

RELIGION

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Sex-education program grows

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Sex is wonderful and fun, exactly what God created it to be, says Meg Rice, a Houston homemaker who has formulated a Christian sex education program drawing national interest.

More than 1,500 parents and teen-agers attended the four-week sessions of the "Sex, God and Me" program held at four major Houston churches this year, said Rice, a St. John the Divine Episcopal Church member.

The five-year-old program, which promotes sexual abstinence until marriage, began with 150 parents and their children. It is attracting attention not only from Houston churches but also from congregations in other parts of Texas and far away as Seattle.

The program has been adopted at First Presbyterian Church, St. Luke's United Methodist Church and St. Martin's Episcopal Church, all prominent Houston congregations, in addition to St. John the Divine.

"Sex, God and Me" is an example of programs generated by concerned laity rather than clergy

or national church bureaucrats. The Rev. Laurens Hall, rector of St. John the Divine, said laity are launching and supporting new programs in church life. Promise Keepers, a national Christian men's movement, is an example of laity successfully launching programs.

"God is moving mightily with this program," Rice said. "It's not Meg Rice; it's not St. John the Divine Church."

The seed for the program was planted five years ago when Rice cast about for a way to emphasize her traditional Christian views on sex to her three teen-agers.

There was no continuing youth sex education program at her parish. "It is a difficult subject for churches to deal with," she said.

Rice and an equally concerned mother and friend, Elizabeth Wareing, approached Hall about sponsoring a mother-daughter seminar based on a Christian book on dating. Hall agreed, but asked the seminar include fathers and sons and that it be annual.

From the program's outset, parents contributed ideas and became actively involved. "The

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huge success of this program is based on the fact that it is run by parents," Rice said. "The Bible tells parents to train the children in the way they should go, it doesn't say the churches should."

Parents like Donna Walden, a member of First Presbyterian, have taken the initiative in introducing the program to their churches. Although she and her son and daughter had already discussed sexual morality, Walden still participated in the program at St. John's. "It reinforced what we were teaching them at home," Walden said.

The program targets seventh- to 12th-grade youths — and their parents. It consists of four two-hour sessions held on Sunday mornings.

Parents and youths jointly attend the first hourlong sessions that deal with various aspects of sexuality. Only in the first of the four sessions is the group separated according to gender for an in-depth description of sexuality and morality. Among the topics covered are biblical guidelines for intimacy, a description of sexually transmitted diseases given by a physician, and forgiveness and "second virginity," or adhering to chastity, for youths who have been sexually active.

Parents and youths are separated in the second hour. Parents attend parenting sessions dealing with communications and youth-related problems such as drugs and alcohol abuse. The youths are divided into small groups according to gender and age to discuss the week's topic.

The youth groups are directed by young adults or people recently married who believe in premarital sexual abstinence, Rice said. The lectures are given by experienced speakers who relate well with youths, including Houston-area athletes such as ex-Houston Oiler Doug Dawson.

Rice said the program opens clogged lines of communication between parents and children. "That happens on the ride home and in the privacy of their homes," she said. "Many parents told me they were finally able to break through the barriers and talk to their kids about sexuality."

Walden said the program strengthened her relationship with her daughter.

"It opens the door to communications between the parent and the teen-agers, because teen-agers think we don't know what we are talking about," Walden said.

A clear, unequivocal stand against premarital sex is important for youths, Rice said.

American culture and media promote sex as recreational or an innocuous rite of passage from adolescence to adulthood, she said.

"The world is saying, 'Go ahead and have sex. It doesn't hurt you as long as you are mature and have (contraceptive) protection,'" she said. "That is a fallacy. The girls come back hurt, ashamed and broken-hearted."



Ben De Soto / Chronicle

Coordinators for "Sex, God and Me," a Christian sex-education program generated by concerned laity rather than clergy or church bureaucrats, are, from left, Elizabeth Wareing, Becky Kidd, Donna Walden, Susan Kamas and Meg Rice.

She said boys also suffer from shame and guilt. But "Sex, God and Me" shows both parents and youths they are not alone in their values and moral stands.

The program encourages youths to cooperate as prayer partners to withstand peer pressure for sexual activity.

Sexually abstinent kids are a by-product of youths who have adopted biblical values and maintain active spiritual lives, she said. "The emphasis is sex, but it is also Christianity and living it," Rice said.

"I didn't realize God cared what I did," wrote one seventh-grader on his program evaluation.

"That is a major, major spiritual awakening," Rice said, noting parents also have eye-opening, spiritually transforming experiences.

Eight Ways to Talk with Your Teen

Today's teens look different, talk different, and listen to different music. But the basic questions about God and themselves remain the same. Though you may not know the lyrics to the latest hit song, your interest and help provide them necessary stability, security, and unconditional love. Get to know them, in order to direct them "in the way they should go."

1. *Maintain open conversations*, even about "trivial" things, so that the lines of communication will be open for weightier topics.

2. *Make the adage* "seek first to understand" your starting point. Listen twice as much as you talk. (More than seven sentences in a row constitutes a lecture.)

3. *Be careful about pointing out* mispronunciations or grammar mistakes. Listen for the point of the story.

4. *Remember how emotionally intense* you felt when you were sixteen? Give your teen some slack when he or she loses perspective.

5. *When possible, make eye contact* with them as you listen.

6. *Refuse self-pity* when your teen chooses another adult (a teacher or youth worker) to confide in. They may need the objectivity someone outside the family provides.

7. *Follow what's happening* in your teenager's

life—"How's cheer-leading going?" "What's up with the youth group these days?"

8. *Although it may not appear to be true*, your teen needs to know you are available for him. Working moms and dads can consider an after-school telephone conversation.



Discipline originally meant "to educate to the point of correction or change." Discipline plays an integral part in "training your child in the way he should go," but it's not the whole story! When your only interaction revolves around discipline, your relationship with

your child suffers. So make sure to balance necessary discipline with generous doses of laughter, shared experiences, and conversation. Your child will then grow to understand the healthy balance between authority, obedience, and character development. (FL)