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Sex education has failed, magazine article proclaims

By Bob Allen

BOSTON (ABP) – Comprehensive sex education, the educational "fad of the hour" mandated in 17 states and supported in 30 more, has failed, according to an article in the October 1994 Atlantic Monthly by Barbara Dafoe Whitehead.

Whitehead, vice president of the Institute for American Values in New York City, gained national prominence for an earlier article for the magazine contending "Dan Quayle was right" about his criticism of media for glorifying non-traditional families, illustrated by a TV sitcom character's decision to have a child out of wedlock.

Whitehead's latest foil is comprehensive sex education, advocated by Surgeon General Joycelyn Elders and the educational and health community and criticized by conservatives and religious groups which advocate abstinence-only training for teenagers.

Proponents of comprehensive sex education – which begins in kindergarten and lasts through high school, examining sexuality not only biologically but also developmentally and socially – contend the approach is "reality-based." Given the statistics on increased sexual activity at younger ages, the traditional call for teenagers to abstain from sex no longer works, they say. Their solution is to educate teenagers about sex and to provide them the resources they need to minimize pregnancy and the spread of sexually transmitted diseases.

But, Whitehead says, research indicates that current sex education programs demonstrate little effectiveness in changing sexual behavior.

"The sex-educators' rhetoric is double-edged," Whitehead wrote. "As credentialed professionals, trained in the health and pedagogical sciences, advocates for a 'reality-based' approach must at some point submit to reality tests. Their claims raise the inevitable question, How realistic is their approach to solving the problems associated with teen-age sex?"

Modern sex education "is rooted in a deeply technocratic understanding of teen-age sexuality," Whitehead wrote. "It assumes that once teenagers acquire a formal body of sex knowledge and skills, along with the proper contraceptive technology, they will be able to govern their own sexual behavior responsibly."

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Educators offer their approach "as an alternative to what they see as a failed effort to regulate teen-age sexuality through social norms and religious values," calling on parents to "face facts" that traditional standards for teen-age sexuality are breaking down.

"To be sure, sex educators have a point," Whitehead acknowledged. "Traditional sexual morality, along with the old codes of social conduct, is demonstrably less effective today than it once was in governing teen-age sexual conduct."

As a technocratic approach, however, current sex education is only as good as the proven effectiveness of its techniques, she continued. While sketchy, research on sex education programs raises skepticism about them, she said.

"Comprehensive sex education places its faith in the power of knowledge to change behavior. Yet the evidence overwhelmingly suggests that sexual knowledge is only weakly related to teen-age sexual behavior," Whitehead said.

A study by Douglas Kirby of ETR Associates, a non-profit health-education firm in Santa Cruz, Calif., showed that sex education programs help students know more about sex but have little effect on teenagers' decisions to engage in or postpone sex, to use contraception or on the likelihood of teen-age pregnancy.

Another study found sex education helped diminish teenagers' shyness about discussing sex, "a mildly positive effect" that might encourage girls to talk to their mothers and thus avoid pregnancy. More important than communication, however, the study found, are parental discipline and supervision. One study shows that teenagers with moderately strict parents had the lowest level of sexual activity, while teens with very strict parents had higher levels and those with very permissive parents the highest levels.

Some comprehensive sex education programs promote heavy petting, or "noncoital sex" as a "safer" alternative to sexual intercourse, a position that some researchers now believe is counterproductive. "There is not a shred of evidence to support the claim that noncoital sex, with or without communication, will reduce the likelihood of coitus," Whitehead said. In fact, she said, several studies show the opposite. "Outercourse is a precursor of intercourse," she said.

While the current preoccupation with discussing sex in values-neutral terms is bearing little fruit, there are other programs which emphasize responsibility. "Sex education works best when it combines clear messages about behavior with strong moral and logistical support for the behavior sought," Whitehead said.

One example she shared is a program in Atlanta for minority eighth-graders at-risk for unwed motherhood and venereal disease. Its goal is to help boys and girls resist the pressures to have sex by employing older teenagers to teach kids how to avoid sexual situations. By the end of the ninth grade, only 24 percent in the program group had had sexual intercourse, compared with 39 percent in the non-program group. "Abstinence programs can help students put off sex," Whitehead said.

In contrast, in New Jersey, one of the nation's most lauded comprehensive sex education programs has had little noticeable effect on teen-age pregnancy, she said. Since 1980, the percentage of teen births to unwed mothers has increased from 67.6 percent to 84 percent.

Despite a generation of sex education, a "new sexual revolution" is afoot among teenagers in America, Whitehead said. The children of the baby boom generation are beginning to have sex at earlier ages than their parents did. In 1970, 5 percent of 15-year-old girls and 32 percent of 17-year-old girls reported having had sex. By 1988 the figures increased to 26 percent for 15-year-olds and 51 percent of 17-year-olds. By age 19, 80 percent of young women have had sexual intercourse.

A 1988 survey of boys said one-third had had sex by age 15 and 86 percent by age 19.

More teenagers report multiple sexual partners — from 38 percent of sexually active girls in 1971 to 59 percent in 1988 — and more report having sex at least once a week.

The largest relative increase in sexual intercourse has occurred among girls age 15, from 4.6 percent in 1970 to 25.6 percent in 1988.

Despite reported high levels of contraceptive use among teenagers, a million girls each year become pregnant. About 37 percent of teen-age pregnancies end in abortion, 14 percent in miscarriage and less than 10 percent in

adoption, meaning teen-age childbearing commonly results in unwed motherhood.

One reason for the failure of sex education, Whitehead said, is "the retreat from adolescence" by professionals concerned with youth sexuality.

Adolescence is "a modern social invention," designed to deal with the modern problem of the lengthening period between biological and social maturity, Whitehead said. Formerly, adolescence "provided institutional reinforcement for the moratorium on youthful sexual activity, giving young people the opportunity to acquire the competencies and credentials of adulthood before they took on the responsibilities of marriage and parenthood."

"In the past decade or so, however, a new way of thinking about teen-age sexuality has emerged. It, too, recognizes the gap between biological and social maturity, but responds with a different set of controls. The new approach contends that teen-agers should be expected to express themselves sexually as part of their normal growing up, but should be able to do so protected from the risks of early sexual activity. The way to protect teenagers is to give them the interpersonal skills and the technical tools to manage their own sexuality."

The shift has assigned a dramatically different role for adults, who under the classic model are "custodians of the moratorium" on teen-age sex. "In the contemporary model, adults have a more limited responsibility. Their job is to train teen-agers in the management of their own sexuality and to provide access to contraceptives." The decision to have or not have sex, "becomes a matter of following individual dictates rather than following socially instituted and culturally enforced norms."

"One can, of course, imagine a creative synthesis of the two models: a little more freedom for the kids, a little less supervision from busy grown-ups. But this is not what has happened. In the past decade the technocratic approach has gained ground while the classic approach has steadily lost it," Whitehead said.

"The health and school establishments did not create the problems associated with teen-age sex. Thus it is impossible not to view their response to these problems with a measure of sympathy. On the front lines of the new sexual revolution, overwhelmed by the clinical evidence of breakdown – 13-year-olds with gonorrhoea, 16-year-olds giving birth for the third time – the youth-serving professionals respond with the tools of the clinic. At the same time, they seem to have lost sight of the meaning and purpose of adolescence and of their own historical role in creating and sustaining it," she added.

Comprehensive sex education "implicitly acknowledges a lifting of the moratorium and a return to a more Darwinian sexual environment," Whitehead said. "What sex educators are offering now is training in sexual survival. Once the kids have been equipped with refusal skills, a bottle of body oil and some condoms, 'reality-based' advocates send them into the world to fend for themselves. Perhaps that is the best protection that today's school and health leaders are able to offer from a harsh and predacious sexual environment. But it is not realism. It is retreat."

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Doctor uses drugs to induce abortions

NEW YORK (ABP) – RU-486, the French abortion pill, is still illegal in the United States, but a New York gynecologist says he has found a way to terminate pregnancies with other drugs that are readily available in U.S. pharmacies.

The New York Times reported Oct. 10 that the doctor, Richard Hausknecht, a long-time abortion rights activist, claims to have performed 126 abortions using a combination of two drugs that have been approved by the Food and Drug Administration.

The procedure, which is effective only in the first eight weeks of pregnancy, involves an injection of

methotrexate, a drug that inhibits tissue growth and has been used in treatment of tumors, followed four days later by a suppository of misoprostol, a drug approved for preventing stomach ulcers but used also to hasten labor for pregnant women.

Typically, the treatment, like RU-486, causes a miscarriage within three days. Hausknecht said the drugs alone worked in 121 of the cases and in five cases surgery was needed to complete the procedure.

Hausknecht told the newspaper his goal is "to show the medical community that there is a safe, simple, effective, legal technique of terminating pregnancies that is private and inexpensive."

"There are parts of this country where abortion simply isn't available, where patients have to travel hundreds of miles and face picket lines at clinics," Hausknecht said. "This technique can be performed in a local doctor's office or even by a nurse practitioner."

Once a drug is marketed, physicians are generally allowed to use it for "off label" purposes as well, an FDA spokesman told the Times, but contended that women should be made aware that Hausknecht's procedure is experimental.

Another doctor studying the drugs for use in abortions, Dr. Mitchell D. Creinin at the University of Pittsburgh School of Medicine, labeled Hausknecht's treatment "unethical" and "using humans as guinea pigs for unproven treatment."

Hausknecht said he does not believe he needs FDA approval to perform the procedure, but he formally requested it, anyway, in September. The agency is required to rule on such requests within 30 days. He said he expects it to be approved.

The introduction of RU-486 was delayed for years by threats from pro-life groups to boycott its manufacturer, Roussel Uclaf. As a result of intervention by the Clinton administration, testing of RU-486 is scheduled to begin this fall. It is not expected to be approved for general use before 1996.

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- By Bob Allen

Hispanic pastors in South Florida offer hope to Cuban refugees

By Barbara Denman

HAIALEAH, Fla. (ABP) – Clutching a photo of her family, Lazara Rodriguez entered the Hialeah, Fla.-based refugee center known as "Cuba for Christ" desperate for answers.

Her niece, her niece's husband and their son had departed Cuba Aug. 2 on a raft bound for the United States. Six weeks later, she had heard nothing from the young family.

Because her relatives were Baptists, Rodriguez hoped the predominately Southern Baptist organization would have more information. For the time being, all she received was counsel.

As Rodriguez endures the long wait of uncertainty, she joins thousands of Cuban-Americans in South Florida desperate for news of family members who left Cuba in the past two months seeking a better life.

Federal officials estimate that more than half of the rafters have died in the shark-infested Florida Straits before they could be rescued or make it to land. Others were plucked from the water only to join the 30,000 other Cubans confined in three government camps set up to accommodate the refugees.

In the chaos, hundreds of families have flocked to the refugee center "Cuba for Christ" to try to locate missing loved ones. They read over the lists of Cuban rafters detained at Guantanamo Bay or the Krome Detention Center

by U. S. immigration officials. If their relatives are in one of the camps, the center helps the Cuban-Americans complete forms giving names, vital statistics and the promise to financially support the refugees if they are released from detention.

Each relative is presented with the gospel message and leaves the center with a Spanish New Testament. They also receive grief counseling by a Florida Baptist pastor or a leader from the association's Woman's Missionary Union.

"Cuba for Christ" was established several months ago by a group of Cuban-American pastors known as "Pastors for Freedom." Since they opened the doors to the refugee center in September, the pastors, mostly Baptists, have gathered more than 22,000 names of Cuban detainees with family members in South Florida. It is the only group systematically identifying and linking Cuban Americans and their detained relatives. The pastors' list is the only one recognized as valid by immigration officials.

Many of the Cuban-Americans in South Florida are concerned about the deteriorating health conditions at Guantanamo. Reports of a lice epidemic and outbreak of skin shingles place at risk the health and survival of the children, said David Lema, pastor of the West Hialeah Baptist Church.

The pastors are working closely with a team of medical students from Miami University who have received government permission to begin making trips to Guantanamo to help relieve some of the refugee's physical sufferings.

And the group is negotiating with the government to send a team of pastors to Guantanamo to help the detainees deal with the stress of their confinement and offer spiritual assistance.

Efforts also are directed to other places where Cubans have fled. Three pastors from the organization, including Obel Guzman, pastor of the Buenas Neuvas Church in Miami, were allowed by the U. S. government to travel Sept. 24-25 to the Cayman Islands. They ministered and gave clothes and Bibles to the 1,300 Cubans detained there. The organization hopes to begin similar ministries to exiled Cubans in the Bahamas and Nassau.

Eighteen months ago, the group of Miami Hispanic pastors organized to sound a proactive voice on Cuban-American issues. The group was familiar with events in Cuba, according to founding member Lema. They decided that Baptists needed to express Christian concerns about the human right violations in Cuba.

"This is a response of Baptist pastors who have been moved by the compassion of God to react to the injustices in Cuba," said Lema. "We are advocates for the right of religious freedom in Cuba."

One of the group's goals is to "promote a Baptist perspective in social affairs in South Florida," said Lema. "We're being recognized as the Baptist voice in the wilderness."

The recent influx of Cuban refugees to South Florida only helped to solidify the need for a Baptist voice, said Lema. Although the U. S. government may resettle the Cuban refugees in other places, Lema warned, in time these refugees will make their way to South Florida, where at least 95 percent have relatives.

"These people are going to come here. You can relocate them in Alaska or Panama, but they will eventually come to Miami," Lema said. "This place is the heart and soul of Cuban culture."

For months now, Lema's congregation has taken an active role in ministering to the Cuban rafters who settled in Hialeah before the immigration was halted. The church operates a food bank using funds from the Florida Baptist Convention hunger relief receipts, Red Cross and other charitable agencies. Several rafter families attend the church. The church has held prayer vigils for the situation.

Lema said the majority of the Cuban immigrants to arrive as rafters have many personal problems that do not allow them to easily assimilate into church life. Many are alcoholics, he reported. "For 25 years they have lived in moral, intellectual, political and economic bankruptcy. Theirs has been a lifestyle of instability."

But according to Lema, the Cuban pastors can collectively minister to the needs of the newest rafters who are being detained. The group speaks of providing food, health and hygiene aids, counseling and financial support if the rafters are allowed to enter the U.S.

And while most of the pastors are unhappy that their countrymen are being detained, they admit that having time to organize and map out a strategy for reaching and ministering to the refugees will be beneficial in the long run.

FMB announces picks for top media posts

By Robert Dilday

RICHMOND, Va. (ABP) — Two media specialists who have played prominent roles in the new conservative-led Southern Baptist Convention have been tapped to supervise the communications network of the denomination's Foreign Mission Board.

David Button, a radio executive from Canton, N. Y., was nominated by an FMB search committee to serve as vice president for public relations and development. Louis Moore, director of media and product development for the Southern Baptist Christian Life Commission, was named associate vice president of communications and director of the news and information office.

Button's nomination — announced by FMB president Jerry Rankin Oct. 7 — will be considered by FMB trustees Oct. 12 during a regular meeting in Richmond, Va. If elected, both he and Moore will join the staff in November and assume responsibilities Jan. 1.

The pair assume positions recently created in staff restructuring initiated by Rankin. They succeed Alan Compton, vice president for communications, and Robert Stanley, director of the news and information office, who will retire Dec. 31.

Button, 41, is president of radio station WVNC-FM in Canton and mayor of the town of 6,700 near the Canadian border. He also is a member of the SBC's powerful Executive Committee and a leader among SBC conservatives in New York.

In his new role, he will supervise the development, communications and public affairs offices at the FMB. The board's research and marketing unit also will relate directly to him.

The FMB's search for a new vice president began last February when trustee chairman John Jackson named a five-member search committee. Assisting in the task was an executive search organization, Meridian Consulting Group of Houston. Among the group's directors is Les Csorba, a son-in-law of Paul Pressler of Houston, architect of the SBC's recent shift to the right. Pressler, an FMB trustee who served on the vice presidential search committee, also served with Button on the SBC Executive Committee.

Other members of the search committee were Bill Sutton of McAllen, Texas; Stephen Davis of Russellville, Ark.; Sam Friend of Bothell, Wash.; and Lawson Swearingen of Shreveport, La.

Rankin said the consulting firm helped identify candidates but was not involved in the final stages of the search process.

Rankin said both Button and Moore have "outstanding" qualifications for their posts, and "both have such a passion for missions and were already seriously sensing the Lord's leadership into new opportunities for service."

Prior to assuming his position in New York, Button was employed by several radio stations in Texas, including KCBI-FM, operated by First Baptist Church of Dallas.

He holds a bachelor of arts degree from Southern Methodist University in Dallas, where he majored in religion, and a master of science degree in communication from Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute in Troy, N. Y.

He and his wife, Ann Denice, have four children. They are members of Emmanuel Baptist Church in Potsdam, N. Y.

Moore, 48, has spearheaded the CLC's communications efforts since 1989. At the FMB he will coordinate the work of the print, audiovisual, news and information, media services units and the Commission magazine. As news and information director he will serve as chief of the Richmond bureau of Baptist Press, the official news service of the SBC.

Moore served as news director for Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in Louisville, Ky., from 1969-72; religion editor of the Houston Chronicle from 1972-86; and editor of the Plano (Texas) Star-Courier from 1986-88.

He was president of the Religion Newswriters Association from 1984-86.

Since taking his current job at the Christian Life Commission, Moore has changed the focus of CLC publications to champion conservative causes, particularly on the issue of abortion and homosexual rights.

Moore and his wife, Kay, both members of First Baptist Church of Nashville, Tenn., have two teenage children.

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