May 22 is a day that should be a national holiday. On that day in 1967, 21 clergymen — 19 Protestant and 2 Rabbis — went public on the front page of The New York Times, defying the anti-choice law of the land at that time.

The clergy announced that they would find safe abortions for any women who needed them. Their announcement said that —

“…believing as clergymen that there are higher laws and moral obligations transcending legal codes, we believe that it is our pastoral responsibility and religious duty to give aid and assistance to all women with problem pregnancies. To that end we are establishing a Clergymen’s Consultation Service on Abortion which will include referral to the best available medical advice and aid to women in need….We affirm that there is a period during gestation when, although there may be embryo life in the fetus, there is no living child upon whom the crime of murder can be committed.”

There was a phone number listed that any woman could call. Different clergy were on call every week. The clergy took no money for their services and presented their work under the rubric of pastoral confidentiality. They calculated correctly that no prosecutor would try to break the confidentiality of a pastoral relationship.

The Reverend Howard Moody was the leader of this initiative, and his picture was included with the May 22 New York Times story. His colleague, Arlene Carmen, took on the task of visiting doctors around the country, presenting herself as a pregnant woman to assess their skill and their willingness to charge a reasonable fee. Finding doctors who had taught themselves how to perform abortions was no easy task since abortion was not taught in medical schools.

continued on page 2
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He was made the Archbishop of Florence, and he presided over a major church council there. When he died, Pope Pius II delivered his eulogy praising him as one who “conquered avarice and pride, was outstandingly temperate in every way, was a brilliant theologian and popular preacher.” He was officially canonized a saint of the Catholic Church in 1523.

I would love to find funding to make 3,000 statues of Saint Antoninus. I would then send one to every Catholic bishop, with a somewhat larger statue for Pope Benedict XVI. I would then urge these church leaders to cease and desist from making statements on women’s reproductive choices until they first kneel and say a little prayer to their saintly pro-choice predecessor.

– Daniel C. Maguire

By the time Roe v. Wade ended the need for their work, this group of clergy and religious people had found safe abortions for over 100,000 women. Their public witness and work was certainly influential in changing the law of the United States.

For people who think women (not governments or churches) should be in charge of their own pregnancies, May 22 is a day to be honored and celebrated.

Another Religious May Day

There is another religious event to be celebrated in May. The day is May 10, the feast day of Saint Antoninus, a pro-choice saint of the Roman Catholic Church. Antoninus was pro-choice for early abortions when they would save the life of a woman. This justified many abortions, given the medical conditions of

his day. Antoninus was a Dominican monk and was considered one of the most saintly and learned scholars of his time.

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– Daniel C. Maguire

In March, the Department of Public Information announced findings by the UN’s Population Division: the world population will likely increase by 2.5 billion over the next 43 years, growing from the current 6.7 billion to 9.2 billion in 2050. The size of this expansion equals the size of the world population in 1950.

The burgeoning numbers will be absorbed primarily by the less developed areas of the world, where population is projected to rise from 5.4 billion in 2007 to 7.9 billion in 2050.

In contrast, the population of more developed regions is expected to remain unchanged at 1.2 billion. These populations would fall, if it weren’t for the projected net migration from developing countries. Migrations are expected to average 2.3 million persons annually.

The Religious Consultation on Population, Reproductive Health and Ethics is an international network of progressive feminist religious scholars and leaders who seek out the positive, renewable moral energies of their faith traditions to direct them to the interrelated issues of population, reproductive health, consumption/ecology and the empowerment of women. The Consultation accomplishes this by participating in international and governmental forums, by convening small symposia of theologians and religious ethicists, and by publishing both scholarly and popular materials.

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India’s Cultural Preference for Males Increasing

India adds 19 million to the world’s population each year, yet its balance between genders does not align with numbers in the rest of the world. India’s population profile favors boys. While about 105 boys are born for every 100 girls in most countries, the ratio in India is about 113 per 100, rising to as high as 129 per 100 in some areas. What’s more, the number of boys continues to increase.

India's long-standing preference for sons and its low value of daughters has traditionally fostered an unusually high ratio of men to women within the country’s population. But in recent years, this imbalance has become more dramatic. The numbers of young girls under age 7 declined in all the major states except Kerala between 1991 and 2001. (See chart.)

Misleading Explanations

In the past, India’s imbalance has been credited to better nutrition and health care for males. Females, on the other hand, were thought to die in higher numbers, from early infancy to their mid-thirties. Another explanation: women and girls were more likely to be missed in censuses and surveys, creating the possibility that the data was inaccurate.

In recent years, however, both recordkeeping and health care have improved. Girls have benefited. Child mortality among girls has fallen more quickly than for boys, a fact that undermines traditional explanations — as the number of males continues to grow.

Selective Abortions & Unenforced Laws

The more realistic explanation lies in abortion. Through information supplied by sonograms and other medical tests, some expectant parents are choosing to abort female fetuses. Declining fertility rates adds extra pressure. Because couples are deciding to have fewer children, they want at least one boy child. The ideal family is often portrayed as two sons and one daughter. Studies show that expectant couples seek sex-selective abortion after having birthed one or two daughters and no sons.

While abortion has been legal in India since 1972, sex-selective abortion was declared illegal in 1994. However, the government has not enforced the ban. Sex-selective abortions have increased, especially in wealthier states and in urban areas, where prenatal tests to determine their fetus’ sex are more available.

As the ratio of males continued to rise and as public awareness and concern grew, stricter amendments to the 1994 law were passed in 2002. Yet they have had little effect.

During a routine sonogram, technicians can use gestures or veiled language to reveal the sex of the fetus. Because nothing is committed to writing, the offense is difficult to define or prosecute. Couples are still aborting female fetuses in alarming numbers. Home test kits will only make circumventing the law easier. In fact these kits will give less wealthy families who could not afford sonograms information on which to act.

Cultural Bias

Rather than try to prosecute elusive technicians, the country must work at reversing the gender bias rooted in its culture. In recent years, the government has increased its efforts. Broader campaigns have been launched to improve the status of women and to encourage parents to value daughters as well as sons. In districts where the preference for males is especially strong, initiatives involve medical professionals, religious leaders, schools, television shows, and politicians.

A “Save a Girl Child” campaign has tried to highlight the achievements and value of young girls. In 2000, the government chose a baby girl to represent the country’s official “billionth baby.”

![Boys Per 100 Girls Under Age 7, India and Selected Indian States, 1991 and 2001](chart)

Sources: Registrar General and Census Commissioner, India, 1991 and 2001 Census results.
The news often tells us of drought in far-off places. We think of it as a problem that belongs to others. Yet water scarcity is moving ever closer to home. The WWF, one of the world’s largest and most experienced conservation organizations, began its August 2006 report, *Rich Countries, Poor Water*, with these words:

“... it is now generally well accepted in the developed world that water must be used more efficiently and that water must be made available again to the environment in sufficient quantity for natural systems to function and deliver what are sometimes called their ‘ecosystem services.’ Many countries also recognise that extensive – and very expensive – repairs are required to reduce some of the damage inflicted on water systems and catchments in the past. Putting the rhetoric into practice in the face of habitual practice and intense lobbying by vested interests has been very difficult.”

**Dire Warnings**

The WWF report is one of the first comprehensive overviews of water issues in the developed world. This survey finds that the world’s wealthier nations also face a water crisis. Poorly thought-out water infrastructure and resource mismanagement is making the water catastrophe truly global.

The report alleges that many cities are already losing the battle to maintain water supplies as governments talk about conservation but fail to do anything. Supporting large-scale industry and growing populations along with using water at high rates have “come close to exhausting the water supplies of some First World cities and is a looming threat for many, if not most, others.”

Add in serious and long-lasting contamination from agriculture and industry, as well as drought in some areas and lower rainfall in others, loss of wetlands, increased evaporation, changed snowmelt patterns, leaks from mains and sewers, and the outlook is daunting. Moreover, says the report, “in the last half-century human interventions with water flows have significantly altered global hydrology.”

Rich countries must make drastic changes to policies if they are to avoid the water crisis that is now facing many poorer nations. The report charges wealthier nations with “profligate use and abuse.”

The authors of the report suggest that agriculture in the richer countries should have to pay more for water. Farmers should also be more actively held responsible for water’s efficient use — and for managing wastes, like salt, especially in intensive livestock farming. The report proposed seven ways to tackle the problem:

1. Respect water by conserving catchments, streams, aquifers, floodplains, and wetlands.
2. Balance conservation and consumption.
3. Change attitudes toward water: don’t try to control natural water — let it act naturally.
4. Modify or repair aging or ill-designed infrastructure to reduce waste, contamination, and the disruption of natural processes.
5. Increase water charges to farmers and monitor contaminants produced by agriculture and livestock.
6. Reduce water contamination in general — the effects of many contaminants are yet unknown.
7. Study natural water systems and cycles. There’s much we don’t understand.

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**Birthmark**

On my face I bear the mark of birth — not my own, but our child’s.

The dark blotch still seems new there, on my right cheek, though the boy nears twenty.

Each child has left me marked, thickened, stretched, long after the umbilicus is cut.

Still, a thin tough thread stays, reaches across miles, slack or taut — links me to dangers, conquests, joy and pain.

I could no more cut those threads than I could bleach out the shadow on my face.

c. 1984, from Bloodroot, poems by Sally Tolan
The World Bank has appealed to governments in the Middle East and North Africa to accelerate their efforts at improving water resources. The warning: water availability per person in the region is predicted to drop 50% by 2050. Many countries in this area have already reached a crisis point. The situation will likely worsen without reforms.

This region holds the record for water scarcity, consuming more of its renewable water resources than anywhere else in the world. The World Bank reports, “Cities will come to rely more and more on expensive desalination, and during droughts will have to rely more frequently on emergency supplies brought by tanker or barge.”

In meeting the demand for water, the report continues, “All of this will have short-and long-term effects on economic growth and poverty, will exacerbate social tensions within and between communities, and will put increasing pressure on public budgets.” Leaders in these regions blame surging populations and climate change for the scarcity. As the demand for water grows more serious, water could become a flash point for conflicts.

The World Bank urged the countries concerned to instigate technical and policy reforms. Some of the changes include reducing water subsidies, improving sanitation and irrigation policies, enforcing environmental regulations, and granting financial autonomy to water providers. The Bank also called for greater accountability for government agencies and water service providers.

The SIX Inconvenient Truths

Andrew Ferguson, a member of the Population Media Center’s Program Advisory Board, takes Al Gore’s Inconvenient Truth further — suggesting there are six inconvenient truths in all.

1. Climate change due to greenhouse gases needs to be taken very seriously.
2. There is immense difficulty in finding a way to replace the energy provided by fossil fuels. The consensus of ecologists is that without these fuels, a world population of only about 2 billion could be supported in comfort.
3. An improbable 60% cut in emissions by the USA and Europe by 2050 would be cancelled out by a probable 130% increase by China, India, and Indonesia (after which per-capita emissions in the latter group would still be below those of the former).
4. Allowing only balanced migration into developed countries is one very important aspect of holding down carbon emissions.
5. Globalization is a powerful driver of carbon emissions, so it needs to be abandoned.
6. To continue with ever continuing growth — as economists and the commercial world would have us do — is just about certain to be fatal. Overdeveloped nations need to “undevelop,” and populations need to shrink, with 2 billion as the eventual aim.

The statement signed by eight bishops and two cardinals unfortunately ignored the main message of my letter to them. (To read this letter, see address at end of this article.) I urged them to recognize that they are overly fixated on issues like contraception, abortion, and same-sex marriage to the neglect of issues like peace-making, ecological destruction of God’s good earth, poverty, racism, and sexism issues on which liberal and conservative Catholics could and should unite. Good people from all the world’s religions (including Catholics) differ on the sexual and reproductive issues on which the bishops seem impaled. The bishops treat them as defined dogmas, and they are not.

When I speak, I speak as one theologian. When the bishops (who are not theologians; they are pastors and administrators) speak on moral issues, they pretend to speak for the whole church. It is arrogant of the bishops to claim a monopoly on insight in the Catholic community. According to Catholic teaching, the Holy Spirit does not restrict illuminating grace to three thousand bishops and the pope. History shows, as Cardinal Avery Dulles, S.J., has written, that there are multiple magisteria in the Church (including the wisdom of the faithful, sensus fidelium, and the wisdom of theologians) which historically have been mutually corrective.

In my letter, I pointed approvingly to the example of Cardinal Roger Mahony who entered the immigration debate citing his obligation to a higher law, and as a matter of fact, his words changed the national debate in significant ways.

According to the criteria that the bishops taught in their 1983 pastoral letter on Peace, the current war in Iraq is unjust and immoral. I urged them to rise to prophecy and point out that an unjustified war is collective murder. Why are these bishops so obsessed with what I call “the pelvic issues” and so mute as a group on the ongoing slaughter in Iraq? Why can they not direct their moral passions to the ongoing double-basting of the planet in CO2?

I wrote to the bishops because I believe most theologians stand by mutely as the bishops pronounce on issues where they have no privileged expertise.

The bishops chose not to answer me on those questions. They stuck to their obsession with sexual and reproductive matters. That is “a pity beyond all telling.”

To read Dan’s letter to the bishops, go to www.religiousconsultation.org. On the Home Page, click on Bishops Denounce Writing of a Catholic Theologian. At the end of that letter, you’ll find a link to Dan’s original message, Letter from a Catholic Theologian to All 270 U.S. Catholic Bishops.

http://www.religiousconsultation.org/News_Tracker/letter_from_Catholic_theologian_to_270_bishops.htm

Veena Talwar Oldenburg has edited a book, Shaame-e-Awadh: Writings on Lucknow (Penguin, 2007), which will come out in June. For 2007-2008, Veena has received a Mellon Fellowship from the Humanities Center of the Humanities at The Graduate Center of the City University of New York. She will be writing about the Oriental Debauch and Bandit Queen.

Sa’diyya Shaikh has recently published four articles:

- A popular article published in the South African newspaper Mail and Guardian titled “Islam and the Path of the Heart” (April 14-April 20, 2006) is also available at http://www.religiousconsultation.org/Islam_and_the_path_of_the_heart.htm
Religious Consultation Report

Why Progressive Religious Leaders Must Find Their Voice on Sexual Justice

Excerpts from Participating Scholar
Reverend Debra Haffner

From an editorial appearing on the home page of the Center on American Progress, June 9, 2006.

… We are beginning to counter the perception that the religious right speaks for religion in America. Many of us are also working to address what I have labeled the “reliophobias” of secular progressive organizations, or a fear of religion that keeps organizations from reaching out to faith communities and from articulating a moral vision.

Yet there’s one set of issues that too many progressive religious leaders are still reluctant to address publicly — those related to sexuality. Some believe these issues are just too divisive. Other progressives warn that they will alienate Catholic and evangelical social justice organizations that raising these issues will impair efforts to build a collaborative movement. Still others believe that it is enough to say that they do not support the criminalization of abortion or writing discrimination into the U.S. Constitution, but that is as far as they are willing to go.

The reluctance to discuss sexuality issues means that even “safe” topics, such as sexuality education, child sexual abuse prevention, and HIV/AIDS prevention, often go unaddressed by progressive religious leaders.

The organized religious right has no such reluctance to address sexuality. Its leaders are unequivocally opposed to abortion, emergency contraception, marriage equality and other rights for gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgendered (GLBT) people, and comprehensive sexuality education. Its leaders speak out on these issues, galvanize their base with these issues, and get the attention of national leaders with these issues.

The religious right presents a unified front, regardless of its behind-the-scenes differences … The progressive religious movement must understand that it cannot successfully challenge the religious right while remaining silent on sexuality. As long as the right maintains its erotophobic emphasis, this lack of response by progressives undermines both our integrity and our ability to successfully challenge the moral authority of fundamentalists in the public square on other issues.

I understand there are those who identify themselves as progressive who are personally opposed to abortion and homosexuality. Ideally, however, a progressive sensibility would understand that, in Julian Bond’s words, “The right to reproductive freedom is as basic as the right to eat at a lunch counter or to cast a vote – or the right of two humans to marry.”

To read the editorial in its entirety, go to http://www.americanprogress.org/issues/2006/06/b1754617.html/print.html.

Sa’diyya presented a paper at the International Symposium on Islamic Civilization in Southern Africa, at the University of Johannesburg in September, 2006. Her paper was titled Engaging Gender Ethics: Voices of South African Muslim Women. In that same month, Sa’diyya presented a seminar on Gender Justice, Islam and HIV/AIDS at a POSITIVE MUSLIMS Roundtable on Sexuality, HIV/AIDS and Islam.

Lloyd Steffen, Professor of Religion Studies and University Chaplain at Lehigh University, has been engaged for two years with an inter-faith, multi-disciplinary team working on a document that addresses the limiting of health care services (e.g., emergency contraception) at religiously affiliated hospitals.

The document, now completed, is entitled In Good Conscience: Guidelines for the Ethical Provision of Health Care in a Pluralistic Society. The document has been approved by the Board of Directors of the Religious Coalition for Reproductive Choice, which publicly announced the document in a press conference in Washington in April. Lloyd will be pleased to send a copy of this document to interested members of the Religious Consultation. You can reach Lloyd at LHS1@lehigh.edu.

At the end of March, Rowman and Littlefield will publish Lloyd’s new book, Holy War, Just War: Exploring the Moral Meaning of Religious Violence.
Views on Eradicating Female Excision Before and After Radio Drama

This drawing appeared in the Population Media Center’s November e-newsletter. It is a drawing that shows the death of Inaam Abdul Wahab at age four, a victim of female genital excision.

The Murder of a Child
Inaam died on December 6, 2005 in Sudan. Her death was caused by severe post-excision infection. Although Inaam’s father opposed his daughter’s excision, Inaam’s grandmother brought her to a midwife who performed the procedure. After extensive bleeding, an infection developed. Inaam was brought to a hospital, but she could not be saved. This simple drawing shows Inaam in her bed after she died.

Inaam’s story is all too common in Sudan, where female excision — also known as female genital mutilation — is a common practice. In Sudan, 90% of women are excised. Estimates indicate that two million girls worldwide are excised annually. As with Inaam, the procedure can end in death. Many of those who survive the ordeal face lasting reproductive health complications.

There is no benefit to the practice, only life-threatening risk. This is a Sudanese social custom, not a custom religiously prescribed. With education, this practice could be eradicated. The Population Media Center, the organization that has had great success in using radio dramas to educate people in developing countries about issues like HIV and population control, undertook the challenge.

Drama Changes Attitudes
In 2005, Population Media Center aired a drama titled Ashreat Al Amal (“Sails of Hope”) throughout Khartoum State in Sudan. The storyline of the serial radio program dramatized the risks and complications of female genital mutilation.

Results
During the airing of the program, the percentage of the population who believed that female excision should be eradicated consistently increased.

The baseline survey, conducted before Ashreat Al Amal aired showed —
- 56.5% of respondents reported that eliminating the practice was not at all important to them.
- 28.6% reported that eliminating female excision was important to them.

At the conclusion of Ashreat Al Amal, the endline survey showed —
- 65.4% of respondents reported that female excision should be eliminated
- Only 17.6% reported that the practice should continue.

The changes brought about by PMC’s radio programs are dramatic — life-altering is the better word. Perhaps if the program had aired sooner, four-year-old Inaam Abdul Wahab might still be alive.

To read more about the lives that were changed as a result of the Sudan program, go to http://www.populationmedia.org/docs/SudanReportSinghal.pdf

To make a donation and to help bring PMC programs into the lives of more people worldwide, please visit http://www.populationmedia.org/donate/donate.html.
On December 18, 1979, the United Nations unanimously passed the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW). This milestone in women’s rights has since been ratified by every industrial democracy — except the US.

In a country which proclaims an interest in human rights — where all have been declared to be created equal — we should be counted among the supporters of CEDAW. Why are we not? In the face of unconscious acts perpetrated on women in places around the world, why are we not stepping forward with other industrialized nations to uphold these sentiments so fundamental to democracy? For 27 years, the US Senate has failed to ratify CEDAW.

Two US presidents, Franklin Delano Roosevelt and Harry S. Truman, worked to establish the United Nations. They saw the need for an international organization to keep the peace and promote human rights in a divided world. Since its inception, the UN has helped prevent nuclear war, established the World Court, worked to stave off famine and disease, and promoted education throughout the world.

In the area of personal rights and freedoms, the UN has created many documents, including the Universal Declaration on Human Rights and the International Conventions on Political and Civil Rights and Economic, Cultural, and Social Rights.

Despite decades of these successes, some in the United States have become reluctant to cooperate with the United Nations, voicing suspicions about its efforts and goals, seeing the organization as a threat that undermines the US.

Given this paranoia, some politicians have become fearful of ratifying United Nations initiatives, intimidated by a possible backlash from their constituents. CEDAW seems to have suffered because of this fear.

In the 1970s, opponents of the Equal Rights Amendment were voicing well-organized resistance when CEDAW first sought ratification. The conservative “Concerned Women for America” put out this statement on CEDAW:

“A privilege of our American system is that we, the people, decide what our laws will be and who will represent us. Advocates of CEDAW intend to use the treaty, and its interpretations dreamed up by the CEDAW Committee, to formulate legislation and challenge existing laws. Rulings from a U.N. body, consisting of people from foreign countries and cultures, will be relied upon to attempt to direct the policies, culture, and laws of America.”

The language of the “Concerned Women” is both belittling and paranoid, distorting the initiative into a subversive attempt to destabilize life in the US. At the time, Senator Jesse Helms characterized the treaty as the work of “radical feminists” whose intent was “enshrining their radical anti-family agenda into international law.”

CEDAW is not hostile to the US nor is it radical. The treaty seeks to establish basic standards of human rights that this country already embraces. Let’s hope that our newly elected Congress might have the fortitude to vote on the treaty. Those interested in this issue may want to write to their representatives.

To read the treaty: [http://www.maximsnews.com/1006cedawwomenstreatyfulltextdecember18.htm](http://www.maximsnews.com/1006cedawwomenstreatyfulltextdecember18.htm)
Religious Institute on Sexual Morality, Justice, and Healing
An Open Letter to Religious Leaders on Adolescent Sexuality

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

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

The remainder of the Letter includes sections on the following topics.

**Affirming Adolescent Sexuality.** 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.

**Ethical Sexual Decision-Making for Adolescents.** We acknowledge the risks, consequences and dangers of adolescent sexuality …. The wisdom of religious traditions confirms that a moral sexuality demands self-understanding, respect, and self-discipline …. 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.

**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 …. 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, openly, honestly, and accurately. Congregations can explore the many dimensions of sexuality and help teens, resist social, media, peer, and partner pressure. Young people should be encouraged to talk to parents and other family members — and recognize the diversity among adolescents …. Faith communities can help model positive, healthy, and joyful attitudes about human sexuality and relationships.

Role of Society. We urge congregations and religious leaders to work in community coalitions to promote adolescent sexual health through comprehensive sexuality education and reproductive health care that is affordable, sensitive, and confidential.

An Affirmation of Adolescent Rights. As religious leaders, we affirm that young people have the right to develop their own moral agency to make informed, responsible decisions about their sexual health and behavior — and ask any questions they have about sexuality without fear or condemnation. Furthermore, the congregation will welcome and respect teens, regardless of their life circumstances and sexual decisions.

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. Download the entire letter from www.religiousinstitute.org.

Using Mosques to Preach Family Planning

The Indo-Asian News Service reported last December that Mosques throughout Pakistan are beginning to distribute contraceptives and informational materials about family planning and the importance of safe sex.

According to Chaudhry Shahbaz Hussain, federal population planning minister, about 22,000 clerics, including 6,000 women scholars, will carry a message promoting the benefits of a small family to the people. In addition, programs are also being aimed at university students.

Using mosques as distribution points is an approach that imitates a very successful program used in Bangladesh. Creating a slogan, “small family, happy family,” also helped Bangladesh gain impressive ground in population control. The country's results have made many international aid agencies sit up and take notice. As in Bangladesh, clerics in Pakistan would use sermons to explain the significance of family planning.

Pakistan's current birth rate is 1.86%. The government would like to lower the rate to 1.3% by 2020. The federal population planning minister speculates that if this plan works effectively, the country may reach its goal by 2010. He admits that the program's success depends on bridging “a gulf between the ministry and the common man.”

One hurdle to be overcome is the reason that people favor large families: the elderly depend on their children for social security. The new message to be delivered is that two well-educated children can do the job.

Should People Have the Right to Determine Family Size and Receive the Information and Means to Do So?

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*The Religious Consultation is a 501(c)3 organization. Donations are tax deductible.*

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