

OPEN LETTER TO RELIGIOUS LEADERS ON FAMILY PLANNING

As religious leaders, we are committed to helping all people thrive spiritually, emotionally, and physically, which includes their sexual and reproductive health. Millions of people ground their moral commitment to family planning in their religious beliefs. Most faith traditions accept modern methods of contraception, and support it as a means of saving lives, improving reproductive and public health, enhancing sexuality, and encouraging intentional parenthood. Even within faith groups that limit or prohibit such services, the religious commitment to freedom of conscience allows couples to choose contraception to intentionally create their families. While there are strong public health and human rights arguments for supporting domestic and international family planning programs, here we invite you to consider the religious foundations for affirming safe, affordable, accessible, and comprehensive family planning services.



A DIVINE GIFT

Religious traditions teach that sex and sexuality are divinely bestowed gifts for expressing mutual love, generating life, for companionship, and for pleasure. From a religious point of view, sexual relationships are to be held sacred, and therefore should always be responsible, mutually respectful, pleasurable and loving. The gift of sexuality is violated when it is abused or exploited. Accessible, safe, and effective contraception allows for a fulfilling sexual life while reducing maternal and infant mortality, unintended pregnancies, abortions, and sexually transmitted infections.



SACREDNESS OF FAMILY

Our faith traditions affirm that parenthood is sacred, and therefore should not be entered into lightly nor coerced. Families in their diverse forms are best upheld in environments where there is love and respect, children thrive, and women's welfare is protected. It is unacceptable for society to impose limits on family size or to discriminate against those who choose not to be parents.



MORAL AGENCY

Every individual is a moral agent with the right and responsibility to make their own decisions about procreation, including family size and the spacing of their children. These rights should be accorded equally to all persons regardless of geography, marital status, sexual orientation, gender identity, disability, class, or race. Men and women are equally responsible for contraception and for procreation. Religious institutions have a special role in helping adolescents develop their capacity for moral discernment about relationships, contraception, and procreation.

We believe that all persons should be free to make personal decisions about their families and reproductive lives that are informed by their culture, faith tradition, religious beliefs, conscience, and community. Decisions about which methods to use must be based on informed consent about medical and health risks. The decision to use or not use contraception must always be voluntary.



SACRED TEXTS AND TRADITIONS

Our sacred texts are silent on modern contraception. Yet, in the creation stories the world over, the Divine fashions humans intentionally in relationships and families. Family planning is thus a key part of the narrative of many sacred texts.

Scriptural stories honor and welcome diverse families, the care of children, and moral and just decision-making. The scriptural mandate to care for the most marginalized and the most vulnerable calls us to assure access to contraception for all people. The longstanding religious commitment to social and economic justice requires a commitment to reproductive justice.

The commandment to “be fruitful and multiply” is not exclusive to procreation, but also calls individuals to co-create a world characterized by justice and inclusion. Our traditions affirm children as a blessing, not a requirement or an entitlement.



MORAL IMPERATIVE TO ACCESS

In a just world, all people would have equal access to contraception. The denial of family planning services effectively translates into coercive childbearing and is an insult to human dignity. We affirm a commitment to voluntary family planning services that includes making the full range of safe and effective methods affordable and accessible. The family planning needs of specific populations, such as low-income women, teenagers, immigrants, refugees and LGBT persons, must be addressed with cultural competence.

Governments must respect individual decisions and assure accurate and comprehensive information as well as access to services and supplies. Hospitals and health services, regardless of religious affiliation, must provide or refer to contraceptive services. Services must be offered without regard to sex, age, gender, income, race, religion, marital status, or sexual orientation.



RELIGIOUS LIBERTY

No government committed to human rights and democracy can privilege the teachings of one religion over another or deny individuals’ religious freedom. Individuals must have the right to accept or reject the principles of their own faith without legal restrictions. No single religious voice can speak for all faith traditions on contraception, nor should government take sides on religious differences. We oppose any attempt to make specific religious doctrine concerning pregnancy, childbirth, or contraception the law of any country in the world. Religious groups themselves must respect the beliefs and values of other faiths, since no single faith can claim final moral authority in domestic or international discourse.



CALL TO ACTION

We call on leaders of all faiths to raise a prophetic voice to publicly advocate for universal access to family planning. We urge religious leaders to:

- Educate themselves and their faith communities about sexual and reproductive health and the need for universal access to family planning.
- Compassionately and competently address the needs of their congregants as they make decisions about family planning, contraception, and sexual relationships.
- Contact local family planning providers for referrals, mutual training and support, and encourage those agencies to acknowledge the influence of faith on clients' decisions about contraception.
- Engage in public discourse about the ethical issues involved in research on new methods of contraception.
- Work within their traditions and denominations to make reproductive health a social justice priority.
- Advocate for increased U.S. financial support for domestic and global family planning services through sermons, public witness, and involvement in the political process.



IN CLOSING

Today, as religious leaders, we are called to support universal access to family planning. Religious leaders and people of faith have supported modern methods of contraception since the early 20th century. We resist any political attempts to restrict or deny access to family planning services. Contraception saves lives, promotes human flourishing and advances the common good.

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This *Open Letter* continues the theological reflection on sexuality issues found in the Religious Institute's *Open Letter to Religious Leaders on Maternal Mortality and Reproductive Justice* (2010), *Open Letter to Religious Leaders on Abortion as a Moral Decision* (2005) and *Open Letter to Religious Leaders about Sex Education* (2002).

RELIGIOUS SUPPORT FOR CONTRACEPTION

Religious Denominations and Movements with Policies that Support Contraception

American Baptist Churches USA • Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) • Church of Latter Day Saints
The Episcopal Church • Evangelical Lutheran Church in America • Greek Orthodox Archdiocese of America
Jewish Reconstructionist Federation • Moravian Church in North America • Presbyterian Church (USA)
Seventh Day Adventist • Union for Reform Judaism • Unitarian Universalist Association of Congregations
United Methodist Church • United Church of Christ

Contraception Use by Religious Individuals

- Eighty-nine percent of all Americans say birth control is morally acceptable, including 82% of U.S. Catholics.¹
- Eight-nine percent of Catholic women at risk of unintended pregnancy use contraception, as do 90% of mainline Protestant women, 91% of evangelical Protestant women, 91% of women with other religious affiliations, and 86% of women with no religious affiliation.²

Support for Access to Contraception by Religious Individuals

- Seventy-three percent of voters agree that we should do everything we can to make sure that people who want to use prescription birth control have affordable access to it. A majority of pro-life, Catholic, and evangelical voters support this goal.³

IMPERATIVE FOR UNIVERSAL ACCESS

Need for Contraception in the US

- There are 36 million women in the United States considered in need of contraceptive services because they are capable of becoming pregnant, are not pregnant, and do not wish to be pregnant. Of these, 17.4 million women are in need of publicly funded services and supplies.⁴
- The number of women in need of publicly funded services increased by more than one million (6 percent) between 2000 and 2008.⁵

International Unmet Need for Contraception

- There are an estimated 222 million women in the developing world who want to delay or avoid pregnancy, but who are not using modern contraception.⁶
- According to the Guttmacher Institute, “Serving all women in developing countries who currently have an unmet need for modern methods would prevent an additional 54 million unintended pregnancies, including 21 million unplanned births, 26 million abortions (of which 16 million would be unsafe) and seven million miscarriages; this would also prevent 79,000 maternal deaths and 1.1 million infant deaths.”⁷

References

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- 2 Rachel K. Jones and Joerge Dreweke, “Countering Conventional Wisdom: New Evidence on Religion and Contraceptive Use,” Guttmacher Institute, April 2011, <http://www.guttmacher.org/pubs/Religion-and-Contraceptive-Use.pdf>
- 3 “Findings From Recent National Survey On Coverage for Prescription Birth Control,” Hart Research Associates, June 20, 2012, [http://www.plannedparenthood.org/files/PPFA/062012HartResearchMemo_\(2\).pdf](http://www.plannedparenthood.org/files/PPFA/062012HartResearchMemo_(2).pdf)
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- 6 “Adding it Up : The Costs and Benefits of Contraceptive Services,” Guttmacher Institute/ UNFPA , June 2012, <http://www.guttmacher.org/pubs/AIU-2012-estimates.pdf>
- 7 *ibid*



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