

Interfaith-government partnership combats teen pregnancy
Episcopalians model cooperative effort in North Carolina

By Sharon Sheridan, October 19, 2010

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[Episcopal News Service] Religious groups and government bodies often seem at odds over social issues such as preventing teen pregnancy. But not in Gaston County, North Carolina, where an Interfaith coalition first convened in 2000 by Episcopalian William Seabrook to combat issues related to homelessness in downtown Gastonia now is working with the county health department and other secular groups to reduce teen pregnancy.

Those efforts include raising awareness of the issue and encouraging churches and other groups to implement programs of their choosing to lower the number of among the community partners in a recently

announced \$5.8 million initiative funded by the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention to tackle teen pregnancy in Gaston County.

"There's a natural partnership between the faith communities and teen-pregnancy-prevention programs," said Amanda Fuller, teen-pregnancy-prevention supervisor for the Gaston County Health Department. "Both the health department and the faith community have a shared interest in building strong families and the healthy development of young people.

"We understand that preventing teen pregnancy is more than biology," she said. "It's more than contraception. It involves values, beliefs, parent-child relationships. It's a very complex issue, and we know that together the faith community and the teen-pregnancy-prevention program can work together to change teen high-risk behavior, and we know religion and morals can help protect teens from becoming sexually active too early. There is research out there to support that.

"The Gastonia Faith Network involves so many different churches from across the county and so many different faith backgrounds," she said. "They have a strong presence, and they're also deeply involved in the communities that they're in. It only makes sense for us to work together because we do have common goals."

Tackling homelessness

A 46-year-member of St. Mark's Episcopal Church, Seabrook convened the first meeting of what began as a downtown faith network a decade ago. "That was because things were really bad in downtown Gastonia, much of which had to do with the homeless," he recounted. "Their behavior was terrible, they were loitering, they were trashing the streets, they were sleeping in the bushes, they were begging [from] everybody and scaring people."

The churches met with the mayor and city police about the importance of working together on the issue, he said. "The city police really came to our aid in many ways. They increased their presence on the streets. They changed their attitude a great deal from one of, 'If you don't behave, I'm going to see you in jail,' to, 'I understand something about the plight of the homeless. I'm sorry you're having to deal with it. Can I help you?'"

Meanwhile, the network told the homeless, "You've got to help us, too, and you've got to start changing your behavior," and they did," Seabrook said. "You don't ever hear about that problem any more."

Over time, the downtown network branched out and became the Gastonia Faith Network. Programs include a church-Rotary Club collaboration to run a "store" with low-priced items for poor residents to buy Christmas presents, a Coats for Kids program and Undies Sunday, when churches collect new underwear for the homeless. St. Mark's hosts network meetings, and parishioners volunteer for various programs, including helping throw a Happy Birthday Baby Jesus Party for children while their parents shop in the Rotary store, said the Rev. Shawn Griffith, church rector. "The kids got to hear the Christmas story and play games and dress up as Wise Men and have their picture taken."

"I think the network is definitely making a difference," he said. "It's been a voice in the community that our city leaders listen to. They occasionally come and speak, and issues are brought up and then passed out through this network to churches so that they can actively be involved in both social and civic issues. It's a good communication place. It's also a great resource where we can share with one another things that are going on and find out who we can go to speak to to get help."

Earlier this year, the network expanded to launch a Faith Collaboration Network aiming to help solve problems throughout the county and to "identify things that are being done well and publicize that," Seabrook said. "We don't just hunt for problems. We also hunt for good news that we can spread around the county."

Focusing on teen pregnancy

The Gastonia Faith Network advisory committee continues to meet, while the new collaboration network is more of a "vital network" to provide information and resources, Seabrook explained. They've identified 14 problems, and teen pregnancy tops the list, he said.

Gaston County has the 39th highest teen-pregnancy rate in North Carolina, which in turn has the 14th highest rate in the country, said Elizabeth Hundley Finley, an Episcopalian who is the development and communications manager for the Adolescent Pregnancy Prevention Campaign of North Carolina (APPCNC), which will administer the CDC grant. "They're a high-rate county in a high-rate state."

To address this, the faith network is reaching out to ministerial associations and denominations across the county, Seabrook said. The network is urging faith groups to learn about the problem and then to do something about it. "Doing nothing is just not acceptable."

The network is encouraging churches and other civic groups to show a video highlighting the issue and is publicizing programs taking various approaches to reducing teen pregnancies. They range from programs aimed specifically at parents or teens to ones for parents and teens, from programs stressing abstinence to more comprehensive ones, Seabrook said. "It's pretty much a smorgasbord. We also say, 'If you don't like any of these, you go out and create your own.'"

The health department, now a formal member of the network, similarly offers multiple programs and can tailor them to meet the needs of different faith communities, Fuller said. "We can take them evidence-based programs that have been proven to work, so they'll be the most successful in their effort. We have partnered with several churches within the community."

"We can all believe different things, but we can work together," Fuller said.

Oct. 19 will mark the first planning meeting for the CDC-funded program, Gaston County Youth Connected: Integrating Education and Clinical Services for Gaston County, she said.

The proposal was one of eight funded across the country. In the first, planning stage, the APPCNC will develop three local advisory groups: community, youth and core-partner panels. The goal will be to offer varied, proven programs, targeting the different needs of different areas or segments of the population, Finley said.

Finley said she expected the faith network to be part of the community advisory panel and likely the core-partner panel as well. "I would also like to see them work with us to put together the youth panel so that we can be sure that youth that are involved in their faith lives also are connected with the project."

The Gastonia Faith Network, she said, is "a real model for what other areas of the state could be doing in terms of using those very strong faith networks and communities to affect the teen-pregnancy rate. They're using great programs. They've been incredibly smart about knowing who in the community needs to be in on the conversation ... They understand that in so many communities the public-health folks who work really hard to affect teen-pregnancy rates and the faith communities can be at odds, and they've worked to bridge those gaps."

Noted Fuller, "Talking about sex and teen pregnancy can be very difficult for the faith communities. We are so lucky to have the Gastonia Faith Network and Bill Seabrook, people who are not sweeping teen pregnancy under the rug."

-- Sharon Sheridan is an ENS correspondent.

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