
A TIME TO EVERY PURPOSE

The Language of Sexual Morality, Justice, and Healing

Religious Institute on Sexual Morality, Justice, and Healing



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FOREWORD

For too long, conservative voices have dominated the religious discourse surrounding abortion, sex education, lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender rights, and other issues of sexual justice. For religious progressives, offering an effective countervoice starts with having the right language—theologically informed, scientifically grounded arguments that reflect a different understanding of how our faith embraces our sexuality.

That is the vision of the Religious Institute on Sexual Morality, Justice, and Healing. And that is the intent of *A Time to Every Purpose*.

In 1999, a group of 20 theologians drafted a seminal statement—*The Religious Declaration on Sexual Morality, Justice, and Healing*—that advanced a new sexual ethic, “focused on personal relationships and social justice rather than particular sexual acts.” It called on the nation’s religious leaders to help put an end to sexual and social injustice. Today, the *Religious Declaration* has been endorsed by thousands of clergy, theologians and religious educators from more than 50 faith traditions. It is the founding document of the Religious Institute, which was created in 2001 to promote the *Religious Declaration’s* aspiration of creating sexually healthy congregations and a sexually just society.

Over the last six years, the Religious Institute has convened colloquia of prominent theologians and clergy from various traditions to address specific issues where progressive religious voices are urgently needed. We have developed a series of *Open Letters to Religious Leaders*, intended to help them address sexual and reproductive justice in their congregations and become advocates in the public square.

Together, the *Religious Declaration* and *Open Letters* constitute an emerging theology of sexual justice that recognizes sexuality as central to our humanity and our spirituality. They articulate a prophetic call for social action, including:

- The need for comprehensive, age-appropriate sexuality education throughout the lifespan. (*Open Letter to Religious Leaders about Sex Education*, 2002)
- Removing the barriers that exclude same-sex couples from the rights and responsibilities, the joy and enrichment of marriage. (*Open Letter to Religious Leaders on Marriage Equality*, 2004)

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- Advocacy for women’s moral agency and reproductive rights, including contraception, prenatal care, adoption and abortion services. (*Open Letter to Religious Leaders on Abortion as a Moral Decision*, 2005)
 - A responsible approach to adolescent sexuality that recognizes the moral capacity of adolescents and the formation of sexual identity as a key developmental task. (*Open Letter to Religious Leaders on Adolescent Sexuality*, 2006)
 - Support for full inclusion of lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people in faith communities and society. (*Open Letter to Religious Leaders on Sexual and Gender Diversity*, 2007)
 - Awareness, dialogue and education to prepare religious leaders to counsel and advocate for safe, effective and accessible reproductive technologies. (*Open Letter to Religious Leaders on Assisted Reproductive Technologies*, 2008)

A Time to Every Purpose combines the *Religious Declaration* and the six *Open Letters* into a valuable new resource for religious leaders, faith communities and advocates of sexual justice. In addition to the declaration and the letters themselves, we have provided facts and figures that point to the economic justice issues at stake, and to the urgent need for policies and social action. We offer responsive readings that you may adapt to your own religious tradition and use in your services.

Each section of this publication poses questions for group study and individual reflection. Because the language of sexual orientation, gender identity and reproductive health can be puzzling, we have provided a glossary of terms beginning on page 66, as well as lists of resources for additional information, counsel and support. All of these and more resources are available online, including reproductions of the *Open Letters* and responsive readings that you can download, print and insert in your worship programs or bulletins. (See www.religiousinstitute.org.)

We hope that the language, data and other information offered here will inform your sermons, inspire public witness and promote congregational action. There is indeed “a time to every purpose under heaven,” and we believe that *now* is the time for sexual justice, in our faith communities and society at large.

The funding for *A Time to Every Purpose* was provided by the Ford Foundation. We are grateful for their generous support of our work. We also thank the foundations and organizations we acknowledge on page 69, who have enabled us to create the *Religious Declaration* and the *Open Letters*. Finally, we thank the more than 60 theologians,

ethicists and clergy who contributed their time, their intellect and their hearts to the prophetic messages that follow. You will find their names after the letters to which they contributed.

The Religious Institute is blessed to have a growing network of supporters who participate in our ministry. We hope *A Time to Every Purpose* will take us a step closer to a world where all may celebrate our sexuality with holiness and integrity.

Rev. Debra W. Haffner
Director
Religious Institute on Sexual Morality,
Justice, and Healing

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Over the past quarter century at least, virtually the only religious voice heard in public discussions of sexuality issues was a conservative one. Progressive religious leaders were too often silent, or their voices unheard, on questions of sexual ethics and justice. The Religious Declaration on Sexual Morality, Justice, and Healing was written to identify the issues and articulate the theological foundations that would constitute a progressive religious platform for sexual justice for the 21st century.

RELIGIOUS DECLARATION ON SEXUAL MORALITY, JUSTICE, AND HEALING

Sexuality is God's life-giving and life-fulfilling gift. We come from diverse religious communities to recognize sexuality as central to our humanity and as integral to our spirituality. We are speaking out against the pain, brokenness, oppression, and loss of meaning that many experience about their sexuality.

Our faith traditions celebrate the goodness of creation, including our bodies and our sexuality. We sin when this sacred gift is abused or exploited. However, the great promise of our traditions is love, healing, and restored relationships.

Our culture needs a sexual ethic focused on personal relationships and social justice rather than particular sexual acts. All persons have the right and responsibility to lead sexual lives that express love, justice, mutuality, commitment, consent, and pleasure. Grounded in respect for the body and for the vulnerability that intimacy brings, this ethic fosters physical, emotional, and spiritual health. It accepts no double standards and applies to all persons, without regard to sex, gender, color, age, bodily condition, marital status, or sexual orientation.

God hears the cries of those who suffer from the failure of religious communities to address sexuality. We are called today to see, hear, and respond to the suffering caused by violence against women and sexual minorities, the HIV pandemic, unsustainable population growth and over-consumption, and the commercial exploitation of sexuality.

Faith communities must therefore be truth seeking, courageous, and just. We call for:

- Theological reflection that integrates the wisdom of excluded, often silenced peoples, and insights about sexuality from medicine, social science, the arts and humanities.
- Full inclusion of women and sexual minorities in congregational life, including their ordination and the blessing of same-sex unions.
- Sexuality counseling and education throughout the lifespan from trained religious leaders.
- Support for those who challenge sexual oppression and who work for justice within their congregations and denomination.

Faith communities must also advocate for sexual and spiritual wholeness in society.

We call for:

- Lifelong, age appropriate sexuality education in schools, seminaries and community settings.
- A faith-based commitment to sexual and reproductive rights, including access to voluntary contraception, abortion, and HIV/STD prevention and treatment.
- Religious leadership in movements to end sexual and social injustice.

God rejoices when we celebrate our sexuality with holiness and integrity. We, the undersigned, invite our colleagues and faith communities to join us in promoting sexual morality, justice, and healing.

* * *

The Religious Declaration on Sexual Morality, Justice, and Healing was developed at a colloquium of theologians in 1999 and funded by The Geraldine R. Dodge Foundation, The Ford Foundation, and The Sister Fund. Participants included Rev. Dr. John Buehrens, Unitarian Universalist Association; Rev. Dr. Kelly Brown Douglas, Howard University; Rev. Dr. Marvin Ellison, Bangor Theological Seminary; Rev. Dr. Marie Fortune, Center for the Prevention of Sexual and Domestic Violence; Rev. Dr. Larry Greenfield, American Baptist Church of Metro Chicago; Dr. Christine Gudorf, Florida International University; Debra W. Haffner, Religious Institute on Sexual Morality, Justice, and Healing; Rev. Dr. Beverly Harrison, Union Theological Seminary; Rev. Faith Adams Johnson, United Church of Christ Board of Homeland Ministries; Frances Kissling, Catholics for a Free Choice; Rabbi Dr. Peter Knobel, Beth Emet The Free Synagogue; Rev. Dr. Joe Leonard, National Council of Churches of Christ; Dr. Daniel

Maguire, Religious Coalition on Population, Reproductive Health, and Ethics; Rev. Dr. James Nelson, United Theological Seminary; Daniel Perreten, Park Ridge Center for Health, Faith, and Ethics; Rev. Dr. George Regas, The Regas Institute; The Right Rev. David Richards, Center for Sexuality and Religion; Rev. Dr. Rosetta Ross, United Theological Seminary; Rev. Dr. William Stayton, Widener University; Rev. Carlton Veazey, Religious Coalition for Reproductive Choice.

RELIGIOUS SUPPORT FOR THE *RELIGIOUS DECLARATION*

- More than 3,500 religious leaders from all 50 U.S. states and 14 countries have endorsed the *Religious Declaration on Sexual Morality, Justice, and Healing*.
- Endorsers include religious leaders from more than 50 faith traditions, including: American Baptist Churches in the USA, African Methodist Episcopal Church, Buddhism, Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints, Church of the Brethren, Community of Christ (Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints), Episcopal Church (USA), Hinduism, Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), The Religious Society of Friends (Quakers), Reconstructionist Rabbinical Association, Reformed Church in America, Roman Catholic Church, Seventh-Day Adventist Church, Southern Baptist Convention, Union of Reform Judaism, Unitarian Universalist Association, United Church of Christ, United Methodist Church, United Synagogue of Conservative Judaism, Unity Church, Unity Fellowship Churches and the Universal Fellowship of Metropolitan Community Churches.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

1. What does it mean that sexuality is one of our most life-giving and life-affirming gifts?
2. How has sexuality been a blessing in your life? How have you experienced your sexuality as broken? How have you experienced it as healing?
3. Does the sexual ethic presented in the *Religious Declaration* make sense for your own life? How would it need to be modified to become a personal ethic?
4. What are your denomination's positions and policies on sexuality issues? Sexual orientation? Gender identity and expression? Sexuality education? Sexual harassment? HIV/AIDS? Abortion? Do you agree with them? Do they go far

enough, or do they go too far? Are these positions or policies reflected in your congregation's life?

FURTHER READING

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**A RESPONSIVE READING BASED ON
*THE RELIGIOUS DECLARATION ON SEXUAL MORALITY,
JUSTICE, AND HEALING***

Sexuality is God's life-giving and life-fulfilling gift.

We celebrate our sexuality as central to our humanity and as integral to our spirituality.

We suffer because of the pain, brokenness, oppression and loss of meaning that too many experience about their sexuality.

We celebrate the goodness of creation, our bodies and our sexuality.

We suffer when this sacred gift is abused or exploited.

We celebrate sexuality that expresses love, justice, mutuality, commitment, consent and pleasure.

We suffer because of discrimination against people because of sex, gender, color, age, bodily condition, marital status or sexual orientation.

We celebrate when we are truth seeking, courageous and just.

We suffer because of violence against women and sexual minorities and the HIV pandemic.

We celebrate the full inclusion of women and sexual minorities in our congregation's life.

We suffer because of unsustainable population growth and overconsumption, and the commercial exploitation of sexuality.

We celebrate those who challenge sexual oppression and who work for sexual justice.

Together: God rejoices when we celebrate our sexuality with holiness and integrity.

The Open Letter to Religious Leaders about Sex Education reinforces scriptural and theological commitments to truth-telling in calling for “full and honest education about sexual and reproductive health.” This Open Letter was published in 2002, at about the midpoint of a decade-long federal government commitment to abstinence-only-until-marriage programs. By 2008, several studies had demonstrated that abstinence-only programs are less effective than comprehensive sexuality education in promoting responsible sexual behavior among young people. By mid-year, 25 states had elected to turn down federal funding for abstinence-only programs, marking a shift toward a sounder approach to sex education in public schools.

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 in 2002, sponsored by the Religious Institute on Sexual Morality, Justice, and Healing and funded by Planned Parenthood of New York. Participants included Rev. Mark Bigelow, Congregational Church of Huntington, Long Island; Rev. Dr. John Buehrens, Unitarian Universalist Association; Rev. Dr. Ignacio Castuera, Pacific Palisades United Methodist Church; Rev. Steve Clapp, Christian Community; Rev. Dr. Marvin 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.
- Many faith-based organizations are members of the National Coalition to Support Sexuality Education, including: American Jewish Congress • Catholics for Choice • Christian Community • Jewish Reconstructionist Federation • National Council of Jewish Women • The Network of Spiritual Progressives • Office of Family Ministries and Human Sexuality of the National Council of Churches of Christ • Protestants for the Common Good • Religious Action Center for Reform Judaism • Religious Coalition for Reproductive Choice • Unitarian Universalist Association • United Church of Christ, Justice and Witness Ministries • Universal Fellowship of Metropolitan Community Churches • Women's Alliance for Theology, Ethics, and Ritual (WATER) • Young Women's Christian Association of the USA (*See the full list of over 140 supporting organizations at www.ncsse.org.*)
- More than 12 faith traditions publish religious education curricula that address sexuality issues, including the Church of the Brethren, the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, the Union for Reform Judaism, the Episcopal Church, the United Church of Christ and the Unitarian Universalist Association.
- Ten religious traditions 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 (USA) • Evangelical Lutheran Church of America • Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) • Reformed Church in America • Union for Reform Judaism • Unitarian Universalist Association • United Church of Christ • United Methodist Church

SEXUALITY EDUCATION IN THE U.S.

- From 1995 to 2002, reports of formal instruction about birth control methods declined among boys (from 81% to 66%) and girls (from 87% to 70%). This, combined with increases in reports of abstinence-only education among males (from 74% to 83%), resulted in a lower proportion of teenagers' overall receiving formal instruction about both abstinence and birth control methods (males, 65% to 59%; females, 84% to 65%), and a higher proportion of teenagers' receiving instruction only about abstinence (males, 9% to 24%; females, 8% to 21%).¹

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- According to a review of sexuality education programs, comprehensive sexuality education programs can delay sexual intercourse, reduce risky sexual behavior, increase use of contraception, and improve parent-child communication. Rigorous reviews of abstinence-only programs show that most of these programs have no impact on the long-term sexual behavior of teens.²
 - A 2004 investigation by the minority staff of the House Government Reform Committee concluded that of 13 abstinence-only-until-marriage curricula, only two of the curricula were accurate. Eleven others contained unproven claims and subjective conclusions or outright falsehoods regarding the effectiveness of contraceptives, gender traits and when life begins.³
 - A federally funded evaluation of four abstinence-only-until-marriage education programs showed that youth enrolled in the programs were no more likely than those not in the programs to delay sexual initiation, have fewer sexual partners or abstain entirely from sex.⁴

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²Douglas Kirby, *Emerging Answers: Research Findings on Programs to Reduce Teen Pregnancy and Sexually Transmitted Diseases* (Washington, DC: National Campaign to Prevent Teen Pregnancy, 2007), 115–125, http://www.thenationalcampaign.org/EA2007/EA2007_full.pdf.

³Henry A. Waxman, *The Content of Federally Funded Abstinence-Only Education Programs* (Washington, DC: U.S. House of Representatives, Committee on Government Reform, 2004), <http://oversight.house.gov/documents/20041201102153-50247.pdf>.

⁴Christopher Trenholm, et al., *Impacts of Four Title V, Section 510 Abstinence Education Programs Final Report* (Princeton, NJ: Mathematica Policy Research, Inc.; U.S. Dept. Health & Human Services, Office of the Assistant Secretary for Planning and Evaluation, 2007), <http://aspe.hhs.gov/hsp/abstinence07>.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

1. What might it mean to support a "lifespan approach to sexuality education"? How can your faith community enhance education for children, teenagers, young adults, middle-age adults and seniors?

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2. Why is it important that religious denominations support comprehensive sexuality education in public schools?
 3. What values are central to the messages your congregation will communicate about sexuality? How do these messages change based on the age of the learners?
 4. What are some first steps your congregation can take to provide or enhance the sexuality education offered in our congregation? To support comprehensive sexuality education in public schools?

FURTHER READING

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A RESPONSIVE READING BASED ON THE *OPEN LETTER TO RELIGIOUS LEADERS ABOUT SEX EDUCATION*

We are committed to the spiritual, emotional and physical health of all people.

We seek to develop the wisdom, values and morality that promote our sexual well-being.

As people of faith committed to justice, we speak out for comprehensive sexuality education for the young people in our community.

Our commitment to truth-telling commands us to seek full and honest sexuality education.

Our young people struggle in a culture that models sexuality without responsibility. They need to know there is a time to embrace, and a time to refrain from embracing.

We will not leave our young people alone on this journey.

As people of faith, we commit to education through the lifespan, so that all may affirm the goodness of creation, our bodies and our sexuality.

We will not leave anyone alone on this journey.

We call for sexuality education that respects the whole person, honors diverse values and promotes ethical human relationships.

We pray that all will celebrate sexuality with joy, holiness and integrity – with understanding, respect and responsibility.

Only two states—Massachusetts in 2004, and Connecticut in 2008—have authorized civil marriage for same-sex couples. Seven other states and the District of Columbia allow for civil unions or other forms of spousal rights for same-sex couples, and debates are underway in the legislatures and courts of several more. Although the Central Conference of American Rabbis and the Unitarian Universalist Association have supported full marriage rights for same-sex couples since 1996, and others have joined them, many faith traditions are still grappling with the issue. The Open Letter to Religious Leaders on Marriage Equality provides a faith-based argument for justice, based on the biblical call to love, compassion and inclusion.

OPEN LETTER TO RELIGIOUS LEADERS ON MARRIAGE EQUALITY

As religious leaders, we are committed to promoting the well-being and moral and spiritual integrity of persons and society. Today, we are called to join the public discussion about marriage equality. There are strong civil liberties arguments for ending the exclusion of same-sex couples from the legal institution of marriage. Here we invite you to consider religious foundations for securing the freedom to marry for same-sex couples. Marriage equality is about more than gaining equal access to the legal protections and responsibilities of marriage. It raises fundamental questions about justice and power, intimate relationships, sexuality and gender, respect for diverse families, and the role of religion as well as the state in these matters.



AFFIRMING SEXUALITY AND THE CENTRALITY OF RELATIONSHIP

Our religious traditions celebrate that humans are created in and for relationship and that sexuality is God's life-giving and life-fulfilling gift. We affirm the dignity and worth of all persons and recognize sexual difference as a blessed part of our endowment. There can be no justification for discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation or gender identity. As religious leaders, we believe that all persons have the right to lead lives that express love, justice, mutuality, commitment, consent and pleasure, including but not limited to civil and religious marriage.



AFFIRMING MARRIAGE AND FAMILY

From a religious perspective, marriage is about entering into a holy covenant and making a commitment with another person to share life's joys and sorrows. Marriage is valued because it creates stable, committed relationships; provides a means to share economic resources; and nurtures the individual, the couple, and children. Good marriages benefit the community and express the religious values of long-term

commitment, generativity, and faithfulness. In terms of these religious values, there is no difference in marriages between a man and a woman, two men, or two women. Moreover, as our traditions affirm, where there is love, the sacred is in our midst.



ALWAYS REFORMING

Marriage is an evolving civil and religious institution. In the past, marriage was primarily about property and procreation whereas today the emphasis is on egalitarian partnership, companionship, and love. In the past, neither the state nor most religions recognized divorce and remarriage, interracial marriage, or the equality of the marriage partners. These understandings changed, and rightly so, in greater recognition of the humanity of persons and their moral and civil rights. Today, we are called to embrace another change, this time the freedom of same-sex couples to marry.



SCRIPTURE AND TRADITION

The biblical call to justice and compassion (love neighbor as self) provides the mandate for marriage equality. Justice as right relationship seeks both personal and communal well-being. It is embodied in interpersonal relationships and institutional structures, including marriage. Justice seeks to eliminate marginalization for reasons of race, gender, sexual orientation, or economic status. We find support for marriage equality in scripture and tradition in their overriding messages about love, justice, and inclusion of the marginalized. Even so, we cannot rely exclusively on scripture for understanding marriage today. For example, biblical texts that encourage celibacy, forbid divorce, or require women to be subservient to their husbands are no longer authoritative. At the same time, there are also many biblical models for blessed relationships beyond one man and one woman. Indeed, scripture neither commends a single marriage model nor commands all to marry, but rather calls for love and justice in all relationships.



MARRIAGE EQUALITY SUPPORTS STRONG FAMILIES

In our nation, families take many forms. All families should be supported in building stable, empowering, and respectful relationships. Marriage equality is a means to strengthen families and is especially beneficial to children raised by same-sex couples. The state should not deny same-sex couples access to civil marriage. Many such couples are in long-term committed relationships and yet remain without legal and, in many cases, religious recognition. Conversely, because the emotional and spiritual bond of marriage is precious, the state should not compel anyone to marry (e.g., in order to qualify for public assistance).



RELIGIOUS PLURALISM

The United States is one of the most diverse religious countries in the world. No single religious voice can speak for all traditions on issues of sexuality and marriage, nor should government take sides on religious differences. Therefore, religious groups must have the right to discern who is eligible for marriage in their own tradition. In addition, all clergy should be free to solemnize marriages without state interference. We also note that many religious traditions already perform marriages and unions for same-sex couples. We call on the state neither to recognize only certain religious marriages as legal nor to penalize those who choose not to marry. The benefits and protections offered by the state to individuals and families should be available according to need, not marital status. The best way to protect our nation's precious religious freedom is to respect the separation of church and state when it comes to equality under the law.



A HIGHER STANDARD

We call on religious and civic leaders to promote good marriages based on responsibility, equity, and love, without restrictions based on the biological sex, procreative potential, or sexual orientation of the partners.

Good marriages:

- are committed to the mutual care and fulfillment of both partners
- increase the capacity of the individuals to contribute to the common good
- assure that all children are wanted, loved, and nurtured
- are free of threats, violence, exploitation, and intimidation.



IN CLOSING

The faiths we affirm challenge us to speak and act for justice for all who seek to express their love in the commitment of marriage. Some people of faith differ with us; others may be undecided. To each and all, we reach out and seek to promote what is best for individuals, couples, families, children, and society. Our commitment is not only for the legal rights of some, but relational justice for all.

* * *

The *Open Letter* was developed at a colloquium of theologians in 2004, sponsored by the Religious Institute on Sexual Morality, Justice, and Healing and funded by Freedom to Marry. Participants included: Rabbi Dr. Rebecca Alpert, Temple University; Rev. Steve Clapp, Christian Community; Rev. Dr. Marvin Ellison, Bangor Theological Seminary; Rev. Dr. Larry Greenfield, Protestants for the Common Good; Rev. Debra W. Haffner,

Religious Institute on Sexual Morality, Justice, and Healing; Dr. Mary Hunt, Women's Alliance for Theology, Ethics and Ritual (WATER); Rev. Barbara Lundblad, Union Theological Seminary; Rev. Michael Schuenemeyer, United Church of Christ Wider Church Ministries; Rev. Dr. Traci West, Drew University.

RELIGIOUS SUPPORT FOR MARRIAGE EQUALITY

Many denominations are considering their policies on marriage, holy unions and the legal right to marry. As of November 2008:

- More than 2,250 ordained religious leaders, including priests, bishops, ministers, rabbis, imams, and theologians from every state in the country, the District of Columbia and Puerto Rico, have endorsed the *Open Letter to Religious Leaders on Marriage Equality*.
- Several faith traditions have policies that support full inclusion of lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) persons, including marriage for same-sex couples. These include:
Alliance for Jewish Renewal • Central Conference of American Rabbis/Union for Reform Judaism • Ecumenical Catholic Church • Reconstructionist Rabbinical Association/Jewish Reconstructionist Federation • Unitarian Universalist Association • United Church of Christ • Unity Fellowship Churches • Universal Fellowship of Metropolitan Community Churches
- Other traditions allow clergy to perform blessings or union ceremonies for same-sex couples, including:
American Baptist Churches in the USA • Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) • Episcopal Church (USA) • Evangelical Lutheran Church in America • Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) • several groups of the Religious Society of Friends (Quakers) • United Synagogue of Conservative Judaism

In these cases, authority is not typically denomination-wide but rests with individual clergy, congregations or local governing bodies. These ceremonies are not understood to be equivalent to marriage and in most cases, it is prohibited to use the word "marriage" in association with them.

- Several denominations have endorsed the rights of same-sex couples to legally marry. In 1996, the Unitarian Universalist Association passed a resolution in support of marriage equality. The same year, the Central Conference of American Rabbis passed a resolution supporting the "right of gay and lesbian couples to share fully and equally in the rights of civil marriage." In 2005, the General Synod of the

United Church of Christ voted overwhelmingly to endorse full civil and religious marriage equality for same-sex couples.

- Many religious institutions have publicly opposed federal and state efforts to deny marriage equality. In 2004, over two dozen denominations and religious groups signed a joint letter to Congress urging the defeat of the Federal Marriage Amendment, which would have written marriage discrimination into the U.S. Constitution. Among the signatories were:
The Alliance of Baptists • American Friends Service Committee (Quaker) • American Jewish Committee • Central Conference of American Rabbis, Episcopal Church (USA) • Jewish Reconstructionist Federation • Evangelical Lutheran Church in America • National Council of Jewish Women • National Sikh Center • The Interfaith Alliance • Union for Reform Judaism • Unitarian Universalist Association • United Church of Christ

MARRIAGE EQUALITY IN THE U.S.

- Among the states, only Massachusetts and Connecticut allow same-sex couples to marry. New York and Rhode Island recognize same-sex marriages legally performed elsewhere.¹ In California, marriage for same-sex couples was authorized by the state supreme court in May 2008. These rights were eliminated in November 2008 when voters approved a change in the state constitution to provide that “only a marriage between a man and a woman is valid or recognized in California.”²
- States with civil union laws include Connecticut, New Hampshire, New Jersey and Vermont. Limited or full domestic partnership benefits are offered in the District of Columbia, Hawaii, Maine, Maryland, Oregon and Washington.³
- Belgium, Canada, the Netherlands, Norway, South Africa and Spain allow same-sex couples to marry. These marriages are not recognized by the U.S. government.⁴
- Three-quarters (74%) of lesbians, gay men and bisexuals report that they would like to marry legally one day and half (49%) would like to adopt children.⁵
- Same-sex couples reside in at least 99.3 percent of all U.S. counties, and there are same-sex couples with children in at least 96 percent of all U.S. counties.⁶

MARRIAGE EQUALITY AND ECONOMIC JUSTICE

- Without the right to marry, same-sex couples are ineligible for any of the 1,138 marriage benefits conferred by federal law, including Social Security benefits, federal tax benefits, veterans' benefits, and civilian and military service benefits.⁷ Nor are they eligible for benefits conferred by state law. Civil unions and domestic partnerships do not provide the same legal and economic security and protections as civil marriage.⁸
- The surviving partner in same-sex couples potentially pays tens of thousands of dollars in taxes when he or she inherits a retirement plan from an unmarried partner. Married spouses in the same situation are not taxed.⁹
- People in unmarried couples are two to three times more likely to be uninsured than people who are married, mainly because of their exclusion from employer-provided plans.¹⁰
- An employee with a domestic partner who receives employer-provided health coverage pays 8% more in taxes because he or she is taxed on the value of the partner's benefits.¹¹

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QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

1. How have understandings of marriage evolved since Scripture was written? What aspects of marriage do you consider timeless?
2. How do you feel about marriage equality for same-sex couples? Should your faith community offer marriage ceremonies? Why or why not?
3. What is the difference between civil unions and marriage? Why would some people support civil unions but reserve marriage only for a man and a woman? Why is the word "marriage" important?
4. What are some concerns people of faith might have about the restriction of civil marriage as a civil right for LGBT people? How does this issue relate to the separation of church and state?

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A RESPONSIVE READING BASED ON THE *OPEN LETTER TO RELIGIOUS LEADERS ON MARRIAGE EQUALITY*

We believe that humans are created in and for relationship and that sexuality is a life-giving and life-fulfilling gift.

We believe that all persons have the right to lead lives that express love, justice, mutuality, commitment, consent and pleasure.

Marriage is a holy covenant and a commitment to another person to share life's joys and sorrows.

All families must be supported in building stable, empowering and respectful relationships.

Our commitment to justice challenges us to speak and act for all who seek to express their love in the commitment of marriage.

True relational justice requires religious and civil rights for all.

All: Where there is love, the sacred is in our midst.

At least 35 million American women—one in three—have had abortions. Almost half of all pregnancies in the U.S. are unintended. The pastoral needs of these women and their families go beyond the moral foundations of abortion. They also involve the responsibility of faith communities and civil society to provide the counseling, education and access to health services that enable all people to achieve spiritual, emotional and physical wholeness. The Open Letter to Religious Leaders on Abortion as a Moral Decision affirms that “the sanctity of human life is best upheld when we assure that it is not created carelessly.”

OPEN LETTER TO RELIGIOUS LEADERS ON ABORTION AS A MORAL DECISION

As religious leaders, we are committed to supporting people’s efforts to achieve spiritual, emotional, and physical well-being, including their reproductive and sexual health. We assist women and families confronted with unintended pregnancies or pregnancies that can no longer be carried to term. We are committed to social justice, mindful of the 46 million women worldwide who have an abortion each year, almost half in dangerous and illegal situations. We seek to create a world where abortion is safe, legal, accessible, and rare. Millions of people ground their moral commitment to the right to choose in their religious beliefs. While there are strong public health and human rights arguments for supporting the right of women to safe and legal abortion, here we invite you to consider the religious foundations for affirming abortion as a morally justifiable decision.



AFFIRMING WOMEN’S MORAL AGENCY

Abortion is always a serious moral decision. It can uphold and protect the life, health, and future of the woman, her partner, and the family. We affirm women as moral agents who have the capacity, right and responsibility to make the decision as to whether or not abortion is justified in their specific circumstances. That decision is best made when it includes a well-informed conscience, serious reflection, insights from her faith and values, and consultation with a caring partner, family members, and spiritual counselor. Men have a moral obligation to acknowledge and support women’s decision-making.



RESPECT FOR LIFE

Our religious traditions affirm that life is sacred. Our faiths celebrate the divinely bestowed blessings of generating life and assuring that life can be sustained and nurtured. Religious traditions have different beliefs on the value of fetal life, often

according greater value as fetal development progresses. Science, medicine, law, and philosophy contribute to this understanding. However, we uphold the teaching of many religious traditions: the health and life of the woman must take precedence over the life of the fetus. The sanctity of human life is best upheld when we assure that it is not created carelessly. It is precisely because life and parenthood are so precious that no woman should be coerced to carry a pregnancy to term. We support responsible procreation, the widespread availability of contraception, prenatal care and intentional parenting.



SCRIPTURE

Scripture neither condemns nor prohibits abortion. It does, however, call us to act compassionately and justly when facing difficult moral decisions. Scriptural commitment to the most marginalized means that pregnancy, childbearing, and abortion should be safe for all women. Scriptural commitment to truth-telling means women must have accurate information as they make their decisions.



MORAL IMPERATIVE FOR ACCESS

The ability to choose an abortion should not be compromised by economic, educational, class or marital status, age, race, geographic location or inadequate information. Current measures that limit women's access to abortion services—by denying public funds for low-income women; coercing parental consent and notification as contrasted with providing resources for parental and adolescent counseling; denying international family planning assistance to agencies in developing countries that offer women information about pregnancy options; and banning medical procedures—are punitive and do nothing to promote moral decision-making. When there is a conflict between the conscience of the provider and the woman, the institution delivering the services has an obligation to assure that the woman's conscience and decision will be respected and that she has access to reproductive health care, either directly or through referral.

We condemn physical and verbal violence and harassment directed against abortion clinics, their staffs, and their clients. We must work together to reduce unintended and unwanted pregnancies and address the circumstances that result in the decision to have an abortion. Poverty, social inequities, ignorance, sexism, racism, and unsupportive relationships may render a woman virtually powerless to choose freely. We call for a religious and moral commitment to reproductive health and rights; there must be access to comprehensive sexuality education and contraception, including emergency contraception.



RELIGIOUS PLURALISM

No government committed to human rights and democracy can privilege the teachings of one religion over another. No single religious voice can speak for all faith traditions on abortion, nor should government take sides on religious differences. Women must have the right to apply or reject the principles of their own faith without legal restrictions. We oppose any attempt to make specific religious doctrine concerning abortion the law for all Americans or for the women of the world.



A CALL TO RELIGIOUS LEADERS

Religious leaders have been in the forefront of the movement for abortion rights for more than fifty years. We call on leaders of all faiths to prepare themselves to offer counsel compassionately, competently, and justly to individuals and families faced with pregnancy decisions. We urge them to:

- Advise and assist adolescent women in involving parents and family members in their decisions, while acknowledging that not every family can offer this support
- Provide age-appropriate faith-based sexuality education that underscores the importance of planned childbearing and responsible sexual decision-making, including abstinence
- Encourage parents to talk openly and honestly about sexuality with their own children
- Counsel women facing pregnancy decisions to reflect, pray, examine their own conscience and faith, and talk with partners and family members
- Support with love to those who choose adoption or termination of their pregnancies, including providing worship opportunities for those who seek them to mourn losses from miscarriages, stillbirths, and abortions
- Provide financial and emotional support for those women who carry their pregnancies to term and provide loving community for them after birth
- Publicly advocate for reproductive rights—including sexuality education, contraception, prenatal care, adoption, and abortion—through sermons, public witness, and involvement in the political process.



IN CLOSING

More than thirty years ago, many religious denominations passed courageous resolutions in support of women's moral agency and their right to a safe and legal abortion. Despite numerous legal challenges and social, scientific and medical advances, we reaffirm this theological commitment: women must be able to make their own moral decisions based on conscience and faith. We call for increased dialog and

respectful listening with those who disagree with us. With them, we share the vision of a world where all children are loved and wanted. We renew our own call for relational and reproductive justice for all.

* * *

The *Open Letter* was developed at a colloquium of theologians in 2005, sponsored by the Religious Institute on Sexual Morality, Justice, and Healing and funded by The Robert Sterling Clark Foundation. Participants included Rabbi Dr. Rebecca Alpert, Temple University; Rev. John Buehrens, First Parish in Needham, MA; Rev. Ignacio Castuera, Planned Parenthood Federation of America; Rev. Steve Clapp, Christian Community; Rev. Stacey L. Edwards, Trinity United Church of Christ, Chicago; Rabbi Dr. Sue Levi Elwell, Union for Reform Judaism; Rev. Dr. Larry L. Greenfield, Protestants for the Common Good; Rev. Debra W. Haffner, Religious Institute on Sexual Morality, Justice, and Healing; Frances Kissling, Catholics for a Free Choice; Kate M. Ott, Religious Institute; Rev. Mark Pawlowski, Planned Parenthood of South Central Michigan; and Leslie Watson Malachi, Religious Coalition for Reproductive Choice.

RELIGIOUS SUPPORT FOR ABORTION RIGHTS

- Many religious denominations have passed policies in support of legalized abortion. They include:
American Baptist Churches in the USA • Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) • Episcopal Church (USA) • Evangelical Lutheran Church in America • Jewish Reconstructionist Federation • Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) • Union for Reform Judaism • Unitarian Universalist Association • United Church of Christ • United Methodist Church • United Synagogue of Conservative Judaism
- More than 40 religious denominations and organizations are members of the Religious Coalition for Reproductive Choice.
- Thirty-six percent of U.S. Catholics believe that abortion should be generally available to those who want it, while an additional 37% believe that abortion should be available under stricter limits.¹
- More than eight in 10 U.S. Jews identify as pro-choice.²

ABORTION IN THE U.S.

- Almost one half of all pregnancies in the United States are unintended, and four in 10 of these are terminated by abortion.³
- Seventy-eight percent of women who have abortions report a religious affiliation.⁴
- More than 45 million legal abortions were performed in the United States from 1973–2005. In 2005, 1.21 million abortions were performed, down from 1.31 million in 2000.⁵
- In 2005, the U.S. abortion rate declined to 19.4 abortions per 1,000 women aged 15–44, compared to 29.3 in 1981. The number of abortions declined to a total of 1.2 million in 2005, 25% below the all-time high of 1.6 million abortions in 1990. The abortion rate is now at its lowest level since 1974.⁶
- Catholic women have abortions at the same rate as women in the population as a whole. In a study of more than 10,000 women over the age of 17 obtaining abortions, 27% were Catholic. Catholics make up almost 25% of the population.⁷
- Americans as a whole are divided on abortion. Fifty-one percent say abortion should be legal in all or most cases; 43% say abortion should not be legal in all or most cases; 6% don't know. Opinions vary widely among different faith traditions, but even in the most conservative traditions, more than four in 10 people support legal abortion⁸:

| | <i>Should Be Legal</i> | <i>Should Not Be Legal</i> | <i>Don't Know</i> |
|------------------------|----------------------------|--------------------------------|-----------------------|
| Evangelical Protestant | 45% | 49% | 6% |
| Mainline Protestant | 62% | 32% | 7% |
| Historically Black | 47% | 46% | 8% |
| Catholic | 48% | 45% | 7% |
| Jewish | 84% | 14% | 2% |
| Muslim | 48% | 48% | 4% |
| Hindu | 69% | 24% | 7% |

UNINTENDED PREGNANCIES, ABORTION AND ECONOMIC JUSTICE

- In 2001, poor women had unintended births at five times the rate of women in the highest income category.⁹
- The abortion rate among women living below the federal poverty level is more than four times that of women at or above 300% of the poverty level (44 vs. 10 abortions per 1,000 women).¹⁰
- Between 1994 and 2001, the rate of unintended pregnancy among poor women increased by 29% while the rate among women at or above 200% of the poverty line declined by 20%.¹¹
- Many women who need abortions must wait until they raise funds, postponing their abortions until later in their pregnancies, when the costs and risks of these more complicated procedures are higher. Fifty-eight percent of abortion patients say they would have liked to have had their abortions earlier. Nearly 60% of women who experienced a delay in obtaining an abortion attribute the delay to the time it took to make arrangements and raise money.¹²

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QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

1. How are reproductive choice and religious freedom connected?
2. What does it mean to be a moral agent? Does recognizing the moral agency of women have broader implications for religious communities?
3. How can people be pro-life and pro-choice at the same time? What are your personal beliefs and where do they come from?
4. Does your faith community have a statement on reproductive choice? If so, in what ways does it agree/disagree with the position of the *Open Letter on Abortion as a Moral Decision*?
5. How can your faith community better support women and men who are facing difficult decisions about pregnancies?

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**A RESPONSIVE READING BASED ON THE
*OPEN LETTER TO RELIGIOUS LEADERS ON ABORTION
AS A MORAL DECISION***

We call for a religious and moral commitment to reproductive health and rights.

We affirm that life is sacred. It must never be created carelessly.

We call for sexuality education, family planning, prenatal care, abortion and adoption services.

We affirm that parenthood is precious.

Women must have the right to make decisions about their reproductive and sexual health.

We affirm the moral agency of women.

Moral decisions are best made with the care and concern of community.

We affirm that abortion is a moral decision.

As a community, we are committed to ensuring that pregnancy, childbearing and abortion are safe for all women and that all can freely decide.

We pledge our compassion and support to all who face these difficult decisions.

Together: We strive for a world in which all children are loved and nurtured.

At least half of American youth will have sexual intercourse by age 20. Many more will engage in other sexual behaviors. Faith communities can play a valuable role in providing the education, direction and open dialogue that will help young people make responsible, ethical decisions about their sexuality. The Open Letter to Religious Leaders on Adolescent Sexuality recognizes the moral agency of adolescents and calls for faithful guidance that affirms the holiness and integrity of their sexuality.

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.



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.

* * *

The *Open Letter* was developed at a colloquium of theologians in 2007, sponsored by the Religious Institute on Sexual Morality, Justice, and Healing and funded by The Moriah Fund. Participants included Rev. Dr. Mariah Britton, Moriah Institute; Alicia Brooks, seminarian, Yale Divinity School; Rev. Steve Clapp, Christian Community; Rev. Dr. Mary L. Foulke, The Episcopal Church of St. Luke in the Fields, New York City; Rev.

Dr. Larry Greenfield, American Baptist Church of Metro Chicago; Rev. Debra W. Haffner, Religious Institute on Sexual Morality, Justice, and Healing; Ann Hanson, Justice and Witness Ministries, United Church of Christ; 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 Rev. Dr. Karen-Marie Yust, Union Theological Seminary and Presbyterian School of Christian Education.

RELIGIOUS SUPPORT FOR RESPONSIBLE ADOLESCENT SEXUALITY

- *The Teenage Sexuality and Religion Research Project* surveyed 5,819 young people in 635 religious communities (Mainline Protestant, Evangelical, Roman Catholic, Reformed Jewish and Conservative Jewish) as well as clergy and religious leaders. Among the results:
 - (a) Fewer than one in six religious youths said their faith-based institution offers significant information on birth control, STD prevention, HIV prevention, rape or homosexuality.¹
 - (b) Seventy-four percent of the clergy and religious leaders in these communities reported that their congregation portrays sexuality in a positive and healthy way, while only 44% of teens in the same study agreed. Most clergy and religious leaders rated their sexuality education programs as fair to good, but teens in these programs tended to rate them as poor.²
 - (c) 61.5% of clergy and other religious leaders agreed that faith-based institutions should teach both comprehensive sexuality education and abstinence.³
 - (d) Only 14% of clergy said that their congregation offers a reasonably comprehensive approach to sexuality education, while 37% said that the congregation does almost nothing.⁴
 - (e) Fourteen percent of male teens and 11% of female teens self-identified as homosexual, bisexual or questioning of their sexual orientation.⁵
- Participation in a religious setting may protect young people against premature involvement in sexual behavior. A review of more than 50 studies of the impact of religion on sexual behavior concluded that “more frequent religious attendance is associated with later initiation of sexual intercourse for white males and for females across racial ethnic groups [and] more conservative sexual attitudes and a decreased frequency of sexual intercourse.”⁶

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- *Our Whole Lives*, the sexuality education program of the Unitarian Universalist Association and the United Church of Christ, teaches that “delaying intercourse can enable teens to experience and learn about their developing sexuality in a healthy and developmentally appropriate manner and to avoid the risks associated with sexual intercourse at an early age... a third option is presented to young people as an alternative to choosing between the options of having no sexual contact and having intercourse... of any kind.”⁷
 - *Sacred Choices*, the sexuality education program of the Union for Reform Judaism, teaches that “adolescents should not be having sexual intercourse while they are in middle school and high school. In most cases adolescents are not ready for sexual relationships at these stages in their lives... [they] know that some adolescents will make choices other than the ones generally seen as appropriate for this age group... [the] tradition urges us to make certain that we protect the physical, emotional, and spiritual health of our young people by making clear that they can come to caring adults in their lives and sort out their choices and actions...”⁸

ADOLESCENT SEXUALITY IN THE U.S.

- Among youth in public and private high schools (grades 9–12) in 2007, 47.8% reported having had sexual intercourse, and 35% reported being currently sexually active. 14.9% reported having had four or more sexual partners.⁹
- By their 18th birthday, six in 10 teenage women and more than five in 10 teenage men have had sexual intercourse.¹⁰
- The pregnancy rate among U.S. women aged 15–19 declined from 117 pregnancies per 1,000 women in 1990 to 75 per 1,000 women in 2002.¹¹
- There are more than 750,000 pregnancies and about 9 million cases of sexually transmitted diseases among youth aged 15–24 each year in the U.S.¹²
- Of the approximately 750,000 teen pregnancies that occur each year, 82% are unintended. More than one-quarter end in abortion.¹³
- The percentage of high school students who have had sexual intercourse decreased from 54% in 1991 to 48% in 2007.¹⁴
- At least 5% of high school students identify as gay or lesbian.¹⁵

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- Improvements in contraceptive use, including increases in the use of single methods, increases in the use of multiple methods and declines in non-use, are responsible for 86% of the decline in the U.S. adolescent pregnancy rate between 1995 and 2002.¹⁶

ADOLESCENT SEXUALITY AND ECONOMIC JUSTICE

- Poor and low-income adolescents account for nearly three-quarters (73%) of pregnancies among women aged 15–19, even though they make up only 38% of all women in that age group.¹⁷
- Poor and low-income teenagers are twice as likely as higher-income adolescents to have an unplanned pregnancy while using the pill or a condom.¹⁸
- Multiple studies show evidence that children born to unmarried mothers are more likely than other children to be poor.¹⁹

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QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

1. Many people grew up hearing only negative things or nothing at all about sexuality. What messages do you want teens to hear about sexuality in your congregation? In your homes?

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2. Adolescence is a time of significant change, growth and moral development. How can you support healthy teen relationships and encourage moral decision-making in your family? How can faith communities help?
 3. Today, girls on average achieve puberty at ages 12–13 and marry at ages 25–27. About a century ago, girls achieved puberty at ages 15–17 and typically married very soon after reaching puberty.²⁰ How do these biological and social changes affect a standard of premarital chastity?

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A RESPONSIVE READING BASED ON THE *OPEN LETTER TO RELIGIOUS LEADERS ON ADOLESCENT SEXUALITY*

We affirm that sexuality is a divinely bestowed blessing at every stage of life.

May every family and faith community help adolescents embrace their sexuality.

Young people pay too high a price when adults ignore their responsibility to help them understand, affirm and embrace their sexuality.

A moral sexuality demands self-understanding, respect and self-discipline.

When parents communicate openly and honestly about sexuality, children are encouraged to express their sexuality in ways that are healthy and life-affirming.

We affirm parents as the primary sexuality educators of their children.

We support our congregation's role in providing sexuality education to our children and youth.

We commit to supporting sexuality education in our public schools.

Together: May our lives model positive, healthy and joyful attitudes about sexuality and relationships, for our children and ourselves.

More than 40 years ago, the Universal Fellowship of Metropolitan Community Churches was formed to provide a religious home for lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender persons. More than 30 years ago, the United Church of Christ became the first mainline Protestant denomination to ordain an openly gay minister. Today, in denominations and congregations across the country, LGBT people continue to look to their faith communities to be beacons of justice and safe havens from societal discrimination. The Open Letter to Religious Leaders on Sexual and Gender Diversity calls for a world that welcomes, affirms and fully includes lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people.

OPEN LETTER TO RELIGIOUS LEADERS ON SEXUAL AND GENDER DIVERSITY

As religious leaders, we affirm sexual and gender diversity as gifts people offer to their congregations and communities. We urgently call for faith-based approaches that embrace this diversity and advocate justice. Living in a time of rapid social change challenges us all to create loving, respectful relationships and to honor the many ways that people live and love. While most of us may be accustomed to categorizing people as male or female, heterosexual or homosexual, binary thinking fails to reflect the full diversity of human experience and the richness of creation. The courageous witness of lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people (LGBT), along with a growing body of social and scientific research, inspire us to affirm sexual and gender diversity as a blessed part of life.



LAMENTATION

Too many religious institutions have failed to embrace sexual and gender diversity. Some have mistakenly called homosexuality sinful when the real issue is heterosexism or the unjust privileging of heterosexuality. Heterosexism devalues gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender people, just as sexism and male privilege devalue women. Silence, misinformation, and condemnation of differing sexual and gender identities have created despair, destroyed relationships, and led to violence, suicide, and even murder. Sexual and gender oppression can no longer be portrayed as virtuous and morally defensible.



SCRIPTURE AND TRADITION

At the center of our traditions is the Biblical mandate to love, do justice, seek equality, and act with compassion. The richness of our sacred texts allows for a variety of interpretations, and there is room for legitimate and respectful disagreement about the meaning of specific passages. However, using the Bible to exclude or attack people

violates the very spirit of our traditions and is morally unconscionable. Sacred texts provide moral wisdom and challenge, but some passages may also conflict with contemporary ethical insights. As we move toward a more just society, we approach our texts and traditions with fresh questions and new understandings.

For example, biblical texts that condone slavery, regard women as property, forbid divorce, or equate disease with divine retribution can no longer be regarded as authoritative. We honor instead those texts and traditions that invite us to welcome the stranger, love our neighbor as ourselves, and view all people as created in God's image. Even so, we cannot rely exclusively on scripture or tradition for understanding sexual and gender diversity today. We must also pay attention to the wisdom of excluded, often silenced people, as well as to findings from the biological and social sciences.



A CALL TO RELIGIOUS LEADERS

As religious leaders, we have an obligation to create a world that embraces the diversity of God's creation. We urge religious leaders to:

- Educate themselves and their faith communities on the diversity of human sexualities and gender identities through age-appropriate sexuality education.
- Obtain training and support to address the pastoral needs of congregants on issues related to sexual and gender diversity, such as the birth of an intersexed child, the coming-out process of a youth or adult, or an individual who is transitioning genders.
- Use the pulpit and public podium to acknowledge the complex realities of personal experience, including family and relational diversity, and to condemn discrimination and violence.
- Encourage their congregations to engage the formal welcoming program of their denomination.
- Work within their denominations and multifaith organizations for sexual justice and the full inclusion of LGBT persons, including ordination, family recognition and rites of passage.
- Publicly advocate for the civil rights of LGBT persons, including anti-discrimination laws, marriage equality, and access to health care.
- Develop partnerships with community and national organizations that promote justice and health for LGBT persons.
- Acknowledge and support religious leaders, individuals, and communities who have, at great cost, embraced the diversity of sexualities and gender identities.

✧
IN CLOSING

There can be no turning back from the goal of the full participation of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender people in our faith traditions and communities. We recognize that this work may challenge beliefs and unsettle relationships, but it goes to the heart of our mission as faith communities: to create the conditions so that each person can flourish. Loving, just communities embrace everyone; they are strengthened when all people are able to live fully and express their gender and sexuality with holiness and integrity. We celebrate sexual and gender diversity as a blessing that enriches all.

* * *

The *Open Letter* was developed at a colloquium of theologians in 2007, sponsored by the Religious Institute on Sexual Morality, Justice, and Healing and funded by the E. Rhodes and Leona B. Carpenter Foundation. Participants included Rev. Steve Clapp, Christian Community; Ann Thompson Cook, God Loves Each One Ministry; Rev. Dr. Marvin M. Ellison, Bangor Theological Seminary; Rabbi Sue Levi Elwell, Union for Reform Judaism; Rev. Dr. Horace L. Griffin, The General Theological Seminary of the Episcopal Church; Rev. Debra W. Haffner, Religious Institute on Sexual Morality, Justice, and Healing; Dr. Mary E. Hunt, Women's Alliance for Theology, Ethics and Ritual (WATER); Rev. Dr. Jay Emerson Johnson, Pacific School of Religion; Rev. Barbara K. Lundblad, Union Theological Seminary; Dr. Virginia Ramey Mollenkott, William Paterson University; Rev. Irene Monroe, Harvard Divinity School; Timothy Palmer, Religious Institute; Dr. Judith Plaskow, Manhattan College; Rev. Michael D. Schuenemeyer, Wider Church Ministries, United Church of Christ; Rev. Dr. William G. Sinkford, Unitarian Universalist Association.

RELIGIOUS SUPPORT FOR SEXUAL AND GENDER DIVERSITY

- Organizations that work for the full inclusion of LGBT persons in the life of faith communities are found in many traditions. These are often referred to as “welcoming” or “affirming” organizations, though different traditions call them by different names. Some of these organizations are official agencies of a religious denomination or movement, while others are loosely affiliated or independent of the tradition. See <http://www.religioustheology.org/links.html> for a list of welcoming and affirming organizations.
- The following religious traditions have policies that support full inclusion of lesbian and gay persons, including ordination and marriage for same-sex couples:
Central Conference of American Rabbis / Union for Reform Judaism* • Reconstructionist

Rabbinical Association / Jewish Reconstructionist Federation • Unitarian Universalist Association* • United Church of Christ* • Unity Fellowship Churches • Universal Fellowship of Metropolitan Community Churches*

- In addition to those listed above, the following religious traditions also ordain openly lesbian, gay and bisexual clergy members:
Episcopal Church (USA) • Evangelical Lutheran Church in America** • Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)** • United Synagogue of Conservative Judaism

*Also ordains openly transgender clergy.

**Lesbian and gay clergy must be celibate.

SEXUAL AND GENDER DIVERSITY IN THE U.S.

- People of faith from all traditions support acceptance of lesbian and gay people. Even in conservative traditions, a significant proportion says that homosexuality should be accepted. Half of the general population says that homosexuality should be accepted, 40% say that it should be discouraged, and 10% respond with “neither,” “both” or “don't know.” Opinions vary among people from different faith traditions¹:

| | <i>Should Be Accepted</i> | <i>Should Be Discouraged</i> | <i>Neither/Both Don't Know</i> |
|------------------------|---------------------------|------------------------------|--------------------------------|
| Evangelical Protestant | 26% | 64% | 10% |
| Mainline Protestant | 56% | 34% | 11% |
| Historically Black | 39% | 46% | 14% |
| Catholic | 58% | 30% | 12% |
| Jewish | 79% | 15% | 6% |
| Muslim | 27% | 61% | 12% |
| Hindu | 48% | 37% | 14% |

- LGBT people live in 99.3% of U.S. counties.²
- 2.8% of men and 1.4% of women self-identify as gay or lesbian. 6.2% of men and 4.4% of women report feelings of sexual desire or attraction toward a person of the same sex.⁴
- There are no national data on the number of people who identify as transgender. The American Psychological Association estimates that rates of transsexualism are

about 1 in 10,000 for biological males and 1 in 30,000 for biological females. The number of people in other transgender categories is unknown.⁵

- Approximately one in 1,500 to one in 2,000 infants are born intersex, or with external genitals that are not easily identified as male or female.⁶
- In a study of 5,819 adolescents in 635 religious communities (Mainline Protestant, Evangelical, Roman Catholic, Reformed Jewish and Conservative Jewish), 14% of boys and 11% of girls reported that their sexual orientation was not heterosexual.⁷

| | Males | Females |
|--------------|-------|---------|
| Heterosexual | 86% | 89% |
| Homosexual | 7% | 5% |
| Bisexual | 5% | 4% |
| Don't Know | 2% | 2% |

- Three-quarters (74%) of LGBT people report experiencing prejudice, discrimination and verbal abuse.⁸
- One-third (34%) of LGBT people report that at least one family member has refused to accept them because of their sexual orientation.⁹

SEXUAL AND GENDER DIVERSITY AND ECONOMIC JUSTICE

- In six national random samples conducted between 1996 and 2006, between 13 and 56% of the transgender community were fired, 13–47% were denied employment, 22–31% were harassed, and 19% were denied a promotion based on their gender identity.¹⁰
- LGBT youth represent 20–40% of all homeless youth. Many had to leave their homes because of conflict over their families' religious beliefs.¹¹
- Sixty-four percent of LGBT students report that they experience verbal harassment because of their sexual orientation and 46% because of their gender identity or expression. Thirty-eight percent report physical harassment because of their sexual orientation and 26% because of their gender identity or expression. LGBT students who experience harassment are less likely than the student population at large to plan to attend college.¹²

- Thirteen states and the District of Columbia have laws that prevent discrimination based on sexual orientation and gender identity. The states are California, Colorado, Hawaii, Illinois, Iowa, Maine, Minnesota, New Mexico, New Jersey, Oregon, Rhode Island, Vermont and Washington.
- Seven states (Connecticut, Maryland, Massachusetts, Nevada, New Hampshire, New York and Wisconsin) have laws that prevent discrimination based on sexual orientation, but not gender identity or expression.
- Lesbians and gays can be fired from their jobs without recrimination because of their sexual orientation in 30 states. Transgender people can be fired because of their gender identity or expression in 37 states.¹³

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QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

1. How do you understand the complexities of sexual orientation and gender identity with regard to personal development, family life, civil society and faith communities? How have you learned what you know?
2. How are the political and social issues relative to LGBT people important to faith communities? What can you contribute to the social and political discourse from a faith perspective?
3. Why do some faith communities uphold the biblical passages that proscribe sexual activity between persons of the same sex while rejecting passages on slavery, women as property, divorce and others? How do any of these passages relate to the biblical call to love one another, and to the belief that all persons are created in the image and likeness of God?
4. How well do you serve the persons in your congregation (adults as well as youth) who may be struggling with sexual orientation or gender identity issues? What would it be like for an LGBT person in this congregation to come out?
5. Would a same-sex couple or a family with parents of the same sex feel welcome in your faith community? What might your community do to create a stronger

feeling of comfort and welcome? If your congregation welcomes LGBT persons, how does someone in the LGBT community know that?

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**A RESPONSIVE READING BASED ON THE
*OPEN LETTER TO RELIGIOUS LEADERS ON
SEXUAL AND GENDER DIVERSITY***

We are grateful for the gift of our lives and the gift of others in our lives.

Each of us is created with dignity and worth.

We are called to love each other and to do nothing to others that we would find hateful to ourselves.

We honor the many ways that people live and love.

We repent for the times when our faith traditions have named lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people unworthy.

Love does not exclude. We are all worthy.

We suffer when LGBT persons are oppressed, excluded and shamed by religious people who overlook the fundamental call to justice in our scriptures.

True justice flourishes when we can live with authenticity and integrity.

May we work to build a community where LGBT people are celebrated as full and equal members, recognizing their many gifts.

We celebrate sexual and gender diversity as a blessing that enriches us all.

For centuries, religious communities have provided direction, discernment and doctrine on issues of fertility, childbearing and family formation. Today, however, there is a relative silence when the issues shift to infertility and assisted reproductive technologies (ARTs). The rapid growth of ARTs has outpaced religious and ethical discernment. This Open Letter calls for awareness, dialogue and education so that religious leaders and clergy will be better prepared to counsel and advocate for safe, effective and accessible reproductive technologies.

OPEN LETTER TO RELIGIOUS LEADERS ON ASSISTED REPRODUCTIVE TECHNOLOGIES

As religious leaders, we are committed to promoting the spiritual, emotional, and physical health of all people, including their reproductive health. We assist women, men, and couples seeking to be parents, and counsel many who are considering assisted reproductive technologies (ARTs). During the past thirty years, millions of women and men have used ARTs to try to have children.

Yet many technologies have been developed without intentional ethical deliberation regarding their complex and varied implications for individuals, families, and society. Most religious leaders have not been prepared to educate and counsel their congregants about ARTs. Moreover, there is growing concern about the promotion of high-cost technologies that have low rates of success. We further recognize the intense yearning that many people feel for biological children, yet we are acutely aware that many children need adoptive and foster care parents.

In this *Open Letter*, and its accompanying Guidebook, *A Time to Be Born*, the Religious Institute on Sexual Morality, Justice, and Healing invites you into a discussion about the moral and religious implications of these technologies.



RESPECT FOR LIFE

Religious traditions affirm that life is sacred. Our faiths celebrate the divinely bestowed blessings of generating life and call for all children to be nurtured and valued.

Religious traditions have differing beliefs on when life begins and the moral status of the embryo and the fetus. These differing religious understandings profoundly affect individual decisions about the use of ARTs, but no one religious viewpoint should determine public policy or medical practice. We urge that the creation and handling of embryos always be regarded with respect and humility.



MORAL AGENCY

The use of ARTs is always a serious moral and medical decision. We affirm women and men as moral agents who have the capacity, right, and responsibility to make their own decisions about reproduction, including pregnancy, contraception, abortion, adoption, ARTs, gamete donation and surrogacy. This right should be accorded equally to all persons regardless of marital status, sexual orientation, gender identity, disability, class, and race. These decisions must be based on informed consent about medical and health risks. They are best made when they include a fully informed conscience, and insights from one's faith, community, and family.



SACRED TEXTS AND RELIGIOUS TRADITIONS

Over time, people of faith approach sacred texts and traditions with fresh questions, changing circumstances, and new understandings. In light of the discrimination that has resulted from religious traditions' over-identification of women with fertility and biological reproduction, there is a need for broader interpretations of texts such as "be fruitful and multiply" and those that present infertility as a penalty for sin or unfaithfulness. Yet, religious traditions can be a rich source of spiritual and moral support for various kinds of creativity, generativity, and family formation. Children are a blessing, not a requirement or entitlement. We honor those sacred texts and traditions that welcome diverse families, individuals with disabilities, persons without children, and alternative family formations as part of a commitment to foster just and loving social relationships and communities.



RELIGION, SCIENCE, AND TECHNOLOGY

Fundamental questions of values and ethics are raised by expanding understandings of science and the development of technologies unimagined by earlier generations. Technological advances must be developed responsibly, cognizant of how marginalized persons and communities have been harmed by forced sterilization, eugenics, and medical experimentation in the name of progress. Theologians, ethicists, clergy, health advocates, and the scientific community need to be in dialogue to understand the cultural context within which science operates and to respond to the societal issues raised by scientific discovery and technological development.



ACCESS, SAFETY, AND PUBLIC POLICY

There are biological and social conditions that cause individual infertility, such as harmful environmental conditions; the failure to adequately prevent, screen, and treat sexually transmitted infections; and postponement of childbearing for career, economic, or personal reasons. Faith communities must support public funding for prevention, screening and diagnosis of infertility in addition to access to information, health care and unbiased counseling about ARTs. As long-term health implications of some procedures are still unknown, there is a need for increased regulation to safeguard health, research to determine the risk of ARTs, and caution on the use of resources for ARTs that are high risk and low success. The availability of effective and safe ARTs should respect the diversity of family structure and not exclude on the basis of partner status, economic circumstances, or sexual orientation.



A CALL TO RELIGIOUS LEADERS

We call on leaders of all faiths to prepare themselves to offer counsel compassionately, competently, and justly to individuals and families making decisions about the use of ARTs.

We urge religious leaders to:

- Become knowledgeable about the teachings of their faith tradition, sacred texts, and current science and technology related to reproduction, families, and ARTs.
- Have a highly developed referral network of professionals who provide pregnancy, abortion, adoption, and genetic counseling that is comprehensive, medically accurate, nondirective, and unbiased.
- Educate their faith community about ARTs through preaching, study groups, healing services for infertility and reproductive loss, as well as education for young adults about the complexities of surrogacy and egg and sperm donation.
- Assist families in developing strategies to share with their children, who are adopted or conceived through ARTs, the circumstances of their conception and family history.
- Promote denominational study of pastoral and ethical responses to ARTs such as access, use, and counseling.
- Publicly advocate for counseling, accurate medical information, regulations to safeguard health and prevent negative outcomes, and increased research regarding risk and efficacy of ARTs.
- Engage in public discourse about the social and ethical issues involved in ARTs and speak out against ART practices that violate human rights and dignity.

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IN CLOSING

The broad spectrum of assisted reproductive technologies calls for deeply personal and complex moral decisions that are unprecedented in human history. As religious leaders, we seek to promote what is best for individuals, couples, families, children, and society and to support those who face these decisions. Religious leaders and theologians have an integral role to play with families, medical providers, and scientists as these technologies unfold.

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**RELIGIOUS SUPPORT FOR RESPONSIBLE USE
OF ASSISTED REPRODUCTIVE TECHNOLOGIES**

Several religious organizations have produced publications to help religious leaders and congregations learn more about the science and economics of ARTs and the accompanying moral and ethical issues. Information about obtaining the following selected publications can be found in the "Further Reading" section.

- The National Council of the Churches of Christ in the USA (NCCCUSA) has produced a policy document titled *Fearfully and Wonderfully Made: A Policy on Human Biotechnologies*, along with an accompanying study document and curriculum. NCCCUSA, representing over 10,000 congregations in 35 Christian traditions, encourages leaders in local churches to become educated about the science and

ethics of ARTs and advises on the roles of pastors and congregations in providing care, support and ethical guidance to their members.

- The General Board of Church and Society of the United Methodist Church has produced an extensive document titled *Spiritual Discernment: A Guide for Genetic and Reproductive Technologies*, which includes a study guide for use with groups or by individuals.
- The Union of Reform Judaism has published *Infertility and Assisted Reproduction* in its *Bio-Ethics Study Guide* series. This document analyzes how Reform Judaism is dealing with this emerging issue and offers a new look at the commandment to “be fruitful and multiply.”

ASSISTED REPRODUCTIVE TECHNOLOGIES IN THE U.S.

- Assisted reproductive technologies include a number of techniques that aid individuals and couples in conceiving biologically related children. The earliest use of ARTs in the U.S. was in 1981. ARTs include the following procedures¹:
 - Artificial Insemination (AI)
 - In Vitro Fertilization (IVF)
 - Intracytoplasmic Sperm Injection (ICSI)
 - Gamete Intrafallopian Transfer (GIFT)
 - Zygote Intrafallopian Transfer (ZIFT)
 - Surrogacy
 - Egg Donation
 - Semen Donation
- Circumstances that motivate people to use ARTs vary widely, including: couples in which one person is infertile; lesbian couples; gay male couples; a couple in which one or both partners are transgender; single women and men; women undergoing chemotherapy; women who want to delay childbearing; and couples who want to use pre-implantation genetic diagnosis (PGD) to screen for medical concerns.
- About 12% of women of childbearing age in the U.S. have used an infertility service.²
- In 2005, 97,442 fresh-nondonor ART cycles were started. Of those, 34% led to a pregnancy, but only 28% resulted in a live birth. Statistics on the overall number of ART procedures are not available.⁴

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- Among those studied, it is not uncommon for patients to undergo multiple ART cycles. In 2005, 19.7% had experienced one previous ART cycle, 10.8% had experienced two previous cycles, 5.7% had experience three previous cycles, and 6.6% had experienced four or more previous cycles. 57.2% had not experienced any previous ART cycles.⁵
 - Federal regulation of ARTs is minimal, and state regulations vary widely. Consequently, there is limited access to research and data about these procedures and insufficient reporting of adverse health effects to the mother or the child.⁶

ASSISTED REPRODUCTIVE TECHNOLOGIES AND ECONOMIC JUSTICE

- Access to ARTs is limited by high costs. In the U.S., costs of IVF range from \$10,000 to \$14,000 per cycle, plus the cost of medications, which can run to more than \$5,000. Added costs can be incurred when using donor gametes (sperm, egg, embryo), a surrogate or pre-implantation genetic diagnosis.⁷ Many women have to go through multiple cycles, making it even more costly.⁸
- Access to ARTs is limited by discriminatory insurance policies and practices. ARTs are usually covered only by the most comprehensive insurance policies, which are typically not available to low-income people. No state public benefits programs cover IVF. Some states require private insurers to cover ARTs or to offer coverage for ARTs, though this often applies only to individuals who have a medical diagnosis of infertility. Such policies discriminate against LGBT people, single people and others who seek to use ARTs for reasons other than physical infertility. Some insurance companies mandate use of a husband's sperm for IVF coverage.⁹
- Access to ARTs is limited by discriminatory state laws or fertility clinic practices. There are no legal requirements that prevent practitioners from discrimination in providing ART services on the basis of partner status, sexual orientation and/or gender identity. For example, some fertility clinics only offer services to heterosexual married couples. The American Society for Reproductive Medicine reports that fertility clinics vary in their willingness to treat single women, single men, lesbian couples and gay male couples.¹⁰
- There is evidence of racial disparity in the use of ARTs. In 2004, nine states began using the 2003 U.S. Standard Certificate of Live Birth, which included a checkbox in its risk factor section to indicate "pregnancy resulted from infertility treatment" and included ART and "fertility-enhancing drugs, artificial insemination, or intrauterine

insemination.” From this, 1% of all live births resulted from infertility therapies, 90% of which were to white women.¹¹

- Couples who conceive through ART are more likely to become pregnant with multiples. In 2000, 35% of all live births resulting from ART were multiple births (twins, triplets or higher-order multiples) as compared to 3% in the general population.¹² Multiple pregnancies are much riskier to the mother and the babies than single pregnancies, particularly when three or more fetuses are involved.

REFERENCES

¹For an explanation of these technologies, see Emily Galpern, *Assisted Reproductive Technologies: Overview and Perspective Using a Reproductive Justice Framework* (Oakland, CA: Gender and Justice Program, Center for Genetics and Society, 2007), 5, <http://geneticsandsociety.org/downloads/ART.pdf>.

²Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, American Society for Reproductive Medicine, Society for Assisted Reproductive Technology, *Assisted Reproductive Technology Success Rates: National Summary and Fertility Clinic Reports 2005* (Atlanta: Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2007), http://www.cdc.gov/art/ART2005/508PDF/2005ART508Cover_National.pdf.

³Ibid.

⁴Ibid.

⁵Ibid.

⁶Galpern, 18–19.

⁷Jessica Arons, *Future Choices: Assisted Reproductive Technologies and the Law* (Washington, DC: Center for American Progress, 2007), http://americanprogress.org/issues/2007/12/pdf/arons_art.pdf.

⁸Galpern, 9.

⁹Ibid.

¹⁰The Ethics Committee of the American Society for Reproductive Medicine, “Access to Fertility Treatments by Gays, Lesbians, and Unmarried Persons,” *Fertility and Sterility* 86 (2006), 1333–5, http://www.asrm.org/Media/Ethics/fertility_gaylesunmarried.pdf.

¹¹Joyce A. Martin and Fay Menacker, “Expanded Health Data from the New Birth Certificate, 2004,” *National Vital Statistics Reports* 55(12) (2007), http://www.cdc.gov/nchs/data/nvsr/nvsr55/nvsr55_12.pdf.

¹²Victoria C. Wright et al., “Assisted reproductive technology surveillance—United States, 2004,” *Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report* 56(SS06) (2007), 1–22, <http://www.cdc.gov/MMWR/preview/mmwrhtml/ss5606a1.htm>.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

1. How do new technologies for helping couples become pregnant conform to or challenge your religious tradition's understanding of fertility and reproduction? Are there limits to how far science should go in helping people reproduce?
2. What might it mean to counsel or support individuals and couples struggling with infertility, considering or currently using ARTs? When do you think adoption should be raised as an option?
3. How does a faith community signal openness to discussing issues of reproductive loss, infertility, still births and difficulties in adoption? What additional training and information do the minister, pastoral care team and lay leadership need? What resources in the local community could help?
4. How might you promote further education on the moral and ethical issues surrounding assisted reproductive technologies?

FURTHER READING

Bhattacharyya, Swasti. *Magical Progeny, Modern Technology: A Hindu Bioethics of Assisted Reproductive Technology*. Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 2006.

Ehrensaft, Diane. *Mommies, Daddies, Donors, Surrogates: Answering Tough Questions and Building Strong Families*. New York: Guilford Press, 2005.

Inhorn, Marcia C. and Frank van Balen, eds. *Infertility around the Globe: New Thinking on Childlessness, Gender, and Reproductive Technologies*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2002.

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United Methodist Church. General Board of Church and Society. *Spiritual Discernment: A Guide for Genetic and Reproductive Technologies*. 2008. <http://www.umc-gbcs.org/atf/cf/%7B689fea4c-8849-4c05-a89e-c9bc7ffff64c%7D/BIOETHICSGUIDEWEB.PDF>.

**A RESPONSIVE READING BASED ON THE
OPEN LETTER TO RELIGIOUS LEADERS ON ASSISTED
REPRODUCTIVE TECHNOLOGIES**

We celebrate that life is a blessing.

May all people be welcomed and loved.

We recognize the intense yearning that many people have for children.

May all children be nurtured and valued.

We recognize that the decision to become a parent is personal and complex.

May all children be wanted and cared for.

Together we break the silence surrounding infertility, pregnancy loss, still births and difficulties in adoption.

We support all who struggle with these issues.

We celebrate the many ways that people create families and are involved in children's lives.

We welcome all types of families.

We pledge to help the children of this congregation grow and mature into responsible and healthy adults.

We commit to just and loving relationships for all.

GLOSSARY

This section provides definitions of terms used in the Open Letters that may be unfamiliar to some readers. All definitions are from A Time to Seek: Study Guide on Sexual and Gender Diversity (Religious Institute on Sexual Morality, Justice, and Healing, 2007), unless otherwise noted.

Bisexuality. An enduring romantic, emotional and/or sexual attraction toward people of all sexes. A person who identifies as bisexual may live in relationship with a partner of the other sex or of the same sex. A bisexual may be more attracted to one sex than another, equally attracted to women and men, or may consider sexual orientation and gender unimportant. The intensity of a bisexual's attractions toward one sex or another may vary over time.

Civil Marriage. A legally recognized union of two individuals who may receive legal protections, rights and benefits under state and federal law. Although civil marriage for same-sex couples is legal in two states—Connecticut and Massachusetts—marriages of same-sex couples are not recognized under federal law. Therefore, legally married same-sex couples do not receive federal marriage protections, rights and benefits. (*See Religious Marriage*)
(Source: Human Rights Campaign, <http://www.hrc.org/issues/5517.htm>)

Civil Union. A legally recognized union of two individuals similar, but not equal, to civil marriage. Civil unions for same-sex couples in the U.S. were first created in Vermont in 2000. Couples in civil unions receive legal protections, rights and benefits conferred under state law only. Civil unions are not recognized by the federal government nor by all other states.
(Source: Human Rights Campaign, <http://www.hrc.org/issues/5517.htm>)

Coming Out. Short for “coming out of the closet,” the term refers to the period when LGBT persons acknowledge and embrace their sexual orientation or gender identity and begin to share this information with others. Coming out is not a one-time event, but an extended process of self-identifying to family, friends, colleagues, clergy and other significant people in an individual's life.

Comprehensive School-Based Sexuality Education. Programs that address the socio-cultural, biological, psychological and spiritual dimensions of sexuality; include medically accurate, age-appropriate information (including both abstinence and contraception) at all grade levels; and complement the sexuality education children receive from their families, religious and community groups, and health care

professionals. (see **Sexuality Education**) (Source: *Guidelines for Comprehensive Sexuality Education: Kindergarten through 12th Grade*. 3rd ed., Sexuality Information and Education Council of the United States (2004), 13, http://www.siecus.org/_data/global/images/guidelines.pdf.)

Gender Identity. An individual's own sense of self as a woman, man or transgender. Gender identity may or may not conform to an individual's biological sex.

Heterosexism. Similar to racism or sexism, this term refers to the privileging of heterosexuality over other sexual orientations, or to the assumption or assertion of heterosexuality as the preferred cultural norm.

Homosexuality. An enduring romantic, emotional or sexual attraction toward people of the same sex. The term "gay" can refer to homosexual women or men, while the term "lesbian" refers only to homosexual women.

Intersexual. An individual who has atypical development of physical sex attributes, including (but not limited to) external genitals that are not easily classified as male or female, incomplete development of internal reproductive organs, variations of the sex chromosomes, over-production or underproduction of sex-related hormones, and variant development of the testes or ovaries. Some intersex characteristics are recognized at birth; others do not become apparent until puberty or later. Intersexuals were previously known as hermaphrodites. Some individuals now prefer the term DSD (disorders of sexual development) to refer to intersex conditions.

LGBT/GLBT. A collective acronym for lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people. Lengthier versions include "LGBTQ" to include people who identify as "queer," and "LGBTQQIA," to include "queer, questioning, intersex and asexual." The "a" may also be used to refer to "allies," non-LGBT identified people who support LGBT justice.

Religious Marriage. The union of two individuals recognized and conferred by a religious denomination, tradition or faith community. Depending on state law where the marriage is performed, the marriage may or may not be legally recognized.

Sexualities. A sociological term for the many ways human beings understand themselves regarding their bodies, gender and intimate behaviors and relationships. The term is typically used to suggest a diversity of sexual and gender identities, rather than a single sexual norm.

Sexuality Education. A lifelong process of acquiring information and forming attitudes, beliefs and values about sexuality. It encompasses sexual development, sexual and reproductive health, interpersonal relationships, affection, intimacy, body image and gender roles. (Source: *Guidelines for Comprehensive Sexuality Education: Kindergarten through 12th Grade*. 3rd ed., Sexuality Information and Education Council of the United States (SIECUS) (2004), 13, http://www.siecus.org/_data/global/images/guidelines.pdf.)

Sexual Identity. An individual's sense of self as a sexual being, including natal sex, gender identity, gender role, sexual orientation and sexual self-concept. Sexual identity may also refer to the language and labels people use to define themselves. Sexual self-concept refers to the individual's assessment of his or her sexual identity.

Sexual Orientation. An individual's enduring romantic, emotional or sexual attractions toward other persons. "Heterosexual," "homosexual" and "bisexual" are examples of specific sexual orientations, although sexual orientation falls along a continuum that ranges from exclusive heterosexuality to exclusive homosexuality. Many people are attracted in varying degrees to people of the same sex and people of the other sex. It is important to note that: (a) Sexual orientation refers to feelings and identity, not necessarily behavior. Individuals do not always express their sexual orientation through their sexual behaviors; and (b) Sexual orientation is not a choice. It is determined by a complex interaction of biological, genetic and environmental factors.

Transgender. An umbrella term for individuals whose gender identity and/or gender expression differs from the cultural expectations of their biological sex. Transgender people seek to make their external gender expression match their gender identity, rather than their biological sex. The term "transgender" does not provide information about a person's sexual orientation; transgender people can be bisexual, heterosexual, homosexual or asexual.

Transsexual. A term for persons who believe that their natal (birth) sex is incompatible with their gender identity. Biological females who live as men are called female-to-male (FTM) transsexuals, transsexual men or transmen. Biological males who live as women are called male-to-female (MTF) transsexuals, transsexual women or transwomen. Transsexuals often pursue medical procedures such as hormone treatments or gender confirmation surgery (also known as sex-reassignment surgery) to make their physical attributes conform more closely to their gender identity. Transsexuals who pursue sex-reassignment surgery may refer to themselves as pre-operative ("pre-op") or post-operative ("post-op") transsexuals. Others dislike this terminology and prefer to say they are in transition.

ORGANIZATIONS

Religious Institute on Sexual Morality,
Justice, and Healing
21 Charles Street, Suite 140
Westport, CT 06880
203-222-0055
www.religiousinstitute.org

Christian Community
6404 S. Calhoun Street
Fort Wayne, IN 46807
260-456-5010
www.churchstuff.com

Sexuality Education and Adolescent Sexuality

Advocates for Youth (AFY)
2000 M Street NW, Suite 750
Washington, DC 20036
202-419-3420
www.advocatesforyouth.org

Answer
Center for Applied Psychology
Rutgers University
41 Gordon Road, Suite C
Piscataway, NJ 08854
732-445-7929
answer.rutgers.edu

Guttmacher Institute
125 Maiden Lane, 7th floor
New York, NY 10038
212-248-1111
www.guttmacher.org

Sexuality Information and Education
Council of the United States (SIECUS)
90 John Street, Suite 704
New York, NY 10038
212-819-9770
www.siecus.org

Marriage Equality and Sexual and Gender Diversity

Center for Lesbian and Gay Studies in
Religion and Ministry, Pacific School of
Religion
1798 Scenic Avenue
Berkeley, CA 94709
510-849-8206
www.clgs.org

Gay and Lesbian Alliance Against
Defamation (GLAAD)
104 West 29th Street, 4th Floor
New York, NY 10001
212-629-3322
www.glaad.org

Gender Public Advocacy Coalition
1731 Connecticut Avenue NW, 4th Floor
Washington, DC 20009
202-462-6610
www.gpac.org

Freedom to Marry
116 West 23rd Street, Suite 500
New York, NY 10011
212-851-8418
www.freedomtomarry.org

Human Rights Campaign (HRC)
1640 Rhode Island Avenue NW
Washington, DC 20036
202-628-4160
www.hrc.org

Institute for Welcoming Resources of
the NGLTF
810 West 31st Street
Minneapolis, MN 55408
612-821-4397
www.welcomingresources.org

National Center for Transgender
Equality (NCTE)
1325 Massachusetts Avenue NW, Suite
700
Washington, DC 20005
202-903-0112
www.nctequality.org

National Gay and Lesbian Task Force
(NGLTF)
National Religious Leadership
Roundtable
1325 Massachusetts Avenue NW, Suite
600
Washington, DC 20005
202-393-5177
www.nglftf.org

Parents, Families, and Friends of
Lesbians and Gays Transgender
Network (PFLAG)
PFLAG National Office
1726 M Street NW, Suite 400
Washington, DC 20036
202-467-8194
www.pflag.org

Soulforce
P.O. Box 3195
Lynchburg, VA 24503
469-867-5725
www.soulforce.org

Reproductive Justice and Assisted Reproductive Technologies

The American Fertility Association
305 Madison Avenue, Suite 449
New York, NY 10165
888-917-3777
www.theafa.org

Catholics for Choice
1436 U Street NW, Suite 301
Washington, DC 20009
202-986-6093
www.catholicsforchoice.org

Choice USA
Egg Donation and Young Women's
Health Project
1317 F Street NW, Suite 501
Washington, DC 20004
888-784-4494
www.choiceusa.org

Generations Ahead
1404 Franklin Street, Suite 240
Oakland, CA 94612
510-832-0852
www.generations-ahead.org

NARAL Pro-Choice America
1156 15th Street NW, Suite 700
Washington, DC 20005
202-973-3000
www.naral.org

Planned Parenthood Federation of
America (PPFA)
434 West 33rd Street
New York, NY 10001
212-541-7800
www.ppfa.org

Religious Coalition for Reproductive
Choice (RCRC)
1025 Vermont Avenue NW, Suite 1130
Washington, DC 20005
202-628-7700
www.rcrc.org

RESOLVE: The National Infertility Association
1760 Old Meadow Road, Suite 500
McLean, VA 22102
703-556-7172
www.resolve.org

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