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Evangelicals say it's time for frank talk about sex

The statistics, some evangelicals say, can no longer be ignored.

Eighty percent of young evangelicals have engaged in premarital sex, according to a new video from the National Association of Evangelicals. and almost a third of evangelicals' unplanned pregnancies end in abortion.

It's time to speak honestly about sex because abstinence campaigns and anti-abortion crusades often aren't resonating in their own pews, evangelical leaders say.

In some instances, that is beginning to happen:

— At this month's Q conference in Washington, participants were asked at the end of a session on "reducing abortion" if churches should support the use of contraception among their single 20-somethings. Responding by text message, 64 percent said yes, 36 percent said no.

— A "Sexuality and Covenant" conference this week (April 19-21) co-sponsored by Mercer University and the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship includes on its agenda the statement that "marital sexual relationships" are not available for many Christians.

— In addition to its video, the NAE is preparing to distribute information packets to pastors that include testimonies from birth mothers and adoptees, as well as definitions of almost a dozen "prevention methods" ranging from abstinence to sterilization.

"This cultural moment calls for a both/and approach that I think can be challenging for churches," said Jenell Williams Paris, a Messiah College professor, at the Q conference. "Both lift up the ideal of premarital chastity, and support people who do otherwise with knowledge and resources that can help them prevent pregnancy."

Paris, who has authored books on Christian approaches to sexual identity and birth control, also was slated to speak at the Mercer conference.

Sarah Brown, the CEO of the National Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unplanned Pregnancy, said the majority of

the Q audience probably preferred reducing premarital sex over considering conception. But that may no longer be realistic.

"Isn't it better for unmarried, sexually active young people to use contraception than to not use it, experience a distressing pregnancy and elect abortion?" Brown said. "It's a difficult choice. It's a difficult question, but I think that's what we have to ask ourselves."

More than 10 years ago, Sarah Walsh Landini, a Pittsburgh barista, was one of those evangelical 20-somethings who abstained. But at age 23, she didn't, and within a month she was pregnant.

"The Bible says not to do it, but I think, for most people, they need more than that," said Landini, now 35, who still sees her 11-year-old son, Jacob, whom she gave up for adoption. "We want to know why. And most of the time folks aren't prepared to answer the question why."

David Gushee, director of Mercer's Center for Theology and Public Life, said the 15-year gap between the average onset of puberty and the average age of marriage is part of what has stopped some of the silence about sex.

"Maybe there is a trend, realizing that 'just say no' and True Love Waits is not enough, that we need a more thorough, more comprehensive and more realistic conversation that goes ahead and deals with the realities that we face in our time," he said, "while attempting to ask what does the Lord require of us in this area."

The discussions are reaching people where they are, said Anika Smith, director of Generation Forum, the NAE program aimed especially at reducing abortion among church members.

"I had a lot of people who came up to me when we showed our video and were crying and saying, 'That's me,'" she recalled. "'That number up there, that was me. I had that abortion,' or 'My girlfriend had that abortion and didn't tell me.'"

She said a sense of shame over premarital sex can lead an unwed woman to choose abortion, and while her organization doesn't push contraception outright, it is trying to educate pastors about what's happening between the sheets with the people in their pews.

"We need to create a safe space in our churches for this discussion to happen without shame or condemnation," said Smith, who has single friends in their 20s who found support for unplanned pregnancies through their churches. She wants to see such churches become "not the exception but the rule."

Evangelical leaders are grappling with how they can do more than simply decry abortion. Author Jonathan Merritt envisions in his new book, "A Faith of Our Own," a community of churches working jointly to help birth mothers pay for diapers, doctor visits, schooling and day care. He said he was pleasantly surprised about the results of the nonscientific Q survey.

"If someone chooses to have sex outside of marriage or if they are married but unprepared to have children, I absolutely think they should use contraception," he said.

Not everyone, however, is ready to advance the conversation to contraception.

Jimmy Hester, co-founder of "True Love Waits," an abstinence initiative started by the Southern Baptist Convention's LifeWay Christian Resources, said: "Any discussion of contraception weakens the abstinence message."

Although Landini admitted at the Q conference that she prayed for a miscarriage, she said that in the end, her unexpected pregnancy brought blessings.

"I'm proud of being a birth mom," Landini said. "I'm proud of my decision. I'm proud of Jacob. I didn't like some of the behaviors that got me into that behavior, but God has been good through that."