
HOW CONGREGATIONS CAN PROVIDE SEXUALITY EDUCATION

“Let love be genuine; hate what is evil, hold fast to what is good; love one another with mutual affection; outdo one another in showing honor.”

Romans 12:9-10



Religious organizations have a critical role to play in the sexuality education of children, youth and adults. Churches, synagogues and mosques can offer formal sexuality education programs as part of religious education and adult education. They can also create informal opportunities for pastoral counseling and support for congregation members on a variety of sexuality issues.

It is important to develop a life-span approach to sexuality issues. Just as religious education does not end at confirmation or bar mitzvah, so education about sexuality is ongoing throughout life. Congregations can consider how they are educating parents, elementary school children, pre-teens, adolescents, college students, single adults, engaged couples, married couples, mid-life, and older adults.

Congregation Environment

It is important to create a positive climate in your congregation for responding to the sexuality needs of your congregation. According to a report by the United Church of Christ, a positive climate is “one in which members and clergy create a caring atmosphere, where differences are accepted, and where the environment is nonjudgmental and holistic. Scripture and prayer contribute to a positive climate and openness to opportunities for grace.”⁵⁰

Consider these ideas:

- Articulate a core set of values around sexuality issues consistent with your faith’s teachings.
- Consider posting these values on your bulletin board, periodically including them in the order of service or newsletter, and giving them to congregation members.

- Develop and adopt clear guidelines for preventing sexual abuse of children in the congregation. Many denominations have guidebooks for safe congregation policies. The Christian Community publishes *A Time to Heal* (information on page 56) which may be helpful.
- Develop and adopt clear guidelines on sexual harassment and sexual abuse for the faith community. Be sure to address interactions between clergy and congregants, adults and youth, and youth interactions. Specify procedures for reporting violations of the policy.
- Have pamphlets about birth control, HIV/AIDS, sexually transmitted diseases, sexual orientation, and other sexuality-related subjects in the pamphlet racks in the foyer or vestibule. Have pamphlets from organizations in the community that provide sexual health services.
- Have a current events bulletin board where you can feature sexuality-related issues on World AIDS Day (December 1), National Family Sex Education Month (October), National Teenage Pregnancy Prevention Month (May) and National Coming Out Day (October 16th).
- Adopt a policy that affirms the full participation of gays and lesbians in the community. The Unitarian Universalists have information on becoming a “welcoming community”; the United Church of Christ encourages its congregations to declare themselves “Open and Affirming” (ONA) toward gay, lesbian, and bisexual persons; and the Association of Hebrew Congregations has a manual for its synagogues on full participation.

- Include a section on sexuality in the congregation's library. Consider including books for parents, single adults, married couples, children, and adolescents.
- Sponsor a concert or theater event at the church, synagogue or mosque with the proceeds going to such community needs as sexuality education materials for schools, an AIDS service organization, a crisis shelter for abused women and children, or a gay and lesbian community organization.
- Host a health fair for the congregation; make certain to include such sexuality-related services as Planned Parenthood, HIV prevention and counseling, adoption agencies, and marriage and family counseling.

Support for Parents

Congregations can provide important support for parents. Parents are the primary sexuality educators of their children, but most welcome the assistance of their faith community in helping to provide their child with morals and values. Congregations can help parents provide this education to their children.

Consider these ideas:

- Hold parenting education programs as part of adult education. These could include programs on parents as sexuality educators, parenting children at different ages, or parent/adolescent programs. Help adults develop the skills to effectively parent on a wide range of issues, including sexuality.
- Encourage parent/child communication on difficult subjects, including sexuality issues. Some congregations provide conversation starter questions in the worship bulletin or newsletter.
- Schedule a one-day retreat for middle school students and their parents; focus on communication skills between students and parents, including the discussion of sexuality issues. Encourage youth involvement in the planning process.
- Hold a group discussion on a book that helps parents talk to their children about sexuality issues. Rev. Haffner has written two books for parents: "From Diapers to Dating: A Parents Guide to Raising Sexually Healthy Children"

and "Beyond the Big Talk: Every Parent's Guide to Raising Sexually Healthy Teenagers." They are available in paperback and at discount prices in bulk (Newmarket Press, 212-832-3575).

- Partner with local secular organizations to bring parenting experts to the community.

Programs for Youth

Congregations can offer young people adult support, a positive peer group, opportunities for service, and a faith-based foundation for decision-making.

Consider these ideas:

- Provide professional staff and volunteers with initial and ongoing training on adolescent growth and development and adolescent sexuality.
- Encourage youth group participation in community activities related to sexuality. Young people can volunteer at an AIDS hospice or hospital nursery, educate or minister to peers, or staff a community hot line. Community service teaches young people about giving to others. It may also protect them. Teens who volunteer are less likely to become sexually involved or pregnant. Provide opportunities for youth to reflect together on their community service.
- Hold after-school programs at the church, temple, or mosque facility for pre-teens and teenagers. These programs may include sexuality topics or have a primarily recreational purpose. Young people who are involved in after school activities are less likely to become involved in sexual behaviors.
- Launch a peer education program about sexuality issues. Train the high school youth group to provide education and information about sexuality to middle school students and preadolescents. Both groups will benefit.
- Offer sexuality education programs for high school youth during religious school. Many congregations "lose" their adolescents after their coming of age ceremonies. A sexuality education program just might keep them involved.
- If the number of young people is large enough, offer programs by developmental

age. A single youth group is unlikely to meet the developmental needs of all young people. If possible, offer programs for early adolescents (middle school), middle adolescents (9th and 10th grades) and late adolescents (11th and 12th grade). If not, try to have occasional separate activities for the younger and the older teens, and seek additional volunteers to work with youth with differing needs.

- Make certain to address sexuality issues and guidelines for youth retreats, sleep-overs, and camping trips. Be explicit about your expectations for youth behavior, including public displays of affection and private sexual relationships. Involve young people in setting the standards for their behaviors in the group, including clear consequences for infractions of those behaviors. Post standards prominently in the rooms where the youth group meets. Develop those standards each year with each new group of teens.
- Make certain that leaders know about the expectations for their own behavior and how to handle infringements of rules.
- Help youth learn assertiveness skills and provide them with opportunities to explore controversial issues. Making controversial topics a regular part of youth discussions helps young people to understand why they have certain values and beliefs.
- Help young people develop friendship and relationship skills. Encourage them to become friends with people who are different from them.
- Articulate high expectations for the youth in the congregation. Set goals such as to remain free from pregnancy, free from sexually transmitted diseases and to graduate from high school. Motivate the young people in the faith community to accept and work toward these goals.
- Provide mentors for young people. Offer career and educational counseling. Young people need significant adults in their lives in addition to their parents. Young people who are planning for their future are less likely to become involved in high-risk behaviors and are more motivated to delay sexual involvement and childbearing.

- Provide opportunities for young people to participate in the congregation. Young people who are engaged in important activities are less likely to become involved in a range of high risk behaviors, including sexual intercourse. Show young people in the congregation that you value their involvement. Provide intergenerational activities so that youth and adults can develop caring and respectful relationships.
- Keep parents informed and up-to-date on sexuality education efforts. Provide opportunities for parents to review the curricula and materials, meet with the adult leaders, and complete parent/child homework sessions to increase communication about sexuality issues. Seek parental consent for sexuality education programs for youth.

A bibliography of faith-based sexuality curricula follows on page 31.

Education for Adults

Sexuality education is a lifelong process. Make certain the adult education program addresses sexuality issues from the diverse perspectives and needs of the congregation's members.

Consider these ideas:

- Hold intergenerational programs on sexuality issues. Programs for teenagers and adults can provide an opportunity to begin a respectful dialogue about sexuality issues.
- Develop a study group on sexuality for adults in the congregation. This could include reviewing a denominational report or studying some of the sexually themed stories in the Bible.
- Develop support groups for adults on sexuality issues. This could include singles groups, divorce groups, sexual abuse survivors groups, marriage enrichment groups, gay and lesbian support groups, and support groups for parents of gay and lesbians.
- Advocate for sexual justice at the denominational level. Participate in national study groups on sexuality issues such as abortion, homosexuality, stem cell research, and marriage equality. If appropriate, develop congregation policies on these issues.

SCRIPTURE READINGS ON SEXUALITY

This is a partial list of texts for worship or Bible study.

Genesis 1:27-28	Judges 11:37-39	Mark 3:31-34
Genesis 2:18-24	1 Sam 18:1	Luke 7
Genesis 17:11-13	2 Sam 1:26	John 4:16-30
Genesis 29	Song of Solomon	John 8
Genesis 30	Isaiah 62:4-5	1 Corinthians 7, 13
Leviticus 17-26	Ruth 1:1-18	Ephesians 5
Leviticus 18:20	Ecclesiastes 3:5	1 John 2-4
Deuteronomy 24:5	Matthew 19:12	

Liturgy

The majority of clergy in one survey felt they should address sexuality issues from the pulpit.

Consider these possibilities:

- Focus on sexuality issues in worship services. Create services around such themes as sexual justice, HIV/AIDS, sexuality education, sexual abuse prevention, parenting, reproductive choice, the changing family, gender issues, and marriage equality.
- Develop sermons on sexuality issues.
- Use diverse Scripture readings on sexuality, love, and blessed relationships.
- Hold candlelight services to remember people with HIV/AIDS, people who have lost pregnancies, or survivors of abuse.
- Announce the availability of religious marriages for same sex couples, holy union ceremonies or opportunities to sanctify domestic partnerships or civil unions.
- Address sexuality issues in coming-of-age ceremonies. Acknowledge that forming a sexual identity is a key developmental task of adolescence.
- Expand rite of passage ceremonies to include puberty, divorce, remarriage, and adoption services.

The box above provides some examples of scriptural passages to include in worship services on sexuality issues.

Clergy

Many rabbis and pastors did not receive sexuality training in seminary, yet they are called upon almost daily to minister to couples in crisis, survivors of sexual abuse, parents of lesbians and gays, people with HIV, and others struggling with sexuality issues.

Consider these ideas:

- Encourage clergy to seek professional training in sexuality issues.
- Encourage the director of religious education and religious youth workers to obtain training and support on sexuality issues.
- Encourage lay persons to receive sexuality education to supplement the clergy's ministry in sexuality issues.
- Ensure that the clergy can respond to parishioners' individual sexuality needs for counseling.
- Make certain that clergy and lay ministers have access to local sexuality-related referral sites for more information. Reproduce the list of national hotlines on page 52 and post it on the bulletin board and in pastoral counseling offices.