



Voice for Choice

A Newsletter from the Minnesota Religious Coalition for Reproductive Choice

Sexuality Education as Ministry

A Note from the Executive Director *Kiely Todd Roska*

Growing up in the United States, young people see and hear about sexuality from many different sources. Youth receive confusing and conflicting messages from parents, peers, media, and religious institutions. Parents want the best for their children, but many have difficulty talking openly with their children about sexuality. Teenagers can pressure one another into sexual activities and share inaccurate information. Media often objectify human bodies and glorify sexual violence. Some religious communities preach abstinence, but most are completely silent about the issue because sexuality causes discomfort and controversy.

However, if religious communities do not address sexuality, it is not that young people will have no information; rather, youth will have inaccurate and inadequate information to make healthy choices for their own bodies. And most likely, young people will not have discussed sexuality in the context of ethics, morality, love, and justice.

Even comprehensive sexuality education programs in public schools deal primarily with issues of anatomy, sexually transmitted infections, and contraception. These programs usually describe human physiology without discussing relationships, decision-making, identity, or the abuse of sexuality. Broadening the definition of sexuality is essential if we want to have meaningful conversations about this sacred part of our humanity.

As religious communities, our mission involves caring about the spiritual well-

being of all people, and healthy sexuality is an essential part of our spiritual well-being. Religious communities should be concerned about helping young people develop a moral compass that honors their lived experiences and helps them navigate their lives with integrity.

We need to teach young people that their sexuality is a sacred gift, and that what they do with their bodies is part of how they live out their faith. Teaching sexuality education in congregations also provides desperately needed resources and community support to families who are often at a loss for how to effectively engage or counter the messages that their children are being taught by peers and the wider culture.

Being holistic in our approach means that we should speak openly and honestly about sexuality. We live in a society that celebrates women as sexual objects, and does not respect the moral agency of young people or the dignity of LGBT persons. When people are being hurt by silence, misinformation, discrimination, and objectification, we need to courageously challenge the status quo. In this environment, teaching comprehensive, holistic sexuality education in congregations is a compassionate, prophetic act. Indeed, it is a form of ministry.

The Minnesota Religious Coalition for Reproductive Choice provides training for two comprehensive sexuality curricula: *Our Whole Lives* and *Keeping It Real!*

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Celebrating the 2007 Faith and Freedom Awards

Thank you to all our supporters and to everyone who attended our 8th Bi-annual Faith and Freedom Awards Banquet on October 23. It was our largest banquet to date, and included our first Silent Auction. The evening was a huge success! The Faith and Freedom Awards honor organizations and individuals who have distinguished themselves through their dedication to reproductive freedom, comprehensive sexuality education, and religious liberty.

This year, Faith and Freedom Awards went to Rabbi Marcia Zimmerman and Rev. Dr. Nadean Bishop, and posthumously to Dr. Jane Hodgson.

Circle of Honor Awards were presented to Sarah Greene, Rev. Walter Lockhart, Representative Neva Walker, First Congregational Church of Minnesota, and the Prairie Star District, Unitarian Universalist Association.



Left: MNRRCRC board member, Judyth Katz (left) with Faith and Freedom Award recipient and keynote speaker Rabbi Marcia Zimmerman.

Below: Former MNRRCRC executive director and Faith and Freedom Award recipient, Rev. Dr. Nadean Bishop



Above: MNRRCRC board chair, Rev. Judith Allen Kim (right) with Nancy Burke, who accepted a Faith and Freedom Award on behalf of her mother, Dr. Jane Hodgson

Right: Board member Rev. T. Michael Rock (right) with Rev. Eric Nelson, who accepted the Circle of Honor Award on behalf of First Congregational Church of Minnesota.



Sexuality Education as Ministry, continued from page 1

The *Our Whole Lives* curriculum was developed by the United Church of Christ and the Unitarian Universalist Association. *Our Whole Lives* offers curriculum for grades K-1, 4-6, 7-9, 10-12, young adult, and adult. There is a companion resource for each age level called *Sexuality and Our Faith*. *Our Whole Lives* can be used in congregations or in secular or multi-faith settings.

The *Keeping It Real!* curriculum was developed by the Religious Coalition for Reproductive Choice, and is a culturally-specific curriculum for teens in African American Christian churches. *Breaking the Silence* is a companion curriculum for parents.

The Minnesota Religious Coalition also has a 49-page annotated bibliography of faith-based sexuality education curricula. Email kiely@mnrsrc.org for more information.

The next training for adults who want to teach the *Our Whole Lives* curriculum with 7-9th and 10-12th graders will be offered February 1-3 at the First Congregational Church in Northfield, MN. For more information and to register, <http://www.psduua.org/Events/OWLNorthfield2008> or contact kiely@mnrsrc.org.

The next training for *Keeping It Real!* and *Breaking the Silence* will take place in February, 2008. Please visit www.mnrsrc.org or call 612-870-0974 for more information.

New *Keeping It Real!* Coordinator

We are thrilled to welcome Crystal Brown, who joined the MN Religious Coalition in August as the new *Keeping It Real!* Coordinator. *Keeping It Real!* is a culturally specific program developed by the Black Church Initiative to prepare African American youth to make healthy, responsible decisions as spiritual and sexual beings.

Crystal earned her Masters degree in social work from Augsburg College in June and her graduate licensure in October. While in graduate school, Crystal worked with students ages 5 - 15 through internships at Ramsey Junior High School in St. Paul and at Reuben Lindh Family Services in Minneapolis. These internships fueled her passion for working with families and youth, particularly those who are underserved and often ignored by the majority population.

Crystal co-planned the 3rd annual Teen Summit held at Camphor Memorial United Methodist Church on October 27th and looks forward to expanding outreach



projects and developing similar teen summits with other organizations in the Twin Cities in addition to building the base of Minnesota churches participating in *Keeping It Real!*

If you would like more information about *Keeping It Real!* or are interested in teaching the curriculum in your congregation, please contact Crystal at 612-870-0974 or crystal@mnrsrc.org.

Welcome, Crystal!

Voice for Choice is a publication of the Minnesota Religious Coalition for Reproductive Choice. If you would like your article or letter considered for our next newsletter, please e-mail Kate at kate@mnrsrc.org, and write "newsletter submission" in the subject line.

MARK YOUR CALENDARS

35th Anniversary Celebration of Roe v. Wade

Together with the seven other organizations of the Minnesota Choice Coalition, MNRRCRC will mark the historic 35th anniversary of Roe v. Wade with a dinner and celebration at International Market Square on **January 17 at 6 pm**. The Keynote Speaker will be former U.S. Surgeon General Dr. Jocelyn Elders, and we anticipate over 500 like-minded Minnesotans will be joining us at the event. For more information visit the MN Choice Coalition at www.mnchoicecoalition.org.

“From Danger to Dignity”

Join us on **January 20** at First Universalist Church in Minneapolis to watch and discuss Dorothy Fadiman’s documentary “From Danger to Dignity” about the Clergy Consultation Service, a nationwide network of clergy that helped women get safe abortions from 1967-1973. Free and open to the public. Call 612-870-0974 for information.

Our Whole Lives Curriculum Training

Where: First Congregational Church in Northfield

When: February 1-3, 2008

Learn how to teach the *Our Whole Lives* comprehensive sexuality curriculum with 7-9th and 10-12th graders in your congregation. To register online with a credit card or to print out a paper application, please visit the Prairie Star District at www.psdoua.org/Events/OWLNorthfield2008. For more information, contact Kiely at kiely@mnrcc.org.

Letters from our summer interns:

Carolyn Browender writes:

Last summer, after completing my first year at American University in Washington, D.C., I saw a posting for a summer internship at MNRRCRC and immediately started drafting a cover letter. For nearly three years in high school, I had volunteered at Planned Parenthood, and while I never felt conflicted about my pro-choice beliefs, I found myself frustrated with the portrayal of all religious individuals as pro-life. During my first year in college, I began attending United Methodist services and became involved with the United Methodist Student Association. My spiritual beliefs and my belief in reproductive justice went hand in hand, but I was still frustrated at society’s portrayal of these things as mutually exclusive.

When I walked into MNRRCRC’s office for the first time and saw a sign stating, “Abortion is a personal decision best left in the hands of a woman and her God,” I knew I was in the right place. While I certainly wasn’t out on the front lines, I am proud to say that I worked with a pro-choice group that approaches reproductive justice from this less-publicized perspective. One nurse at a clinic that I e-mailed wrote, “I really appreciate your organization’s approach to religious freedom and reproductive choice issues. How empowering for women and men who wonder if the two can coexist.”

Willa Ahlschwede writes:

I grew up in Omaha, Nebraska, where religion, for me, was synonymous with conservative politics. Religion equaled mega-churches, conservative Catholicism, and a red, white and blue billboard proclaiming “This is God’s Land.” Politics equaled enthusiastic bills banning gay marriage and late term abortion. But then in college I surprised even myself and majored in religious studies. What I discovered was that many religions are not motivated by fundamentalism or greed, but by moral men and women with an energizing faith.

This past summer at MNRRCRC once again impressed upon me that faith is empowering, that religious people are often the most progressive, and that the “religious right” in the U.S. does not get the last word on God. I was inspired by the way that MNRRCRC makes community a priority and approaches all faith traditions with respect. At MNRRCRC, change is reached through dialogue and by treating men and women with love and understanding and as stewards of their own lives.

***Faith and Choices*—Empowering Congregations and Individuals**

The *Faith and Choices* curriculum was developed to give congregations an opportunity to increase dialogue about morality, faith, and reproductive choice. The curriculum is meant to accompany denomination-specific *Faith & Choices* Action Kits, which provide denominational statements about reproductive choice, sample sermons, testimonies before congress, and relevant scripture passages. The curriculum brings these resources to life in the context of group discussion, helping participants clarify their own beliefs in relation to their faith tradition and empowering them to work for reproductive justice.

In the last year and a half, the Coalition has trained over 100 people to teach the *Faith and Choices* curriculum, and congregations that have taught the curriculum have reported back on the successes of the discussions.

Sara, a recent *Faith and Choices* participant, said that she came out of the sessions feeling more fully grounded in her faith *and* her belief in reproductive justice. “Reproductive choice is not just a secular thing,” she said. “It’s a complex issue, and being able to discuss it openly in a trusting community really helped me clarify my beliefs about it.”

Faith and Choices participants are encouraged to engage with their denomination’s statement about reproductive choice and write their own faith statements. Sara’s discussion group decided that the denominational statements in the curriculum were not personal enough, so participants came up with individual belief statements that were connected to their own lives and had more meaning for them.

The *Faith and Choices* curriculum can also help participants come to terms with their personal experiences with abortion. “My daughter and I were both participating in the *Faith and Choices* discussions,” Sara said, “but I had never told her that I had an abortion before she was born. My daughter always had a clear sense of justice, and I never had to press her into her beliefs about reproductive rights, but still, I hadn’t found the way to say ‘I had an abortion.’ I think I was afraid she would judge me, and that her image of me as a mother would be forever changed.”

But participating in the discussion with her daughter brought them closer together, which is why Sara decided to tell her daughter about her abortion. “I realized that in order to be fully spiritual and comfortable with who I am, I needed to share this information with her. I also needed her to know that the abortion was something that brought her father and me closer together. People often claim that abortion destroys relationships, but it didn’t destroy our relationship. It made us more dedicated to each other.”

Sara and her daughter went out for dinner before one of the discussion sessions and she was surprised to learn that her daughter already knew what she was going to tell her. “She was totally supportive.”

The *Faith and Choices* discussion groups are facilitated by congregation members trained in the curriculum. The sessions can unite congregations, help individuals clarify what they believe about reproductive justice in the context of their faith, and help move participants to a place where they are ready to advocate for choice and women’s reproductive rights.

“The wonderful thing about these discussions is that you don’t have to agree with each other,” Sara said. “Abortion is not a black and white issue, and one of the things that I learned was to be more accepting of what other people say and believe about abortion. Even if we disagree, we can talk about this issue respectively, without screaming at each other.”

**** The next *Faith and Choices* training will take place January 31, 6-8:30 pm at the
Minnesota Church Center, 122 West Franklin Avenue in Minneapolis****

If you are interested in being trained to facilitate *Faith and Choices* discussion sessions in your congregation, e-mail Kiely at kiely@mnrcc.org. RSVP by January 25.



Minnesota's Religious
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