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Latino Evangelical Leaders Openly Discuss Sex and Teen Pregnancy

Hispanic faith leaders around the country are partnering with The National Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unplanned Pregnancy with the aim to persuade Hispanic teens to avoid engaging in early sexual activity while facilitating open dialogue within the context of Christian-based morals.

The National Campaign commissioned a new survey and found that 52 percent of parents and 57 percent of teens nationwide think religious leaders and groups should do more to help prevent teen pregnancy. Furthermore, among those teens who haven't had sex, the primary reason is because it's against their religion or morals, reports the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

"The National Campaign has long sought to catalyze a national discussion on the role of personal responsibility in reducing teen and unplanned pregnancy and to reach out to faith communities as partners in this work," said Sarah Brown, CEO of The National Campaign. She also adds, "The National Campaign recognizes the key role that faith and values play in teens' and young adults' decisions about sex, love, and relationships."

Joining in on the same message is the Rev. Luis Cortes, founder and president of Esperanza, who asserts, "As the leaders and shepherds of the Church, we are in a powerful position to intervene in the lives of young people and change the course of their paths."

Esperanza – one of the largest Latino faith-based evangelical networks in the United States – is a major player in this effort. Their work to address teen pregnancy within the Hispanic community comes in the form of a toolkit titled, "Countering the Silence: A Faith Leaders Toolkit To Preventing Teen Pregnancy." The new resource will be released to 600 attendees at the annual Esperanza National Hispanic Prayer Breakfast in Washington, D.C., on June 20.

According to Brown, 20 faith leaders, working in partnership with Esperanza, will be trained to use the toolkit and in turn they will train over 200 additional faith leaders in major metropolitan areas nationwide. The toolkit also includes data and research on teen pregnancy and related issues, relevant Bible studies and ideas on how leaders can facilitate relative discussion topics between teens and their parents.

The National Campaign also published a guide on the issue last month. According to the organization, parents and faith leaders should learn about contemporary youth culture in order to communicate effectively with adolescents. The handbook also notes that nine out of 10 teens admit they would delay early sexual activity if their parents were open to freely discussing the topic beforehand.

Having faith leaders spearhead this effort has been deemed essential in reaching the Hispanic community and could possibly strike a chord among youth to restrain from sexual behavior.

"For many faith communities, promoting abstinence to marriage is a priority, for others it is not," said Bill Albert, the Chief Program Officer for The National Campaign. "From The National Campaign's perspective, we simply hope that faith leaders can use these new materials – or others if they wish – to address the important topics of sex, love, relationships, and family formation within their own faith traditions," he added.

Despite readily available materials and suggested advice for families, Brown notes that nearly three in ten girls in the U.S. become pregnant by age 20. Additionally, rates of teen pregnancy among minorities, including Latino teens, remain far above the national average. However, teaming up with faith leaders could prove to be the difference the youth community needs.

"Research makes clear that religion, faith, and a strong sense of right and wrong play vital roles in protecting teens from too-early sexual activity and teen pregnancy. In particular, being connected to a religious community is linked with a decreased risk for teen pregnancy," said Albert.