

Does the Episcopal Church Have a *Right* or a *Responsibility* to Teach People Eight to Eighteen Years of Age About Sex?

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In an article in the April 3, 2000 New York Times, Anne Jarrell reported that pre-teenagers go on dates which not infrequently involve sexual activity including oral sex, mutual masturbation, and nudity.¹ The number of young people engaged in this activity has increased since 1975; in 1997, 17% percent of 12 and 13 year-olds, and 38% of girls and 45% of boys 15 years of age have had intercourse.² An adolescent medicine specialist was quoted as saying that young women often engage in oral sex which they consider “no big deal.” They apparently do not see this activity as sex, “but as safe and fun and a prelude to intercourse.”³ This is of concern to school psychologists because when it comes to oral sex, “the boys are getting it, the girls no.”⁴ This seems to be borne out by the fact that one private middle school with a sex education program that begins in the fifth grade is debating the idea of distributing fruit-flavored condoms for use during oral sex.⁵

The trend to experience sex short of intercourse is related to several factors. Factors preventing intercourse include fear of AIDS and the fact that about one-third of all public schools teach abstinence as the sole contraceptive method. Factors that encourage sexual exploration (other than natural biology) include sexually graphic films and videos, “MTV, lurid rap lyrics, and technosex on the internet.”⁶ Apparently preadolescent and early adolescents also believe that sexual activity short of intercourse carries a smaller risk of sexually transmitted diseases, including AIDS.⁷ Psychologists are concerned about increasingly younger people engaging in sexual activity

¹ Anne Jarrell. “The Face of Teenage Sex Grows Younger.” *New York Times*. 3 April 2000. sec. B, 1. (Attached)

² Jarrell, Sec. B, 8.

³ Jarrell, Sec. B, 8

⁴ Jarrell, Sec. B, 8

⁵ Jarrell, Sec. B, 8

⁶ Jarrell, Sec. B, 8

⁷ Jarrell, Sec. B, 8

because “most young teenagers cannot handle the profound feelings that go with early sex” and may pursue bodily pleasure with such casualness that the act(s) become mechanical and dehumanizing; later in life such youngsters may have trouble forming relationships.⁸

Given that for a number of reasons, sexual activity is occurring in more young people than ever before, and granted that such activity is medically dangerous as well as potentially psychologically damaging to our youth, does the Church have a *right* or *responsibility* to enter this arena in order to provide sex education, which is what most experts agree is needed.⁹ The term “right” implies something that members of the community agree is inalienable; privileges or powers that cannot be infringed upon.¹⁰ “Rights” often refer to the claims of individuals within a society to specific freedoms or entitlements (such as civil rights). If this definition is extended to institutions, then society has to assign that privilege to the Church. Because of the nature of western liberalism and the strong sense of the autonomous self, and since Christian denominations have such widely disparate beliefs concerning contraception, it seems highly unlikely that mutual agreement could be achieved that would endow any Christian group with the “right” to teach sex education in any kind of public forum. However, it is possible that subaltern groups may find agreement; those groups would most likely be those within a given denomination or congregation within a denomination. However, that is not to say that the Episcopal Church should remain silent on the issue. Temple argues that “the Church must announce Christian principles and point out where the existing social order at any time is in conflict with them.” Although elaboration of Christian values must also be done in ways that enhance personal virtue.¹¹

⁸ Jarrell, Sec. B, 8

⁹ Dr. Eva Siegler said, “We shouldn’t wait to talk to them about AIDS, sex and violence until they are twelve.” Other psychologists are encouraging programs that provide pre-teenagers with opportunities to explore their feelings and digest the sexual messages they receive.” Quoted in Anne Jarrell. “The Face of Teenage Sex Grows Younger.” *New York Times*. 3 April 2000. sec. B, 8.

¹⁰ John E. Smith, “Rights.” In *The Westminster Dictionary of Christian Ethics*, eds. James Childress and John Macquarrie. (Philadelphia, PA: Westminster Press, 1967), 556.

¹¹ Susan Dolan-Henderson. Presentation at the American Academy of Religion, November, 1995.

Given that the Church cannot assume the right to teach sex education, does the Church have a *responsibility* to do so? At the heart of the Christian tradition is the relational norm expressed in the Baptismal covenant and in the Gospel of Mark: the first commandment is to “love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength” and the second is to “love your neighbor as yourself.” (Mark 12:30-31; NIV). Christian responsibility demands honor and respect of all persons. Although the Christian norm for sexual relations within marriage presupposes a loving relationship,^{12,13} it does not necessarily follow that all loving relationships must be sexual, or that all sexual relationships are by definition loving ones. Ms. Jarrell’s article implies that young people have difficulty making these distinctions. The function of sex is not only to produce children, but also to enhance the loving interpersonal relationship between partners.^{14,15,16} Ms Jarrell’s article suggests that not only is sexual activity among pre-teenagers rising, it has taken on a very self-gratifying, hedonistic quality that debases Christian morality. William Temple pointedly comments that “only the love of God working upon [a person’s] conscience, heart, and will can set [the person] free from self-centeredness.”¹⁷ By exercising its responsibility (not its right) to encourage Christians to fulfill their Baptismal vows, the Church can (and must) re-establish in its youth a sense of morality reflecting the cardinal and theological virtues. Thus, it is a duty of the Church to become involved in sex education. What would such a program look like? Kenneth Kirk stated that through the sacraments of the Church and the “divine grace that they convey, [the church can achieve] the fullest and highest means of

¹² Robert L. Stivers, Christine E. Gudorf, Alice Frazer Evans, Robert A. Evans. *Christian Ethics: A Case Method Approach*, 2nd ed. (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1994), 237.

¹³ Lewis Smedes. “Respect for Covenant: The Unexplored Connections.” In *From Christ to the World: Introductory Readings in Christian Ethics*, ed. Wayne G. Boulton, Thomas D. Kennedy, and Allen Verhey. (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1994), 351.

¹⁴ Robert L. Stivers, Christine E. Gudorf, Alice Frazer Evans, Robert A. Evans. *Ibid.*, 238.

¹⁵ Vigen Guroian. “An Ethic of Marriage and Family.” In *From Christ to the World: Introductory Readings in Christian Ethics*, ed. Wayne G. Boulton, Thomas D. Kennedy, and Allen Verhey. (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1994), 324.

¹⁶ Beverly W. Harrison. “Misogyny and Homophobia: The Unexplored Connections.” In *From Christ to the World: Introductory Readings in Christian Ethics*, ed. Wayne G. Boulton, Thomas D. Kennedy, and Allen Verhey. (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1994), 341.

¹⁷ William Temple. *Christianity and Social Order*. (New York: Penguin Books, 1942), 465.

putting such ideals into practice.”¹⁸ Christian sex education would result in the development of an ideal that would “enshrine an element of otherworldliness and ... self-denial.” As a national priority the Episcopal Church should teach comprehensive sex education together with the psychology of adolescence in the context of Christian values to provide young people with the virtues needed to arm themselves and to act responsibly toward each other. Such teaching would engender feelings of genuine intimacy, mutuality, and security.¹⁹

¹⁸ Kenneth E. Kirk. *Some Principles of Moral Theology and their Application*. (London, England: Longmans, Green and Co., 1920), 37.

¹⁹ Beverly W. Harrison. *Ibid.*, 340.

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