

An Open Letter to Religious Leaders About Sex Education

As religious leaders, we have a continuing commitment to the spiritual, emotional, and physical health of the nation's young people. Now we are called to join in the public discussion about the nature of sexuality education for the country's youth. Strong public health arguments support comprehensive sexuality education. Here we invite you to consider the religious foundations for supporting sexuality education—education that respects the whole person, honors the truth and diverse values, and promotes the highest ethical values in human relationships.

A DIVINE BLESSING

Religious traditions affirm that sexuality is a divinely bestowed blessing for expressing love and generating life, for mutual companionship and pleasure. It is also capable of misuse, leading to exploitation, abuse, and suffering. Sexuality, from a religious point of view, needs to be celebrated with joy, holiness, and integrity, but it also demands understanding, respect, and self-discipline. Our traditions affirm the goodness of creation, our bodies, and our sexuality; we are called to stewardship of these gifts.

A TIME FOR DISCERNMENT

Our religious ancestors created rites of passage to recognize the transition to sexual maturity and adulthood. God created us as sexual beings from birth to death; but it is in childhood and adolescence, that we begin to develop the sexual wisdom, values, and morality that will determine whether we will become sexually healthy adults. As religious leaders, we want young people to learn about their sexuality, not primarily from the entertainment media or their peers, but from their parents, faith communities, and school-based programs that address the biological, psychological, cultural, ethical, and spiritual dimensions of sexuality.

AN INCLUSIVE COMMITMENT

Religions have a venerable tradition supporting healing, health care, disease prevention, and health promotion. They also express commitment to the most marginalized, the most vulnerable, those most likely to be excluded. Sexuality education programs must benefit all young people regardless of income, class, ethnicity, and gender. Programs must also be inclusive of those who are heterosexual

and those who are sexual minorities, those who are abstinent and those who have had sexual relationships, and those who have experienced brokenness and oppression about their sexuality.

EDUCATION WITH INTEGRITY

Religions value education, including education about our sexuality. We have learned from our commitment to religious education that programs must be age-appropriate, accurate, and truthful, and have both immediate relevance and applicability for later life. Young people need help in order to develop their capacity for moral discernment and a freely informed conscience.

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.

TRUTH TELLING

Scriptural and theological commitment to telling the truth calls for full and honest education about sexual and reproductive health. Young people need to know “there is a time to embrace and a time to refrain from embracing” but they also require the skills to make moral and healthy decisions about relationships for themselves now and in their future adult lives. They need help to develop the capacity for personal relationships that express love, justice, mutuality, commitment, consent, and pleasure. Our culture too often models sexuality without responsibility, and many adolescents are left on their own to struggle through conflicting sexual messages. It is with adult guidance and comprehensive information and education about sexuality—education that includes abstinence, contraception, and STD prevention—that young people will be able to make responsible decisions.

A HIGHER STANDARD

As religious leaders, we call on policy makers, school officials, and educators to provide comprehensive sexuality education that honors truth telling and the diversity of religious and moral values represented in the community. Such education:

- Emphasizes responsibility, rights, ethics, and justice.
- Affirms the dignity and worth of all persons.
- Teaches that sexuality includes physical, ethical, social, psychological, emotional, and spiritual dimensions.
- Complements the education provided by parents and faith communities.
- Publicly identifies the values that underline the program.

- Teaches that decisions about sexual behaviors should be based on moral and ethical values, as well as considerations of physical and emotional health.
- Affirms the goodness of sexuality while acknowledging its risks and dangers.
- Introduces with respect the differing sides of controversial sexual issues.

IN CLOSING

People of faith must speak out for comprehensive sexuality education. We know that there are people of good faith who differ with us on what young people need. We seek to reach out to those from whom we may be divided to seek what is best for our nation's youth. We all must be truth seeking, courageous, and just in our efforts to provide all young people with the sexuality education they so urgently need.

The Open Letter was developed at a colloquium of theologians sponsored by the Religious Institute on Sexual Morality, Justice, and Healing. Participants included Rev. Mark Bigelow, Congregational Church of Huntington, L.I.; Rev. Dr. John Buehrens, Unitarian Universalist Association; Rev. Dr. Ignacio Casuera, Pacific Palisades United Methodist Church; Rev. Steve Clapp, Christian Community; Rev. Dr. Mark Ellison, Bangor Theological Seminary; Rabbi Sue Levi Elwell, Union of American Hebrew Congregations; Rev. Dr. Larry Greenfield, Religious Institute on Sexual Morality, Justice, and Healing; Debra W. Haffner, M.Div., Religious Institute on Sexual Morality, Justice, and Healing; Ann Hanson, Justice and Witness Ministries, United Church of Christ; Rev. Dr. Sheron Patterson, St. Paul United Methodist Church, Dallas; and Rev. Carlton Veazey, Religious Coalition for Reproductive Choice.

RELIGIOUS SUPPORT FOR SEXUALITY EDUCATION

In 1968, the National Council of Churches of Christ, Commission on Marriage and Family, the Synagogue Council of America's Committee on Family, and the United States Catholic Conference called upon churches and synagogues to become actively involved in sexuality education within their congregations and their communities.

More than 12 religious organizations are members of the National Coalition to Support Sexuality Education, including the American Jewish Congress, the Office of Family Ministries and Human Sexuality of the National Council of Churches of Christ, and the Unitarian Universalist Association.

Almost eight in ten conservative Christians support sexuality education in high school and seven in ten support it in middle school.

Ten religious denominations, and the Office of Family Ministries and Human Sexuality, National Council of Churches of Christ, have policies supporting sexuality education in schools. They include: Central Conference of American Rabbis • Church of the Brethren • Episcopal Church • Evangelical Lutheran Church of America • Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) • Reform Church in America • Union for Reform Judaism • Unitarian Universalist Association • United Church of Christ • United Methodist Church.

More than 2400 clergy, theologians, and other religious leaders have endorsed the Religious Declaration on Sexual Morality, Justice, and Healing, which calls in part for lifelong, age-appropriate sexuality education in schools, seminaries, and community settings.

More than 1600 clergy have signed a new statement by Planned Parenthood Federation of America calling for comprehensive sexuality education in schools and opposing abstinence-only education. The Central Conference of American Rabbis and the Justice and Witness Ministries, the Unitarian Universalists Ministers Association and the United Church of Christ have also endorsed it.

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