

BORN-AGAIN Virginity

ABSTINENCE EDUCATORS ENCOURAGE KIDS TO START OVER IN BEING PURE

BY JOHN W. KENNEDY



Lakita Garth-Wright addresses students in Los Angeles.

Thousands of teens gathered around the country in the past week for Valentine's Day-related purity ceremonies, vowing to remain virgins until their wedding day.

Yet many of those taking the pledge already have engaged in sexual intercourse. These "born-again" virgins now promise to abstain from sexual activity from here on, until their wedding day.

The growing popularity of the secondary virginity movement is partly a concession by abstinence educators that so many students have lost their sexual innocence. But, more importantly, by amending their presentations to include these young people, teachers and youth pastors are providing a message of hope where little existed before.

"Our message is if you haven't had sexual contact you don't have to — but if you have, there's forgiveness in Christ," says Briggie Berridge, co-founder of a group called Wait 4 Him based at Thomasville (N.C.) Assembly of God.

MOVEMENT GAINS STEAM

Southern Baptists initiated the church-driven abstinence movement in 1993 with True Love Waits. Many church bodies, including various Assemblies of God congregations, continue to use True Love Waits materials, but there are dozens of faith-based programs being taught under headings such as Waiting for Your Mate and Choosing the Best.

The instruction is having an impact. Sexual intercourse among teens has fallen gradually but steadily, from 54 percent 15 years ago to 47 percent according to the latest U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention figures.

Youth usually are accepting, or at least tolerant, of abstinence teachings. A recent Gallup poll shows that 56 percent of teens believe young people should abstain from sex until they are married.

Federal funding to teach character-based abstinence classes totals \$167 million this fiscal year, compared to \$59 million in 1998. The

courses teach that abstinence is the only way to avoid out-of-wedlock pregnancy and sexually transmitted diseases; that a mutually faithful, monogamous marital relationship is the expected standard; and that sex outside marriage is likely to have harmful psychological and physical effects.

"These new concepts make sense to kids who don't have a moral compass," Berridge says. "But adults who went through the sexual revolution and rebellion against moral standards sometimes don't want to present any boundaries."

Thus, it's often parents who convince school districts that a "comprehensive" or "abstinence plus" approach is needed, including demonstrations of and distribution of contraceptives. The record number of pregnant teens in the late 1980s and early 1990s also sparked a push in many schools for "safe sex" education.

Yet Christians such as Lakita Garth-Wright of Chicago have stepped in to teach federally funded "abstinence only" public school sex-education materials, which have become the sole curriculum taught in more than a third of the nation's schools.

Initially, Garth-Wright, who has been an abstinence educator for 17 years, had trouble finding schools to allow her to speak. Last year, she spoke to half a million kids at schools and churches. She has to turn down invitations because she is so busy.

HELD ACCOUNTABLE

In the early years of the abstinence movement, some students who signed pledge cards did so in response to parental and church concerns that they avoid sexual intercourse at all costs.

"Abstinence is not just saying 'Don't bring home a baby; don't bring home a disease,'" Garth-Wright says. "It's about self-control and self-discipline."



Christian students display the purity rings they wear to promote abstinence.

Some presentations stressed "don't do it" without explaining the biblical basis for premarital fidelity or the emotional fallout from inappropriate sexual experimentation.

"Some kids took the attitude, 'They just don't want me to get pregnant, so I can do everything but sexual intercourse,'" says Rachel Chima, a Houston-based Assemblies of God abstinence educator and consultant with Teens Against Premarital Sex.

Chima, 36, says abstinence materials that don't incorporate a holistic lifestyle change — based on character education and decision-making skills — are bound to fail.

Chima acknowledges that Christian students can readily give in to temptation unless they have accountability partners, follow-up training at church or parental boundaries.

"The commitment isn't a one-time decision to be forgotten after one night," Chima says. "Churches just can't bring a speaker in, have an altar call and never mention it again."

Chima says it's important for youth pastors — and parents — to revisit the issue every few

months, discussing related topics such as choosing friends wisely and setting dating limits.

Berridge knows support groups are essential for young people to stay away from temptation.

"Just because a girl comes to the rally, just because she is a Christian, doesn't mean she'll automatically be able to keep the pledge of purity," Berridge says.

These days, some churches sponsor elaborate ceremonies in which a parent presents a purity ring, necklace, pendant, bracelet or watch to the child, to be worn until the wedding day. National jewelry chains have joined Christian retailers in selling the symbols.

Besides the ceremony, youth pastors have learned that for abstinence education to be effective there must be teaching beforehand and an ongoing commitment afterward.

King's Way Assembly of God in Versailles, Ky., conducts a biennial True Love Waits banquet in February, after 10 weeks of discipleship classes on purity. Commitment cards are signed not only by participating students, but also by parents, the senior pastor and youth pastor. Parents take turns in front of a mi-

