



## AN OPEN LETTER TO RELIGIOUS LEADERS ON ADOLESCENT SEXUALITY

Religious leaders today have a special responsibility to help adolescents achieve moral, spiritual, and sexual health. A new faith-based approach to adolescent sexuality grounded in developing the moral agency of teenagers is urgently needed.

We call for faith communities to move beyond silence about sexuality or a fear and shame-based ethic that is only based on rules and prohibited acts. Young people pay too high a price when those in religious communities ignore their responsibility to help them understand, affirm and embrace their sexuality.

Teenage pregnancies and sexually transmitted diseases affect too many of the nation's young people. They often result from a culture that is over-sexualized and over-commercialized and encourages early sexual experimentation. We have a responsibility both to help young people develop their capacity for moral decision-making and to protect them from the consequences of involvement in developmentally inappropriate sexual behaviors.

Religious institutions serve more teens than any other agency in the community except the public schools, and they are specifically empowered to offer values-based education to children outside of the home. Research demonstrates that participation in a religious setting prepares young people to resist risk-taking behaviors.

Our religious traditions provide guidance to adolescents on making decisions about their sexuality and in coping with the consequences of those decisions. As religious leaders, we have a role to play in helping adolescents understand their evolving sexuality and in helping them make responsible sexual choices, now and in their future.

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### AFFIRMING ADOLESCENT SEXUALITY

We affirm that sexuality is a divinely bestowed blessing at every stage of life. It has the promise to enhance human wholeness and fulfillment but also the potential for misuse, exploitation, and abuse.

Forming a sexual identity is a key developmental task for all adolescents. As young people mature biologically and emotionally into adults, they experience their first erotic feelings and romantic relationships, and confirm their gender identity and sexual orientation. Religious institutions must acknowledge this broader understanding of young people's sexuality, including the differing needs of early, middle, and late adolescents and young people of diverse experiences and orientations.



## ETHICAL SEXUAL DECISION-MAKING FOR ADOLESCENTS

Even as we celebrate the inherent goodness of adolescent sexuality, we acknowledge its risks, consequences and dangers. We affirm that most adolescents are not developmentally ready for mature sexual relationships that include intercourse of any kind. The biological and social sciences inform us that such activities can pose significant biological, social, and emotional risks. The wisdom of religious traditions confirms that a moral sexuality demands self-understanding, respect, and self-discipline. Faith communities can encourage adolescents to delay sexual intimacy until they are physically, cognitively, emotionally, morally, and spiritually ready for the most intimate sexual relationships and their consequences.

Religious institutions must therefore be committed to helping young people develop their capacity for moral discernment and a freely-informed conscience for responsible sexual decision-making. The faith community can be a place where young people receive support and guidance in how to discern their readiness for mature relationships.

Faith communities must recognize, however, that many adolescents will become involved in sexual relationships during their teenage years. Adolescent intimate relationships, like those of adults, should be based on shared personal values, and should be consensual, non-exploitative and non-coercive, honest, mutually pleasurable, and protected against unintended pregnancies and sexually transmitted diseases. All persons, including adolescents, have the right and responsibility to lead lives that express love, justice, mutuality, commitment, consent, and pleasure.



## A CALL TO RELIGIOUS LEADERS

As religious leaders, we want young people to learn about and understand their own sexuality, not primarily from their peers or the media, but from their parents, religious institutions, sacred texts, and school and community programs.

### **Role of Parents and Guardians**

Faith communities must support parents in their role as the primary sexuality educators of their children and adolescents. Religious leaders can assist parents to communicate openly and honestly about sexuality. Congregational programs can help parents understand adolescent sexual development, set limits for their children, and share values in their own homes.

## **Role of Faith Communities**

Faith communities can provide the opportunity for teens to learn and talk about sexuality.

Congregations that foster adolescent sexual health and moral agency:

- Provide an environment where sexuality, intimacy, and relationships are discussed openly and honestly with trained youth leaders.
- Provide age-appropriate and accurate information about sexuality, including its spiritual dimensions, from the particular faith tradition.
- Offer young people support and guidance to explore and develop their own values, attitudes, and sexual decision-making skills, including limit-setting, and how to resist social, media, peer, and partner pressure.
- Encourage young people to involve their parents and other family members in their decisions about relationships and sexuality.
- Recognize the diversity of adolescents in their congregations: 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 abuse.
- Implement policies to protect young people from abuse, harassment, exploitation, and violence, both within the congregation and in the community.
- Refer to sources of sexual health care in the community as needed.
- Maintain an awareness of emerging issues that face adolescents, such as safe use of the Internet.
- Model positive, healthy, and joyful attitudes about human sexuality and relationships.

## **Role of Society**

Our commitment to an ethic of care and justice requires us to be concerned about all of the young people in our communities. Religious leaders can promote a positive view of adolescents and be a prophetic voice on behalf of healthy sexuality in the community.

We urge congregations and religious leaders to work in community coalitions to promote adolescent sexual health through:

- Comprehensive sexuality education that includes teaching about abstinence, contraception, and STD prevention
- Reproductive health care that is affordable, sensitive, and confidential
- Education and employment opportunities that offer young people a sense of purpose and hope for their futures.

We call for religious leaders to speak out against any education that denies young people medically accurate information or requires coercive parental notification and consent for reproductive health services.



## AN AFFIRMATION OF ADOLESCENTS' RIGHTS

As religious leaders, we affirm that young people have the right to:

- Develop their own moral agency in order to help them make informed and responsible decisions about their sexual health and behavior
- Ask any questions they have about sexuality without fear or condemnation
- Receive full and accurate information about their sexuality in the context of the values of their faith
- Affirm their own sexual and gender identity and orientation
- Be welcomed and respected by the faith community regardless of their life circumstances and sexual decisions
- Express their sexuality in ways that are developmentally healthy and life-affirming
- Be treated with respect by leaders and congregants.



## IN CLOSING

We know that people of faith may differ on what young people need. We seek to reach out to those from whom we may be divided to seek what is best for the nation's youth. We call for every family and every faith community to help their adolescents affirm their sexuality with holiness and integrity.

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The Open Letter was developed at a colloquium of theologians sponsored by the Religious Institute on Sexual Morality, Justice, and Healing. Participants included the Rev. Dr. Mariah Britton, Moriah Institute; Alicia Brooks, seminarian, Yale Divinity School; the Rev. Steve Clapp, Christian Community; the Rev. Mary L. Foulke, The Church of St. Luke in the Fields (Episcopal); the Rev. Dr. Larry Greenfield, American Baptist Church of Metro Chicago; the Rev. Debra W. Haffner, Religious Institute on Sexual Morality, Justice, and Healing; Ms. Ann L. Hanson, United Church of Christ; the Rev. Cedric A. Harmon, Americans United; Dr. Kate M. Ott, Religious Institute; Dr. Su Yon Pak, Union Theological Seminary; Rabbi Laura Novak Winer, RJE, Union for Reform Judaism; and the Rev. Dr. Karen-Marie Yust, Union Theological Seminary and Presbyterian School of Christian Education.

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