than 5,800 teens from 635 congregations (mostly Protestant, but also from Roman Catholic, Unitarian, Jewish and Islamic congregations) and found that a large majority of teenagers say they often do not receive the information they need and want from their faith communities. Nine in 10 teens felt that the information on sexual decision-making they had received from their congregation was not adequate, and fewer than 14% indicated they had received any significant information on contraception, preventing sexually transmitted infections, rape and homosexuality.

Experts recognize that young people need full and honest information from their faith communities, but say that implementing sexual ethics or sex education programs can be a challenge for three reasons. First, program implementation must be balanced against other, competing priorities and obligations. “The over-scheduling of American families is a constant problem,” says

Ann Hanson, minister for sexuality education and justice in the United Church of Christ. “Often, families, clergy and congregations will say, ‘We don’t have time for yet another youth program.’”

Even more than the time commitment, however, congregations often may not think of health promotion or risk reduction as a vital component of their youth ministries. “Offering sex education is a novel idea to many clergy and lay leaders,” says Joanne Alba of Planned Parenthood of Southwestern Oregon, who has been working with congregations to address adolescent sexual health. “Faith leaders often don’t consider their role as educators.” Indeed, some religious communities may feel that health issues are best left to other sectors. Sex education is often not part of a denomination’s culture, and local congregations may not be expected to offer these programs.

Finally, leaders in local congregations may be hesitant to offer sex education for fear of causing conflict, both within their congregations and within their communities. “It’s been my experience that while people may be theoretically open to offering sex education, they worry about the blow-back,” says Steve Clapp, president of Christian Community. “In some cases, these fears are exaggerated, but not always. Almost every pastor knows about someone who has gotten into trouble or lost donations because they were outspoken on sexuality issues. We need to help clergy and lay leaders identify a base of support to make it easier for them to be champions for these programs.”

Faith-Based Activism

Amidst the challenges that local congregations face in implementing sexual education and ethics programs, there are signs of hope. Importantly, most clergy say they would welcome a broader conversation about the sexual health of the nation’s young people. According to its 2000 survey of clergy, the Christian Community found that two in three religious leaders say their congregation could do more than they currently are in sex education and would like to make it a higher priority. According to Clapp, once it is explained to a congregation what comprehensive sex education and sexual

ethics mean, there is, more often than not, support for these programs. “In the current climate, where almost \$1.5 billion in government funds has gone to abstinence-only programs, we’ve been concerned that people of faith would not be open to more comprehensive approaches. But in my work with churches, I’ve been pleasantly surprised. People in churches care about teens, and the number that support comprehensive sex education is larger than we think.”

Indeed, many congregation-based sex education programs offer a forum where parents and other adults can learn about the curricula and express their fears, concerns and support for the program. Parent orientation is key to building consensus, says Melanie Oommen, a minister at the First Congregational Church in Eugene, Oregon. “There is a lot of healing around sexuality that needs to happen—even for parents. So, for the first month of the sex education program, we focus on adults and their needs. This is something we couldn’t do in a school setting. By offering sex education at church, we can address the needs of the whole family.”

A handful of progressive national groups are working to help congregations become more involved with sex education. Some of these groups are focused on program implementation, whereas others are focused on encouraging the progressive faith community to join the public debate over sex education. Advocates for Youth and local Planned Parenthood affiliates have been important catalysts for change, raising awareness about European approaches to adolescent sexual behavior and hosting “faith leadership forums,” where communities can discuss strategies, programs and policies that influence adolescent sexual health. The Religious Coalition for Reproductive Choice has been at the forefront of assisting predominately African American churches in addressing sexuality issues through its National Black Church Initiative. In some states, the group also provides trainings in the OWL curriculum and supports church leaders who want to use their experience in teaching sex education in advocating for better policies. “We’ve been visiting elected officials at the federal and state level to say that people of faith support

comprehensive sex education,” says Kiely Todd Roska of the Minnesota Religious Coalition for Reproductive Choice. “Many policymakers are surprised to learn that churches are offering comprehensive sex education when our schools are limited to teaching abstinence-only. It’s an important reality that people need to know about.”

The Religious Institute, meanwhile, has played a critical role in articulating the religious foundations for supporting sexual and reproductive rights and comprehensive sex education, with both its Open Letter to Religious Leaders on Sexuality Education and its Religious Declaration on Sexual Morality, Justice, and Healing—which itself has been endorsed by more than 2,600 religious leaders from more than 40 religious traditions. “As religious leaders, we’re committed to ‘truth telling,’” says Debra Haffner, director of the Religious Institute. “Education that respects and empowers young people has more integrity than education based on incomplete information, fear and shame. Programs that teach abstinence exclusively and withhold information about pregnancy and sexually transmitted disease prevention fail our young people. Scriptural and theological commitment to telling the truth calls for full and honest education.”

Dollars and Voices

Whether faith-based advocacy will result in government aid to more progressive religious institutions—or even whether it should—is an open question. Government funding of overtly sectarian organizations is a hotly debated topic. On the one hand, there are those who argue that because congregations and local ministries are close to and trusted by communities, families and individuals in need, the government should encourage their involvement. According to President Bush in his January 29, 2001, announcement of the Faith-Based Initiative, religious organizations “provide more than practical help to people in need. They touch and change hearts.” And it is one of the goals of this administration to “help [faith-based programs] in their work to change hearts while keeping a commitment to pluralism.”

On the other hand, there are those who believe direct funding to places of worship is problem-

atic. With government money come government rules, monitoring and control, and some argue that faith-based organizations could find their missions shifting and their religious character lost, as they adapt their programs to the federal grant process rather than the needs of their clients. Equally alarming, some say, is the reverse: having the government fund religious organizations without monitoring what they do with the money. Without government oversight, faith-based organizations may be free to discriminate in whom they hire, to proselytize and to otherwise impart their religious values on others with government funds. After all, the point of many faith-based programs is to provide assistance in the context of a specific faith tradition.

Nevertheless, progressive faith-based involvement in comprehensive sex education, with or without government funds, is critical for two reasons. First, churches and other places of worship that offer sexual ethics and comprehensive education programs play an important role in the lives of young people and fill a critical gap. Although sex education in schools is widespread in this country, it is increasingly driven by abstinence-only policies, leaving young people to look elsewhere for information and direction. Many young people need and want help from their faith communities, and with guidance and support, they will be better prepared to manage such an important part of their lives.

Second, by joining the public discussion over the content of sexuality education, progressive faith-based organizations are beginning to address the moral weaknesses of the abstinence-only approach and to counter the perception that the religious right speaks for religion in America. The fact that people of faith support comprehensive sex education for religious reasons has a way of moving the political debate over sex education—and ultimately affecting policies that impact young people now and in their future.

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