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Teenage Pregnancy A Church problem?

Revd Canon Jane Fraser

Just So
stories and critical comment
on social justice themes

Statistics

Worcestershire

Under 18 conceptions = 346 (2004)

33.0 rate (per 1000 15-17yr olds)

Under 16 conceptions = 57 (2004)

5.3 rate (per 1000 13-15yr olds)

Dudley

Under 18 conceptions = 272 (2004)

48.1 rate (per 1000 15-17yr olds)

England

Under 18 conceptions = 39,545 (2004) 41.5
rate (per 1000 15-17yr olds)

Under 16 conceptions = 7,179 (2004) 7.5
rate (per 1000 13-15yr olds)

Since 1998 there has been an overall reduction of 6% in Worcestershire and 12.1% in Dudley. This compares to a reduction of 11.1% nationally

Teenage Pregnancy A Church problem?

By the Revd Canon Jane Fraser

The United Kingdom has the worst record on teenage pregnancy in Europe. Around 40,000 teenagers under the age of 18 in England become pregnant each year, including 7,000 who are under 16 (see page 16). While some of these young people and their children go on to have happy and fulfilled lives, many do not. All too common are stories of unfinished education, poor employment prospects, low income and poor housing. This in turn results in poor physical, emotional and spiritual health for both the young parents and their children. Those who choose to terminate their pregnancy face fewer long-term consequences, in the form of regret for their decision or social disadvantage, but concerns for the individual by her social and faith communities are, nonetheless, also significant.

The response of the British government was to introduce a teenage pregnancy strategy in July 1999, with the aim of halving the number of teenage conceptions over a period of ten years and increasing by 60 per cent the level

of teenage parent participation in education, training and employment so as to reduce the risk of long-term social exclusion. A comprehensive programme of national and local initiatives has produced encouraging progress on meeting these very challenging targets.

By way of contrast, there has been no significant policy initiative from the major faith communities. An informal survey was undertaken by the author and Martin Pendergast, as Faith Advisors to the Independent Advisory Group of the Teenage Pregnancy Unit, to identify faith organisations that might support the Teenage Pregnancy Unit's aims. This indicated that development had been piecemeal, often arising from local initiatives and driven by the motivation of individuals and local groups in response to identified need. In some instances this had been done in the face of a lack of encouragement by those in positions of authority within their faith group.

No easy answers

The Christian faith holds that human life is sacred and thus to be cherished and respected. Taking a human life, therefore, is only to be condoned in exceptional circumstances.

- xi. K. Wellings, K. Nanchahal, W. Macdowall, S. McManus, R. Erens et al., *Sexual Behaviour In Britain: Early Heterosexual Experience*. Lancet 358:1843-50, 2001
- xii. Fr Joseph Quigley, quoted in *The Birmingham Post*, 8.2.2002

References

- i. Matthew 18:4f; Mark 9:36; Luke 9:48
- ii. Average age at first marriage is now around 30 years and less than 1% of people marrying are virgins. See *Population Trends no: 119*, London: The Stationery Office, Spring 2005
- iii. Average age at birth of first child is 29.5 years. See *Population Trends no: 118*, London: The Stationery Office, June 2004
- iv. BMRB International *Evaluation of the Teenage Pregnancy Strategy. Tracking Survey. Report Of Results Of Benchmark Wave*. January 2001
- v. Leslie J. Francis, *The Fourth R for the Third Millennium: Education In Religion And Values For The Global Future*, Lindisfarne Books, 2001
- vi. UNICEF, *A League Table Of Teenage Births In Rich Nations*. Innocenti Report Card No. 3. Florence: UNICEF Innocenti Research Centre, 2001
- vii. John Coleman, *Key Data on Adolescence*, Trust for the Study of Adolescence, 2005
- viii. C. Swann, K. Bowie, G. McCormick and M. Kosmin, *Teenage Pregnancy And Parenthood: A Review Of Reviews. Evidence Briefing*. London: Health Development Agency, 2003
- ix. BMRB International, *Evaluation of the Teenage Pregnancy Strategy. Tracking Survey. Report Of Results Of Benchmark Wave*. January 2001
- x. D. Kirby, *Emerging Answers: Research Findings On Programs To Reduce Unwanted Teenage Pregnancy And Parenthood*, Washington DC, National Campaign to Prevent Teen Pregnancy, 2001

Consequently, many Christians, most notably those who hold to the teaching of the Catholic Church, believe abortion to be a sin. The Churches, however, vary in their teachings about the circumstances under which a termination of pregnancy might be deemed to be acceptable, based partly on the need to preserve the life of the mother and partly on an understanding of the stage at which life begins.

Although there is evidence that abortion was almost as common prior to the passing of the Abortion Act in 1967 as in the following years, the growing number of legal abortions has caused considerable concern among Christians, in particular among Catholics. The Society for the Protection of Unborn Children (SPUC) was established initially to oppose the liberalising of abortion legislation but has continued to campaign on this issue and to work with women facing an unplanned pregnancy with the aim of promoting alternatives to abortion. The Catholic Church does not sponsor it but a large proportion of its supporters are from that denomination.

Running parallel with this development was the establishment of the Brook Advisory Centres by Helen Brook who was a Catholic con-

cerned to make provision for young people who were sexually active but who wished to avoid an unwanted pregnancy. Her primary motivation was the avoidance of unwanted pregnancy and abortion through education and the provision of reliable contraception.

What is of particular relevance to the Churches' involvement in work with teenage parents and those at risk of pregnancy is that Brook Centres grew in number and credibility among young people throughout the latter part of the twentieth century, offering advice on relationships and contraception. Although not an abortion referral agency, its professional approach to counselling those facing a problem pregnancy was then taken on by district health authorities when setting up similar services. Moreover, the educational materials produced by Brook, and based on their experience of listening to young people and responding to their needs, were increasingly seen as brand leaders with credibility amongst young people and those working with them on issues related to their sexuality.

At present, one in three women in Britain experience an abortion at some stage in their reproductive lives. Young people are therefore aware that this issue has a direct rele-

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For a fuller version of this paper, readers are invited to study Jane's chapter Teenage Pregnancy: Are the churches to blame? in Opening Up: Speaking Out in the Church, edited by Julian Filochowski & Peter Stanford, published by Darton, Longman & Todd, 2005, ISBN 0-232-52624-9. We are grateful to the editors and publishers for granting permission to produce this paper.

that we listen to the moral values that they espouse and aspire to and involve ourselves in meaningful dialogue with them, both within our Churches and in the secular setting of schools, youth groups and young people's advice centres. Hopefully, this should lead to the Churches once more being seen as providing a solution to the problem of teenage pregnancy rather than being, at least to some extent, to blame.

vance to their lives in that they may know a sister, cousin, aunt or friend who has sought this solution to an unwanted pregnancy. They therefore have real difficulty in identifying abortion as inherently evil but see it, rather, as a distressing and potentially harmful consequence of unplanned pregnancy or unprotected sexual intercourse. They are therefore unlikely to heed the condemnation of abortion promoted by SPUC and the Vatican.

What is more likely to resonate with them is a realistic presentation, based on credible scenarios that raise awareness of the fact that a young woman facing an unplanned and unwanted pregnancy may have to choose between options, all of which she may see as morally wrong. We have already considered the premise that most Christians see abortion as in principle to be avoided (as, indeed, do people of other faiths). Bringing up a child without adequate material, emotional and social resources may also be seen as sinful given the primacy of the child afforded by Jesus in the gospels.¹ What is less frequently acknowledged is that, in some cultures within the UK and some socio-economic groups, giving up responsibility for one's flesh and blood through adoption is also seen as morally reprehensible

Although this may seem like a “no win” situation, it does highlight the need to consider the circumstances and the conscience of each person when faced with a complex dilemma with implications for the young woman’s future spiritual, emotional, social and physical welfare. This, then, in my opinion, should be a focus for the Church’s professional engagement in what could be termed a twenty-first century equivalent of nineteenth century rescue work.

Engaging with the solution

If, however, the Church is to regain a position of strength and authority in relation to prevention of the circumstances leading to the unacceptably high rate of teenage pregnancy in the UK, it needs first to be engaged in the solution. To return to my previous analysis of developments following the Abortion Act, it was only through active engagement in providing services for young people who were already sexually active, and then listening to their needs, that Brook was able to develop educational materials that were seen as credible by young people. At the same time they met the needs of teachers and other professionals working with them who required resources that engaged young people in the process of

with significantly higher levels of regret, of non use of contraception and conception before the age of eighteen.^{xi} The Catholic archdiocese of Birmingham, under the leadership of Father Joseph Quigley, has produced a more comprehensive package of personal and sexual relationship education, *All That I Am*. He comments:

“I’m convinced that trying to lower the teenage pregnancy rate is intimately related to trying to improve young people’s self-esteem and their understanding of their dignity. If we reduce the ways of looking at development simply to strategies of saying ‘no’, we are failing to understand the issue of dignity and the gift of sexuality,”^{xii}

The scheme includes both a primary and secondary curriculum and is backed by a programme of support for teachers delivering the course. It is hoped that schools sponsored by other denominations may use the programme to tackle these issues.

I believe that it is therefore incumbent on the Church to speak to young people about their sexuality in terms that relate to their experience of growing up in the new millennium,

first sexual intercourse and improving contraceptive use.^{viii}

They are more likely, too, to rejoice in that intimacy and do so without fear or shame when avoiding the risk of pregnancy or infection. It would appear, therefore, that the Church needs to focus on fostering commitment and encouraging the development of young people's skills in negotiating relationships, in building the friendships and social intimacy skills they need before embarking on a sexual relationship within a relationship of commitment if they are to be able to aspire to the Christian ideal of mutuality, faithfulness and respect. Certainly, research into what young people want consistently reflects this view.^{ix}

Research does not suggest that providing young people with sex and relationship education and contraceptive advice increases sexual activity.^x There are now a few examples of Christian bodies promoting personal and sexual relationship education from a faith perspective. The Christian education charity Care has developed its own pro-marriage sex education pack for schools, *Evaluate*, which preaches delaying sex rather than chastity and is based on the fact that early sexual activity (under the age of sixteen) is associated

considering information and viewpoints in order to understand the issues for themselves.

Indeed, for twenty years, I wrote most of this material based on my previous professional role as a counsellor in a Brook Centre. The Christian Churches would do well to consider fostering more vocations to priestly ministry within the youth work, health and sex education professions as a mark of their commitment to young people's moral and sexual development. It is my experience that many youth workers in the church and voluntary sectors are acutely aware of the need for such work but feel ill equipped to engage in it. They are also fearful of the possibility of a negative reaction from their sponsoring body. Given the high proportion of youth work sponsored by Church-based organisations and groups, this is a sad reflection on the role of such bodies around sexual matters and the need to invest in training to a professional standard.

Christian Churches, on the whole, promote the ideal of abstinence from sex before marriage and faithfulness within it even if, at the same time, they accept its diminishing role within a committed relationship. However, throughout the Church's history this is an ideal that has more often been honoured in the

breach than the observance. The situation has been exacerbated in modern times by a combination of early physical maturity, extended education and delayed marriage and child-bearing trends, as well as the development of reliable forms of contraception.^{ii,iii} The response of Christian groups has varied from promoting the use of reliable forms of contraception to the promotion of abstinence through pledges. As with abortion, the difference in approach has largely, but not exclusively, been along denominational lines, with Protestants being more comfortable with the use of contraception than Catholics.

Although 86% of parents feel strongly that there would be fewer teenage pregnancies if more parents talked to their children about sex, relationships and contraception,^{iv} attitudes of young people vary markedly from their parents' generation even among those of faith. Professor Leslie Francis' research of adolescents in England and Wales^v found that only 14% of adolescents saw pre-marital sexual intercourse as wrong and this figure only rose by 1% among the Christians in the survey. The Church needs to take account of what these young people are telling us.

The Church's credibility is also weakened by

the fact that the Bible has so little to say that is clear and unambiguous on this subject and when there is such a brief Church history of what we regard as the tradition of abstinence before marriage. For example, pre-marital cohabitation in the form of 'betrothal' was more usual and a range of informal marriage practices was widespread until the passing of the Hardwicke Act in 1753.

Breaking the pledge

There is strong evidence concerning the effectiveness of comprehensive sex and relationship education, linked to accessible services, which encourages young people to delay sexual activity but also encourages them to use contraception if they do have sex.^{vi} Moreover, a consistent theme in current research is that parents are a preferred source of sexual education but that many young people recognise that they don't currently have that sort of relationship with their parents or are too embarrassed to contemplate such discussions.^{vii} Enabling parents to undertake this role and complement comprehensive school sex education programmes should therefore be the preferred approach if the churches see preventing teenage pregnancy as a priority as it is also a key factor in delaying