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'Our Whole Lives' Sex education program bares all

No topic off limits: Church's program shocks many for frank approach.

By Tom Kiskan

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"Oh my God," said a Simi Valley parent told of a new sexuality education program that deals unabashedly with orgasms, masturbation and homosexuality.

In one telling exercise, high school kids will describe sexual fantasies involving whipped cream or other items. In another task designed to promote acceptance, participants will create slogans that could be used in a gay pride festival.

No topic is off-limits in the weekly course to be offered in April at a small, liberal church that is about as typical of Simi Valley as snowplows. Students will be taught about abstinence but also given tools to stay safe if they choose to have sex. Condoms will be available, along with lessons on how to use them.

Supporters characterize the program as part of a needed antidote to a society unwilling to answer questions coursing through teen-agers and instead relying on abstinence and information on sexually transmitted diseases as primary educational tools. But tell Michelle Scharf about the controversial curriculum -- with videos that include some nudity and an exercise in which students list slang names for various sex organs -- and it's as if she is an old-fashioned record player stuck on a skip.

"Oh my God. Oh my God."

Scharf, who has children ages 12 and 15, prefers a more clinical approach to sex education and worries that providing too much information is akin to a dare.

"I think the more you introduce to them, the more curious they become," she said, then referring to lessons involving condoms. "It's just asking for trouble. It's condoning kids to have sex at a high school age."

The course, called *Our Whole Lives*, shoves new ammunition into an old fight over how much information should be given to teen-agers about sexuality and who should be providing it.

Supporters say the program for high-school-age kids is meant to supplement family efforts. The course begins with mandatory four-hour orientations where parents are told exactly what the kids will learn. But they also say the sessions focus on areas families and schools wincingly avoid.

Developed over several years through a national collaboration of the United Church of Christ and the Unitarian Universalist Association, the *Our Whole Lives* curriculum deals with sensuality, intimacy and sexual identity as well as the more typical health and risk issues.

Students are taught communication and refusal skills, and delve into topics as disparate as the keys to a lasting relationship, body image and oral sex. The program is open to all families, though class sizes are limited to 16 people and several of the slots are taken by members of the United Church of Christ in Simi Valley.

Our Whole Lives is designed to help teens understand their bodies and to develop their own values and decision-making systems about sexuality. Organizers characterize the class as a safe place to ask anything. They insist every query will be answered head-on.

"The decisions people make about sexuality are among the most important decisions they'll make," said Stuart Bechman-Besamo, who will lead the program along with his wife, Jeanie

Mortensen-Besamo. "We want to help these people be well prepared through providing them accurate and full information."

The "Oh my God" reaction isn't unusual. The program tramples the delicate boundaries observed by school programs mandated by the state education code to hone in on abstinence and to give parents the option of pulling children out of sex-ed classes.

Schools craft their programs with exceeding caution, sometimes involving parents and clergy on committees that recommend classroom materials to be used. Still, there are people who balk at the occasional use of Planned Parenthood speakers to talk about contraception to high school kids.

"I think they go too far," said the Rev. Dave Wilkinson of Sunrise Christian Fellowship in Simi Valley, offering a similar reaction to the Our Whole Lives program. "As a church we need to provide a very biblical, healthy view of sex, but I don't think showing kids how to put a condom on a banana is going to teach that."

Accurate, honest sex education is a good thing, and because sexuality is a centerpiece of discussions about morality, churches should be involved as long as they take a secondary role to parents, said Teri Reisser, a marriage and family therapist and former board member of the Crisis Pregnancy Center in Thousand Oaks.

The problem is that families often wilt under the pressure of responsibility.

"Parents are woefully inadequate in being able to speak frankly to kids about sexuality," Reisser said. "What I find is that parents teach an abstinence message but forget their kids still have raging hormones and still have questions about masturbation and orgasms, etc."

Reisser's concern with the Our Whole Lives program is its direction. It should not be aimed at high schools but at their parents. They should be the ones taking the 40 hours of class, including two overnight sessions, learning negotiation skills, the intricacies of intimacy and anything else that needs to be passed on to their kids.

"Then parents can decide where they draw the line," she said.

Our Whole Lives will be held at the United Church of Christ, a Simi congregation of about 80 members who pride themselves on their openness about sexual orientation, varying religious beliefs and virtually everything else.

Considering that few others adequately tackle sex education, the Rev. Bill Greene thinks it's appropriate for a church to take the lead. It's a house of truth, he said, a place where people can explore any topic.

"Pleasure and being sensual and being aroused is part of being human," he said. "Creation has given us incredible gifts to appreciate and use our bodies."

But many others suggest limits are not necessarily bad.

"On almost any topic, you can give too much information, whether it's U.S. history or sex education," said Richard Simpson, assistant superintendent for instructional services at the Conejo Unified School District.

Simpson said his district's program -- which includes parent and clergy involvement on an advisory committee, does not allow Planned Parenthood presentations and deals briefly with sexual orientation -- is cautious because that's what the community wants.

Perhaps the most crucial debate concerns how teen-agers process sex education, with many parents and religious leaders arguing that information on fantasies and various sexual acts just encourages kids to experiment before they're ready.

"It makes sex an end to itself rather than a way of expressing love between a wife and husband," Wilkinson said. "The more kids are exposed to sex, the more they want to experiment with it."

Some parents endorse the argument but others point to the proliferation of sexual images and messages in television, movies and music. Society is saturated with sex and kids are going to be affected whether teachers or parents address all the complexities or not, they say.

"There's no data that this kind of information is dangerous or encourages kids to have sex," said Claire Brindis, an adolescent health professor at UC San Francisco who evaluates sex education programs.

She pointed at countries such as France, Germany and the Netherlands that provide comparatively extensive programs on sexuality.

"The data indicates that the kids who are armed with information tend to make smarter and wiser decisions," she said. "It's the kids growing up in ignorance who make the poor mistakes."

Brindis worries programs that focus primarily on abstinence or biblical definitions of sexual morality push teen-agers to rely on anecdotal information that makes old wives tales look scientific. She told of one teen-ager who believed that sitting on a cold curb after sex decreased the chances of pregnancy.

"Here we are in the year 2001 and we have a lot of young people who are really ignorant," she said. "I think that's more dangerous than equipping kids with information."

The differing opinions aren't limited to adults. Talk to teen-agers near a high school in Ventura and some will tell you the schools don't do nearly enough, while others say they're taught everything they need to know. In fact, one self-assured junior greeted a question about sex with a wide grin. "What do you want to know?" he asked.

Two seniors dealt with the question more seriously. They said schools do what they can. Then they paused before trying to explain what educators can't do.

"They can't," said one of the students, "make the kids listen."

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For more information on the Simi Valley Our Whole Lives program, call 582-4950 or check out the Web site at www.uua.org/owl.