

Engaging Faith Communities in Teen Pregnancy, STD/HIV Prevention Efforts



Why Connect with Faith Communities?

Faith communities may share your vision and goals. Many religious communities are committed to making the world a better place for children, developing youth leadership, and making a difference at the local level. Many have a social justice focus that is expressed through service in local communities. Some faith-based organizations will be able to work with you directly on teen pregnancy prevention; others will be able to join your efforts to prepare youth for adulthood.

It's good to have Faith on your side. When you are advocating for community change, it's good to have the clout and strong community ties that many faith communities bring to the table.

Faith communities are connected to youth. Many religious organizations sponsor youth groups, and frequently these groups are active or interested in social change and community service. Some congregations offer safe spaces for LGBTQ youth or runaway homeless youth. Congregations like these have a wealth of experience and connections to bring to your initiative. Some are already offering positive sex education programs to youth in their congregations.

Talking Points for Engaging Faith Communities

Describe Who You Are Succinctly

"[Our initiative] brings people together to help youth stay healthy, avoid pregnancy, and achieve their goals. We want our community to be a place where young people have the support they need to lead meaningful and fulfilling lives. We [have/are creating] a plan to reduce our community's high adolescent pregnancy rates by expanding access to proven education programs, health services, and youth development opportunities."

What's in it for the Faith Community?

Making a difference: "In our community, adolescent pregnancy rates are higher than the state average. We believe we can help young people change those statistics. By becoming involved, you can help us create the opportunities and resources that youth in our community need and deserve."

Community outreach: "Participation in our effort may help your faith community develop new community connections."

Your services: You may find that religious organizations are interested in a variety of education services that you can provide.

- **Clergy and lay leader professional development:** Religious leaders help members of their congregations cope with all kinds of personal matters, but they are not necessarily experts in sexual health services and counseling. They may be interested in an in-service on teen sex and sexuality in your community, available services, and counseling techniques.
- **Parent education:** You may be able to offer speakers for adult education; for example, "How to Talk to Your Kids about Sex," or "How to Be an Askable Parent." Let your contact know the range of talks you can offer.

- **Youth education:** “We offer an evidence-based sexual health education program that we would be happy to provide to your youth group.”

Identify a Range of Meaningful Roles

Clergy and lay leaders have many demands on their time. Provide a range of ways to get involved, from very light involvement to becoming a central member of your community council. Even the smallest role, however, should be meaningful.

- **Less intensive roles:** Provide space for meetings or events, invite you to write an article for their newsletter; invite you to speak to the congregation or religious coalition.
- **More intensive:** Speak at an initiative event; organize opportunities for you to provide education to lay leaders, parents, or youth; help you plan a clergy event.
- **Most intensive:** Serve on your advisory council, advocate for policy change, solicit other clergy/lay leaders to join your effort.

Tips for Including Faith Communities

1. **Knowing your congregation is key!** A member of the congregation will be the most effective ambassador to the clergy or youth minister.
2. **Establish common ground.** You may find that you are best able to collaborate on goals related to healthy youth development, such as giving young people the tools to make healthy decisions, build positive relationships, and develop education and career goals – all of which have a real impact on teen pregnancy and sexual health.
3. **Check the calendar.** Check an interfaith calendar before scheduling meetings and events at which you hope to have participation from members of faith communities.
4. **Think outside the church.** Welcome and include all faith communities to your initiative—not just majority denominations.
5. **Include lay leaders.** Don’t focus strictly on the clergy. Lay leaders, religious educators, and youth group leaders may be equally valuable and may have more time to offer.

Resources

Involving the Faith Community in Teen Pregnancy Prevention

Chapter seven in a community organizing guide from the National Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unplanned Pregnancy provides strategies, practical tips, and information about collaboration.

www.thenationalcampaign.org/resources/getorganized/ch07.pdf

For more on **community approaches to adolescent sexual health**, visit the ACT for Youth Center of Excellence at http://www.actforyouth.net/sexual_health/community/