

Clergy Symposium Studies Building Healthy Teen Relationships

On May 5, 2010, the ninth annual Interfaith Clergy Symposium discussed strategies for engaging a faith community's teens in building healthy relationships.

The recent profusion of news stories describing teen harassment of classmates, the tragedies of victims driven to suicide by bullying, the use of text messaging to defame targets, and the prevalence of abusive behaviors in dating relationships, generated a high level of interest among the Symposium's 49 attendees. Participants represented twenty-six different faith communities from fourteen cities and towns in the greater Boston area.

Speakers pointed out, and discussion groups agreed, that the challenges in engendering respect for healthy relationships among teens are exacerbated by several factors. Many teens tend to be oppositional. Lectures can cause them to push back against the lecturer's advice. Adults' ideas often are rejected as out of touch with modern norms.

Moreover, kids today are bombarded with messages in music videos, electronic games, movies, TV programs, and other mirrors of American culture. Too often the messages implicitly or openly sell the idea that abusive behaviors are acceptable and effective means for satisfying ego-serving needs for power and control.

Small-group discussions produced a variety of useful ideas for countering the challenges. A consensus emerged that a one-time program aimed solely at a congregation's young people is unlikely to have lasting value. A continual and systemic effort to integrate teens into the faith community as productive members of that community has proven to be more effective. Engaging youth in social action projects provides opportunities for teens to work alongside adults who model desired behaviors and reinforce a faith community's values. Projects that develop skills, give youth a sense of purpose, and offer opportunities for youth to feel valued and make a difference can have a lasting positive influence.

Youth-oriented programs within the faith community, such as religious education or courses that teach human sexuality, can serve as platforms for important discussions exploring healthy interpersonal behaviors, enjoyable interactions, and appropriate, respectful dating relationships.

The Symposium, organized collaboratively by the Concord-based Domestic Violence Services Network, Inc. and the Sudbury-Wayland-Lincoln Domestic Violence Roundtable, earned very positive evaluations by the participants.