



2017

# What's the 411 on Sex in the African American Church? A Qualitative Exploration of African American Girls' Exposure to Sex Communication in the Church.

Brittany Berry

*Virginia Commonwealth University*

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarscompass.vcu.edu/etd>

 Part of the [Developmental Psychology Commons](#)

© The Author

Downloaded from

<https://scholarscompass.vcu.edu/etd/5187>

This Dissertation is brought to you for free and open access by the Graduate School at VCU Scholars Compass. It has been accepted for inclusion in Theses and Dissertations by an authorized administrator of VCU Scholars Compass. For more information, please contact [libcompass@vcu.edu](mailto:libcompass@vcu.edu).

WHAT'S THE 411 ON SEX IN THE AFRICAN AMERICAN CHURCH? A QUALITATIVE  
EXPLORATION OF AFRICAN AMERICAN GIRLS' EXPOSURE TO SEX  
COMMUNICATION IN THE CHURCH

A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of  
Philosophy at Virginia Commonwealth University

By: Brittany Monet Berry  
M.S., Virginia Commonwealth University, 2011  
B.A., University of Virginia, 2009

Director: Faye Z. Belgrave, Ph.D.  
Professor  
Department of Psychology

Virginia Commonwealth University  
Richmond, Virginia  
October, 2017

## Acknowledgement

First, I must publicly extend my unending gratitude to Jesus Christ for grace and inspiration. Without Him, I would not be. To my mother and father, and a host of family and friends, I say thank you for always loving and encouraging me! This dissertation is dedicated in love to the memory of Dr. Brandon Darnell Rogers, an amazing singer, doctor, and most importantly, an amazing friend. It was the way you lived life that pushed me to the finish. I will always love you and cherish our time together on the campus of The University of Virginia and beyond! Thank you also to Dr. Rosalie Corona, Dr. Terri Sullivan, Dr. Vivian Dzokoto, and Dr. Christopher Brooks for supporting me along my graduate school career and for sharing your knowledge as my dissertation committee members! I extend my greatest thanks to Dr. Faye Belgrave, my graduate advisor, for encouraging me, pushing me, and guiding me to the finish even when I could not see the finish line!

## Table of Contents

	Page
Acknowledgement .....	ii
List of Tables.....	vii
List of Figures .....	viii
Abstract .....	ix
Chapter 1: Statement of the Problem .....	1
Chapter 2: Literature Review .....	3
Consequences of Risky Sexual Behavior .....	3
Sexual Risk and Physical Health .....	3
Sexual Risk and Education .....	5
Sexual Risk and Peer and Family Relationships .....	5
Adolescent Sexual Behaviors .....	6
African American Girls are at Greater Risk.....	7
Sex Initiation.....	7
Multiple Sex Partners.....	8
Condom Use .....	8
Religiosity Among African Americans .....	9
Religiosity and Church Engagement among African American Adolescents .....	10
Religiosity as a Protective Factor for Risky Sex .....	11
Delayed Sex Initiation and Sexual Behavior .....	11
Religiosity and Contraception Use .....	12
Sex Attitudes and Efficacy among Sexually Active Girls .....	13

Impact of Family Religiosity on Girls' Sexual Behavior . . . . .	14
Impact of Peer Religiosity on Girls' Sexual Behavior . . . . .	14
How is Religiosity Protective? . . . . .	16
The Ecology of the African American Church . . . . .	17
Smith's (2003) Theory of Religious Effects . . . . .	20
Moral Order . . . . .	22
Learned Competencies . . . . .	22
Social and Organizational Ties . . . . .	23
Sex Communication in Church . . . . .	24
Are Churches Discussing Sex? . . . . .	24
What are Churches Saying About Sex? . . . . .	26
Girls' Experiences of Sex Communication in Church . . . . .	27
Chapter 3: Study Purpose . . . . .	28
Chapter 4: Method . . . . .	29
Grounded Theory . . . . .	29
Participants . . . . .	31
Inclusion Criteria . . . . .	34
Procedure . . . . .	35
Procedure for Youth Participants . . . . .	35
Procedure for Youth Leader Participants . . . . .	36
Data Collection & Management . . . . .	37
Interview Questions . . . . .	38
Demographic Questionnaire . . . . .	38

Semi-Structured Interview for Girls .....	38
Semi-Structured Interview for Youth Leaders .....	39
Qualitative Data Analysis Plan .....	39
Trustworthiness.....	40
Bracketing.....	41
Chapter 5: Results.....	43
Do You Like Church? .....	45
What Information is Communicated to Girls in Your Church about Sex .....	48
Is This Information Based on Religious Principles? .....	52
How Do Girls Typically React to Conversations about Sex? .....	53
Does Information about Sex Communicated in Church Affect Girls Behavior?.....	58
How Can We Best Communicate Information about Sex to Girls in Church?.....	63
How Youth-Oriented is Your Church? .....	70
What is Your Church’s Position on Sex Education? .....	71
Chapter 7: Discussion.....	73
Major Findings .....	75
Findings and the Theoretical Framework.....	80
Recommendations for Church Leaders and Youth Leaders .....	81
Recommendations for Future Research .....	85
Study Limitations .....	87
Conclusion .....	89
List of References .....	91
Appendix A: Youth Demographic Questionnaire .....	100

Appendix B: Youth Leader Demographic Questionnaire . . . . .	102
Appendix C: Youth Interview Questions . . . . .	104
Appendix D: Youth Leader Interview Questions . . . . .	106
Appendix E: Coding Categories and Definitions for Youth Participants . . . . .	108
Appendix F: Coding Categories and Definitions for Youth Leader Participants . . . . .	110

**List of Tables**

	Page
Table 1. Youth Participant Demographic Information . . . . .	32
Table 2. Youth Leader Demographic Information . . . . .	33
Table 3. Total Number of Units of Meaning (UOM) Coded for Youth . . . . .	44
Table 4. Total Number of Units of Meaning (UOM) Coded for Youth Leaders. . . .	45



## List of Figures

	Page
Figure 1. Bronfenbrenner's (1979) Ecological Model adapted to illustrate the Church as an ecological system. . . . .	19
Figure 2. Smith's (2003) Theory of Religious Effects . . . . .	21

## Abstract

### WHAT'S THE 411 ON SEX IN THE AFRICAN AMERICAN CHURCH? A QUALITATIVE EXPLORATION OF AFRICAN AMERICAN GIRLS' EXPOSURE TO SEX COMMUNICATION IN THE CHURCH

By: Brittany M. Berry, Ph.D.

A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy at Virginia Commonwealth University.

Virginia Commonwealth University, 2017.

Major Director: Dr. Faye Z. Belgrave, Professor, Psychology

The purpose of this dissertation research was to explore sex communication with African American girls in the African American Church. This research was guided by two objectives: (1) to explore African American adolescent girls' exposure to sex communication in African American Churches, and (2) to explore African American girls' perceptions and feelings about these messages. In this qualitative study, 20 African American teen girls and eight Church youth leaders were interviewed. Interviews were transcribed and coded to determine themes for youth and youth leaders. A total of 32 themes emerged across youth and youth leader interviews. Twelve girls reported some discussion of sex in Church and 8 girls reported no discussion. Overall, participant responses indicated that sex messages in Church are typically abstinence-focused and based on religious principles, with mention of using condoms in some cases. Findings indicated that girls vary in their comfort level with discussions about sex depending on multiple factors, including their own sexual activity. The impact of sex communication in Church on girls' sexual behavior may vary; however, the relationships youth have with youth leaders and fellow parishioners may aid in holding girls accountable to the information they gain and religious values they cultivate in Church. Recommendations for Church leaders, youth leaders, and researchers are provided.

## **Chapter 1: Statement of the Problem**

African American female adolescents are more likely than girls from other racial/ethnic groups to engage in risky sexual behavior and they are disproportionately affected by the consequences of such behaviors (CDC, 2014). These consequences include early and unplanned pregnancy (Ventura, Hamilton, & Mathews, 2014), sexually transmitted infections (Pflieger, Cook, Niccolai, & Connell, 2013), impairments in education, and disruptions in family and peer relationships (Wiemann, Rickert, Berenson, & Volk, 2005). Consequences from risky sexual behavior not only negatively affect African American girls, but also negatively affect their families and communities. Thus, it is important to consider protective factors that may buffer against sexual risk for African American adolescent girls.

Religiosity is a culturally salient protective factor for African American youth (Ball, Armistead, & Austin, 2003; Grant et al., 2000). The African American Church, the institution through which religiosity is practiced, has played a central role in the lives of African American youth and families (Lincoln & Mamiya, 1990; Taylor, Chatters, & Levin, 2004). African American parents are more likely to take their children to Church than any other racial/ethnic group. The importance of religious doctrine and messages in the lives of children can be summed by the Biblical proverb, "Train a child in the way he should go, and when he is old he will not part from it" (Proverbs 22:6). Parishioners bond with one another and develop a Church family that worships, learns, serves, and raises its children together. Parents and other adults also engage youth in Church activities to keep them preoccupied with positive activities and to deter them from negative behaviors. Religiosity and spirituality, as practiced in the African American Church, may have a significant protective influence on African American adolescent girls' sexual behaviors.

The African American Church provides an important context for girls to be exposed to beliefs and directives about sexual activity. Teachings from the Church may aid girls in engaging in introspection on God's desires for them regarding sex. Moreover, consistent exposure to religious teachings on sex may lead African American girls to develop a personal relationship with God that is supported by personal Bible study and prayer. Spirituality is also important. This intrapersonal component of religion may help girls make safe decisions about sex. While African Americans are members of many different religious denominations, the majority are Christians and most African American Christians worship in the Church. Therefore, my study will focus on Christians within the African American Church.

The African American Church provides opportunities for African American girls to participate in religious activities with peers and adults. Many Churches offer Bible study classes, worship services, service projects, and youth outings. There are also opportunities to participate in a myriad of Church ministries, such as music, ushering, and missions. These activities enable youth to socialize with other youth, which may reinforce positive decision-making and pro-social behaviors. Peer interactions may also help adolescents relate to and gain insight from other adolescents about abstaining from sex. Furthermore, interaction with adults in the Church helps to situate African American youth within a community or village where there are adults other than family members to help teach, monitor, and discipline them.

The overall goal of this study is to examine religious messages about sex that African American girls are exposed to in Church. In doing so I hope to better understand what messages are being provided, how these messages are perceived, and the implications of these messages for girls' sexual behaviors. This research seeks to meet two primary objectives: (1) explore African American adolescent girls' exposure to sex communication in African American

churches, and (2) explore African American girls' perceptions and feelings about these messages. This is a first step toward subsequent research to develop effective faith-based programs for preventing African American girls' risky sex behaviors.

## **Chapter 2: Literature Review**

This literature review begins with an examination of the prevalence of risky sex behaviors and associated outcomes. Multiple facets of religion in the African American community are then discussed. Religious participation by African Americans and adolescents is highlighted along with research on the protective benefits of religion for African American adolescents. Using Bronfenbrenner's model of development as a theoretical framework, the African American Church is also examined as an ecological context in which protection against risky sex may be conferred. Smith's (2003) theory of religious effects is also discussed as it provides us with an understanding of how the Church can be protective against youth risk behaviors. Finally, sex communication in the African American Church is discussed.

### **Consequences of Risky Sexual Behavior**

Engaging in risky sexual behaviors has several consequences that impact girls' health and subsequent development. Often in discussions of sexual risk among teens, pregnancy and sexually transmitted infections (STIs) are the primary outcomes discussed. However, there are several other negative consequences girls may experience. Peers and family relationships and even communities may be impacted by the risky sexual behaviors of adolescent girls. This section discusses risky sexual consequences on girls' physical health, education, and family and peer relationships.

**Sexual risk and physical health.** Adolescents and young adults ages 15 to 24 account for 50% of new STI cases (Satterwhite et al., 2013) and the highest STI rates are observed

among female adolescents and ethnic minorities (CDC, 2017). Forty percent of sexually active adolescent females have had an STI that had the potential to cause fertility issues and even death (Forhan et al., 2009). African American girls are at a greater risk for contracting STIs relative to white youth (Pflieger, Cook, Niccolai, & Connell, 2013).

African American girls are also at greater risk of HIV infection than White and Latina girls (CDC, 2012). African Americans account for 44% of new HIV infections each year (CDC, 2014). One third of the new infections among African Americans occur in young people ages 13 to 24 (CDC, 2014). Furthermore, African American adolescents account for 57% of new HIV infections among those ages 13 to 24 (CDC, 2014). Among females ages 13 to 24, the rate of new HIV infection among African Americans is 20 times greater than Whites and six times greater than Hispanics (CDC, 2014). A majority of the new cases of HIV among youth and young adults are the result of risky sexual behaviors (CDC, 2012). Similar differences in risk exist for gonorrhea and other STIs (CDC, 2009).

One area of lower risk for African Americans compared to other racial/ethnic groups is in HIV testing. African American high school students are more likely than White, Hispanic, and Asian students to have been tested for HIV (CDC, 2013). One reason for the increased HIV testing rates is that African American teens may be more aware of the risks and rates of HIV in their community.

Risky sexual behavior also increases pregnancy and teen births. More than 249,000 babies were born to teen mothers in 2014 (Hamilton, Martin, Osterman & Curtin, 2015). The teen birth rate has declined to a record low in the U.S. of 24.2 per 1,000 teen girls (Hamilton et al., 2015) but there are ethnic/racial disparities in rates. The rate of teen births among African American girls (34.9 per 1,000 in 2012) is higher than that for White (17.3 per 1,000) girls but

slightly lower than that for Latino girls (38 per 1,000) (Hamilton et al., 2015). Considering the impact of teen motherhood on mother, baby, and community, further work is needed in reducing teen births.

**Sexual risk and education.** Adolescents' sexual behaviors are significantly related to their academic performance and educational achievement. Girls who reported skipping class or performing poorly on an academic test were more likely to report more frequent vaginal sex and less frequent condom use than those who did not skip class or perform poorly on academic tests (Hensel & Sorge, 2014). Similarly, earlier sex initiation and teen pregnancy are associated with dropping out of high school (Perper, Peterson, & Manlove, 2010; Kirby 2002). Finally, research shows that high school students who are abstinent are less likely to be expelled from school or drop out (Rector & Johnson, 2005; Sabia & Rees, 2009).

Approximately 30% of teen girls report pregnancy or parenting as the reasoning for dropping out of high school (The National Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unplanned Pregnancy, 2012). This link between sexual activity and education is important given the implications of poor academic achievement on future job-seeking, financial stability, and overall wellbeing.

**Sexual risk and peer and family relationships.** The consequences of risky sex can also impact relationships with peers. Adolescents who are sexually active may receive criticism from peers who are not sexually active or who practice safer sex. Moreover, if a girl becomes pregnant, her peer relationships may be interrupted because she may have less free time to hang out with friends. Strained or lost friendships may be particularly stressful for teen mothers as peer relationships are very important during adolescence (Wiemann, Rickert, Berenson, & Volk, 2005). Additionally, adolescent sexual behaviors can significantly impact families. The parent-child relationship may become strained if an adolescent does not follow family values, religious

beliefs, or directives about sexual activity. Moreover, sexually active teens may have younger siblings who are aware of their older sibling's sexual behaviors and younger siblings may be at risk of repeating these behaviors.

If teen pregnancy occurs, the family is significantly impacted. Often a mother or grandmother has to assume responsibility for much of the child care and child rearing (Krishnakumar & Black, 2003). The sharing of parental duties as well as confusion and inconsistency about which maternal figure is responsible for parenting duties can strain the relationship between the teen mother and her maternal figure as well as other familial relationships. Thus, there is a great need to understand risk and protective factors that could potentially buffer against or exacerbate factors associated with African American adolescents' risky sexual behaviors.

### **Adolescent Sexual Behaviors**

As discussed, adolescent girls' risky sex behaviors are of great concern given the consequences. Risky sex behaviors are sexual activities that are associated with increased risk of negative outcomes, such as unprotected sex, sex with multiple partners, and early sexual activity (i.e., prior to the age of 13) (Parks, Hsieh, Collins, Levonyan-Radloff, & King, 2009; Eaton et al., 2012). An understanding of adolescent sexual development may aid in understanding adolescent sexual behaviors. Teens' may mature into adults physically at a faster rate than they mature cognitively and psychologically (Dahl, 2004). Thus, the physical body may seem prepared for sex; however, adolescents may not be psychologically or emotionally prepared for sex and the associated outcomes. This gap in physical and cognitive maturation may manifest in risky sex behaviors for adolescents.



The Centers for Disease Control (CDC) conducts an annual school-based survey called the Youth Risk Behavior Surveillance (YRBS) survey. High school students are asked to answer questions about six health-risk behaviors including, tobacco use, alcohol and other drug use, and sexual behaviors (Brener et al., 2013). According to the survey, approximately 47% of U.S. high school students and 46% of high school girls have had sex (CDC, 2013). About 41% percent of sexually active high school students and 47% of sexually active female students did not use a condom during last intercourse (CDC, 2013). Almost 78% of teen girls did not use birth control pills before their last sexual intercourse and 15.7% did not use any pregnancy prevention method (CDC, 2013).

### **African American Girls are at Greater Sexual Risk**

Sex behaviors and sexual risk differ across ethnicity and gender. African American youth engage in more sexual behaviors than other ethnic and gender groups. Forty-nine percent of African American high school students have had sex, compared to 39.9% of white students, and 42.5% of Hispanic students (Kahn et al., 2016). Rates of sexual activity have declined among girls and slightly fewer African American high school girls (37.4) have had sex than White girls (40.3), and Hispanic girls (39.8) (Kahn, et al., 2016). African American girls may be moving in a positive direction with fewer girls engaging in sex in high school; however, with more than one third of African American high school girls engaging in sex, they are still at great risk.

**Sex initiation.** African American girls are more likely to initiate early sex (e.g., sex prior to age 13) than White, and Hispanic girls (Kahn, et al., 2016; Dancy, Crittenden, & Ning, 2010). Early sex initiation can increase the likelihood of additional risky sex behaviors and negative outcomes. African American girls' early initiation is associated with increased risk of having

less safe sex, sex with more partners, pregnancy, and sexually transmitted infections including HIV (Bachanas, et al., 2002; Kaplan, Jones, Olsen, & Yunzal-Butler, 2013). Earlier sex initiation is also associated with a greater likelihood of drug and alcohol use, having ever been forced to have sex, and having experienced dating violence in the past year for African American youth (Kaplan et al., 2013).

**Multiple sex partners.** African American youth are also at least as likely, and more likely in some cases, to have more sexual partners (Kahn et al., 2016). African American girls (9.2%) are equally as likely to have had four or more sexual partners compared to White (9.2%) girls. They are more likely to have had four or more sexual partners than Hispanic (6.7%) girls (Kahn, et al., 2016). Having a high number of sexual partners is associated with several sexual risk factors that place African American girls at greater risk for negative outcomes including unintended pregnancy, HIV and other STIs (Valois, Oeltmann, Waller, & Hussey, 1999; Vasilenko & Lnnza, 2014). Factors that contribute to a high number of sexual partners include substance use and dating violence. Valois et al. (1999) found that African American girls who engage in alcohol, tobacco, and marijuana use were likely to have more sexual partners than those who did not use substances. African American girls who were the victims of dating violence also reported more sexual partners. Temple et al. (2012) also found that girls who send, receive, or request sexting messages are more likely to have had multiple sex partners than those who do not participate in sexting. The combination of these sexual risk factors is associated with greater risk of negative sexual behaviors.

**Condom use.** In previous years, African American girls were more likely than White and Hispanic girls to have used a condom during last intercourse (CDC, 2013); however, recent data indicates that African American girls (46.7%) are less likely than White (55.9%) and

Hispanic girls (48.3%) to have used a condom during last intercourse (Kahn et al., 2016). The findings of lesser condom use among African American girls pose important implications for African American girls' risk of acquiring HIV and STIs, as well as becoming pregnant.

In overview, there are several areas of increased sexual risk for African American girls including earlier sexual initiation, more sexual partners, and lesser use of condoms. Identifying and understanding culturally and contextually salient protective factors that may attenuate some of these risks is important and is the focus of the current study.

### **Religiosity among African Americans**

Religiosity can be protective against risky sex (Belgrave, Marin, & Chambers, 2000). Researchers vary on definitions of religiosity; however, generally religiosity refers to the institutionalized practices and rituals associated with a belief system (Koenig, 2009). This includes practices such as attending worship services, study groups, and youth group activities at Church. Spirituality is most often conceptualized as the individual's intrapersonal beliefs and relationship with God or a higher power (Mattis, 2000). Faith in God, prayer, and feelings of being supported by God are characteristic of a spiritual life.

Religion and spirituality have historically been important in the African American community. Approximately 79% of African Americans report that religion is important in their lives, compared to 56% of adults in the U.S. (PEW, 2009). African Americans are more likely to be Protestant than any other ethnic group in the U.S., with over 75% of African American protestants being affiliated with a historically African American Protestant denomination (Pew, 2009). Furthermore, 64% of African Americans who live in the south are affiliated with historically African American Churches (PEW, 2009). Overall, African Americans are identified

as the most religiously committed group based on reported rates of high religious importance, Church attendance, regular prayer, and certainty about the existence of God (Pew, 2009).

### **Religiosity and Church Engagement among African American Adolescents**

African American youth are more likely than white youth to attend Church and youth activities (Mattis & Mattis, 2011; Smith, Denton, Faris, & Regnerus, 2002). Church attendance varies by gender. African American girls are more likely than African American boys to attend Church and participate in religious activities (Belgrave & Brevard, 2015). The majority of African American youth are involved in some Church activities and most Churches provide youth-specific opportunities for learning, fellowship, and service. Additionally, Churches typically involve youth in Church-wide initiatives to keep them engaged in positive activities and to affirm their importance in the Church. Consistent participation in Church activities may help African American youth develop strong ties with Church leaders and peers.

There are some culturally unique experiences of religion and the expression of faith among African American youth. The religious experience in African American Churches is often very music- and movement-focused and a typical Church worship service includes musical selections performed by a choir or music group. In fact, the majority of worship time in some African American Churches is spent on music and singing. The congregation sings along, claps their hands, stomps their feet, and may sometimes dance around or shout praises.

Worship services in African American Churches are also often interactive. Call and response methods are employed in songs and sermons. The preacher may ask the audience to repeat something or even ask the parishioners questions during the sermon. Youth often participate in services along with the adults. They may praise dance, sing in the choir, or usher

during services. Through the interactive format of worship and other activities, congregants bond and build community.

### **Religiosity as a Protective Factor for Risky Sex**

Research has consistently supported the protective effects of religiosity for African American adolescents (Montgomery-Walters, 2010; Mattis & Mattis, 2011). Religious African American youth may be specifically protected against several risky sex behaviors, and consequently negative sex outcomes (Rostosky, Wilcox, Wright, & Randall, 2004; Ball, Armistead, & Austin, 2003; Steinman & Zimmerman, 2004; McCree, Wingood, DiClemente, Davies, & Harrington, 2003). This section will address religiosity as a protective factor for sexual initiation and activity, contraception use, sex attitudes, and sexual efficacy.

**Delayed sex initiation and sexual behavior.** Religiosity is related to both sexual debut and sexual activity. Rostosky et al. (2004) conducted a meta-analysis of longitudinal studies in which researchers examined the causal impact of adolescents' religiosity on their sex behaviors. Ten longitudinal studies that met inclusion criteria were included. The majority of the studies were conducted between 1980 and 2000, but also included two significant studies from the 1970s and one 2001 study. Inclusion criteria included school and community adolescent populations with at least 100 participants. Rostosky et al. (2004) found that affiliation with a more conservative denomination was associated with delayed sex initiation for both African American and White females. Additionally, greater Church attendance and higher scores on a composite religiosity measure were associated with delayed sexual initiation (Rostosky et al, 2004). This research supports the protective effects of religion on sexual debut for adolescent girls.

Ball, Armistead, and Austin (2003) examined the relationship between religiosity and several psychosocial outcomes, including sexual activity. The sample included 492 African

American, urban, adolescent females between the ages of 12 and 19. Religiosity was assessed using a variety of methods. Self-religiosity was assessed with a Likert-scale item asking participants how religious they rated themselves. Church attendance was assessed by asking how frequently they attended Church services. Family religiosity was assessed with a single item that asked participants to indicate how religious they perceived their families to be.

Findings from Ball and colleagues (2003) were mixed as to the relationship between religiosity and sexual activity. There were no significant differences in sexual activity across the different levels of self-religiosity or family religiosity. However, there were significant differences in sexual activity related to Church attendance (Ball, Armistead, & Austin, 2003). African American teen girls who reported more regular Church attendance were less likely to be engaged in sexual activities. These findings suggest that Church attendance might be protective against sexual activity for this population. Perhaps Church attendance allows for interactions with a religious peer group that may hold norms that are not supportive of sexual activity. Moreover, adolescents who attend Church may experience parental monitoring and monitoring by other adults in the Church. The adage, "It takes a village to raise a child" helps to explain this concept of multiple adults monitoring the adolescent in the Church environment. Church attendance may also provide opportunities for youth to learn religious directives and moral teachings against premature sexual activity.

**Religiosity and contraception use.** Religiosity is also associated with the use of contraceptives (Steinman & Zimmerman, 2004; Rostosky et al., 2004). Research has shown that higher levels of religiosity is associated with a greater likelihood of condom use (Titilayo, Agunbiade, & Okanlawon, 2009; Steinman & Zimmerman, 2004). In the paper by Rostosky and colleagues (2004), some of the studies in the meta-analysis focused on religiosity and

contraception use. In one study, males who attended Church during midadolescence reported more frequent use of condoms in late adolescence (Pleck, Sonenstein, Ku, & Burbridge, 1996). However, other studies have found that affiliation with a more conservative denomination is linked to a lack of contraception use during first sex for both White and African American girls (Brewster, Cooksey, Guilkey, & Rindfuss, 1998, Cooksey, Rindfuss, & Guilkey, 1996). These findings indicate the importance of examining adolescent males' and females' religiosity and sexual behaviors separately.

**Sex attitudes and efficacy among sexually active girls.** Religiosity also positively affects girls' sex attitudes and efficacy regarding safer sex practices. McCree et al. (2003) conducted a prevention trial for a program designed to prevent the transmission of sexually transmitted diseases (STDs) and human immunodeficiency virus (HIV). Participants included 522 African American adolescent females. Eligibility criteria included having had consensual vaginal intercourse with a male partner at least once in the past six months and being between the ages of 14 and 18. Religiosity was operationalized as the frequency with which participants engaged in religious or spiritual activities. Participants completed a self-report questionnaire on religiosity and were involved in a structured interview on their sexual behaviors.

About two-thirds of the sample reported high religiosity, and the majority reported their religious affiliation as Baptist. Girls who reported higher religiosity also reported more positive attitudes towards condom use and a greater likelihood of having used condoms in the previous six months (McCree et al., 2003). Also, participants with higher religiosity reported greater self-efficacy in communicating with new and steady partners about sex, STDs, HIV, and pregnancy. The more religious girls also reported later initiation of sex and higher self-efficacy in refusing unsafe sexual encounters (McCree et al., 2003). This study illustrated potential benefits of

participating in religious activities on African American adolescent girls' sexual behaviors and attitudes.

**Impact of family religiosity on girls' sexual behavior.** Studies suggest that family religiosity is important in adolescents' sexual activity. Data from the 1997 National Longitudinal Survey of Youth (NLSY) indicated that family religiosity is linked to less adolescent sexual activity (Manlove, Logan, Moore, & Ikramullah, 2008). In the Manlove et al. study, family religiosity was measured by a maternal caregiver's report and included items, such as parental attendance at religious services and parental prayer, among others. Adolescents whose maternal caregiver reported greater family religiosity were more likely to report having had fewer sex partners and using contraceptives consistently. Several mediators were found to impact this relationship, including later onset of sex, positive peer environments, and parental monitoring (Manlove et al., 2008).

Landor and colleagues (2011) found similar findings using a sample of 612 African American adolescents, of whom 55% were female. They found that parental religious commitment was related to adolescents' religiosity as well as a more authoritative parenting style. Furthermore, adolescents' association with peers who were less sexually permissive was linked to parents' and adolescents' religiosity. Landor and colleagues also found some gender differences, such that parental religiosity was more protective against risky sex behaviors for females than males. Among females, more authoritative parenting was associated with less sexual activity and having peers who were less sexually permissive.

**Impact of peer religiosity on girls' sexual behavior.** Adolescents' friends' religiosity may also impact sexual behaviors. Adamczyk & Felson (2006) examined the impact of friends' religiosity on adolescents' first sex. They also examined how the impact of friends' religiosity



differs depending on the density of friendship networks. The study sample was a subsample from the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health (Add Health). Add Health is a school-based survey completed by students in the 7<sup>th</sup> through 12<sup>th</sup> grades in three waves. The subsample used in this study was a saturated sample of 3,001 participants who attended the same high school and who participated in at-home interviews in addition to the school-based survey. Participants were predominantly White and students at religious schools were oversampled.

Adamczyk & Felson (2006) found that friends' private religiosity, defined as the intrapersonal facets of religiosity such as frequency of prayer or subjective importance of religion, strongly influences adolescents' first sex independent of adolescents' own religiosity. They note opportunity limitations, reputational costs, and pro-virginity norms as likely pathways of influence for friends' religiosity. Adolescents who spend time with religious peers may have difficulty finding peers who are willing to talk about or engage in sexual activities with them. Moreover, sexually active adolescents' relationships with religious peers may suffer, as well as their reputations (Adamczyk & Felson, 2006). Adolescents with religious friends may be exposed to pro-virginity norms and absorb some of their friends' religious prescriptions about sex which may help to delay first sex. There were no significant findings for the impact of friends' public religiosity on adolescents' first sex; however, participation with religious friends in religious activities might allow youth to meet and build friendships with religious peers whose private religiosity may subsequently protect against first sex. Family religiosity also influences parenting practices and peer affiliation. All of these factors appear to intersect to influence sexual risk and behavior. Further research is needed to better understand the potential positive effects of religiosity on peer and family interactions, contraception use, and other sex behaviors among adolescent girls.

### **How is Religiosity Protective?**

Research has offered some insight in helping us understand how protection may be conferred through religion and spirituality. At a basic level, religiosity may function through factors such as a sense of support of God, fear of punishment for negative behaviors, and having a network of accountability with peers and adults (Smith, 2003). McCree et al. (2003) found that religiosity, defined as participation in religious services, prayer, and communication with peers and faith leaders about spiritual concerns, was associated with sexually protective behaviors including condom use and later sex initiation. The investigators also found that higher parental monitoring, having a mother as a primary caretaker, and living in a two-parent household were associated with higher religious involvement (McCree et al., 2003). It is likely that highly engaged parental caregivers facilitate religious involvement by encouraging their adolescent children to participate. Youth also depend on parents to provide transportation and other resources necessary for participation in religious activities.

Meier (2003) conducted a study to examine one potential mechanism through which religiosity protects against risky sex behaviors. The investigator posited two causal propositions regarding the relationship between religiosity and sexual behaviors; attitudes toward sex; and onset of sexual activity. First, lower religiosity leads to less inhibitive attitudes towards sexual behaviors. Second, less inhibitive attitudes towards sexual behaviors lead to earlier onset of sexual activity (Meier, 2003). Meier examined the extent to which religiosity and attitudes towards sex jointly impact sexual initiation. The author also explored a bidirectional relationship between religiosity and sexual activity. A secondary data analysis was conducted using the 1995 and 1996 waves of the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health (Add Health) data. Participants in this subsample were 4,948 adolescents, ages 15 to 18. Eligibility

criteria included being a virgin at time 1, having never been married at time 2, and never having experienced forced sexual activity at time 2. Data were collected via a computer-based interview. Religion was assessed through items about the importance of religion as well as the frequency of Church attendance, prayer, and participation in youth group activities.

The findings indicated that higher religiosity is significantly related to a lower likelihood of having sex for adolescents; however, this relationship is not significant for males and is weaker for females when attitudes toward sex are accounted for (Meier, 2003). The investigator did not find support for the hypothesis that sexual activity precedes subsequent religiosity. Sexual activity was associated with subsequent changes in attitudes towards sex (Meier, 2003). These findings suggest that sex attitudes may be a mechanism through which religiosity impacts sexual activity. Empirical support for the mechanisms through which religiosity and the African American Church offers risk and protection is limited; however, there is some theoretical support for the Church as a protective factor.

**The ecology of the African American Church.** Bronfenbrenner's (1979) Ecological Model of development helps to illuminate the comprehensive nature of the African American Church as a protective context. According to Bronfenbrenner, there are proximal and distal factors which interact to influence the developing child (1979) who is at the center (See Figure 1). The closest level is the microsystem which includes relationships and interactions the individual has with people in her environment (e.g., family & peers). Further out is the exosystem which includes more distant relationships as well as institutions in the community such as schools and Churches that impact the individual. The most distal level of Bronfenbrenner's model is the macrosystem. Macrosystem influences include the government, cultural orientations, historical events, and other systematic and institutional entities that impact

the individual more distantly. The individual may be less aware of distal factors than proximal factors that impact friendships or school experiences; however, factors at all levels interact within and across levels, to produce a constantly changing and intersecting developmental context.

The African American Church can function as a mini ecological system in and of itself (See Figure 1). The adolescent is at the center of the system with his or her relationship with God, as well as personal religious practices. The next level is the microsystem which is comprised of family and peer relationships. In the systems model of the Church, the microsystem includes relationships with family members and peers who attend the same Church, the different ministries of the Church in which the adolescent is involved, and relationships with members of the Church family such as the pastor, leaders, and other congregants.

Bronfenbrenner's exosystem includes extended family, neighborhoods, the school board, and the media among other influential factors. The Church model includes extended family and friends who attend other Churches or consider themselves Christians, neighboring churches, the surrounding communities in which the Church may interact, as well as information in the media on area Churches or religious living. Finally, the macrosystem in Bronfenbrenner's model encompasses laws, culture, history, social conditions, and economics. In the African American Church model, the macrosystem is comprised of governing organization such as the National Baptist Convention of America, laws that impact religious practices, secular and religious culture, African American history, and key events or controversies related to the Church.

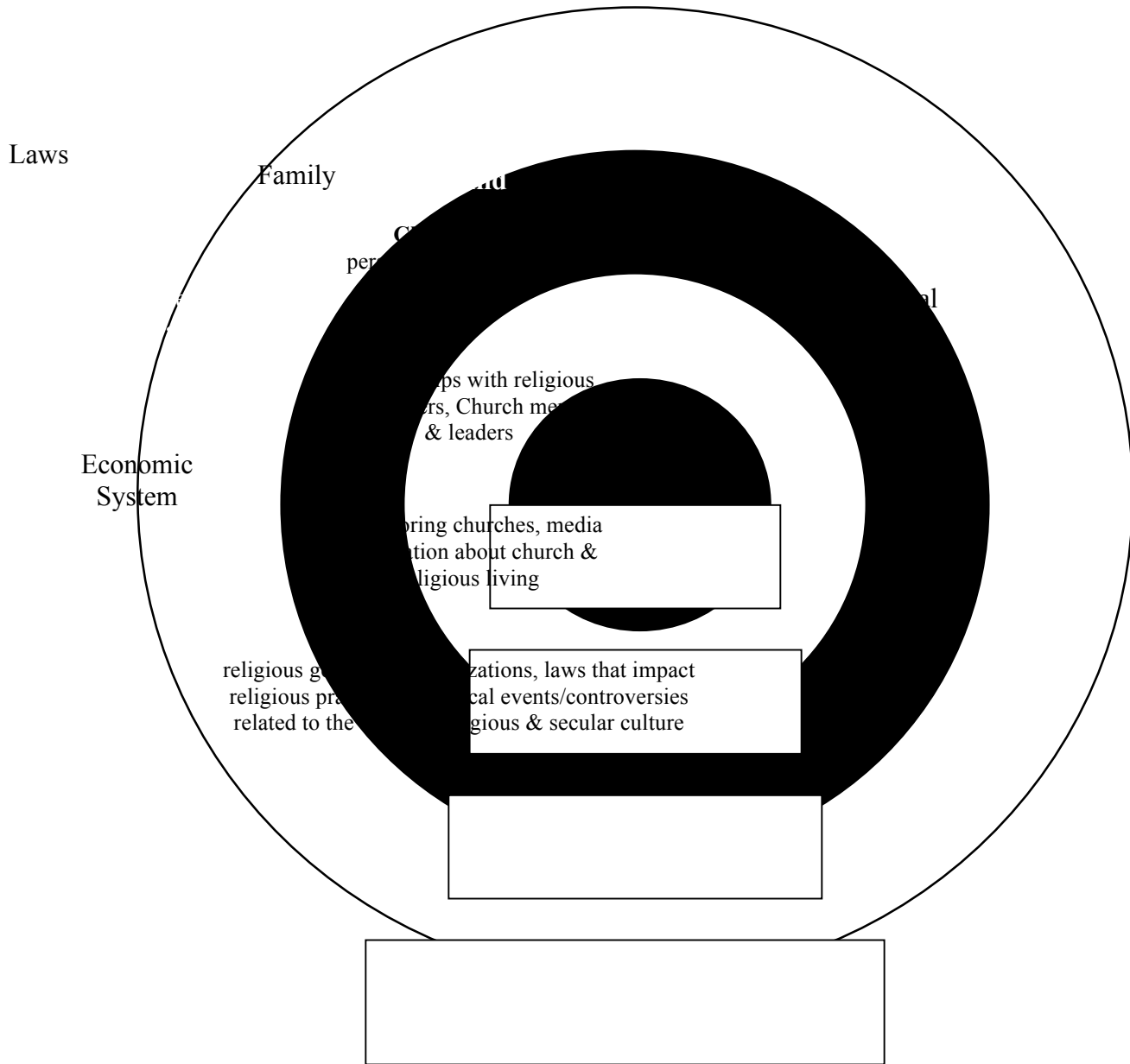


Figure 1. Bronfenbrenner's (1979) Ecological Model adapted to illustrate the Church as an ecological system.

From an ecological perspective, the Church can serve as a larger protective context, comprised of influential factors at varying interacting levels of protection for African American

youth. The Bible passage a teen reads aloud for the youth Bible study may be the biblical basis for the song she sings with the choir or the focal point of the sermon the pastor preaches, all reinforcing the message. An adolescent may hear prayers prayed by the worship leader at citywide revival, mom at the dinner table, and a friend in Sunday school and learn to pray when he or she is in a tough situation. All of these religious experiences in the Church and with members of the Church are intertwined, acting on adolescents and being acted upon by adolescents to impact risk and protection.

**Smith's (2003) Theory of Religious Effects.** Smith's (2003) Theory of Religious Effects provides further understanding of the ways in which the African American Church can provide a protective context against youth's negative behaviors. According to the theory, religiosity affects parishioners via three main categories of influence: (1) moral order; (2) learned competencies; and (3) social and organizational ties. Each category is comprised of three of nine mutually-supporting factors (See Figure 2). Youth are given the knowledge of right and wrong behavior, the skills to be successful at practicing right behavior, and connections to other believers to encourage and congratulate success at making good behavioral decisions.

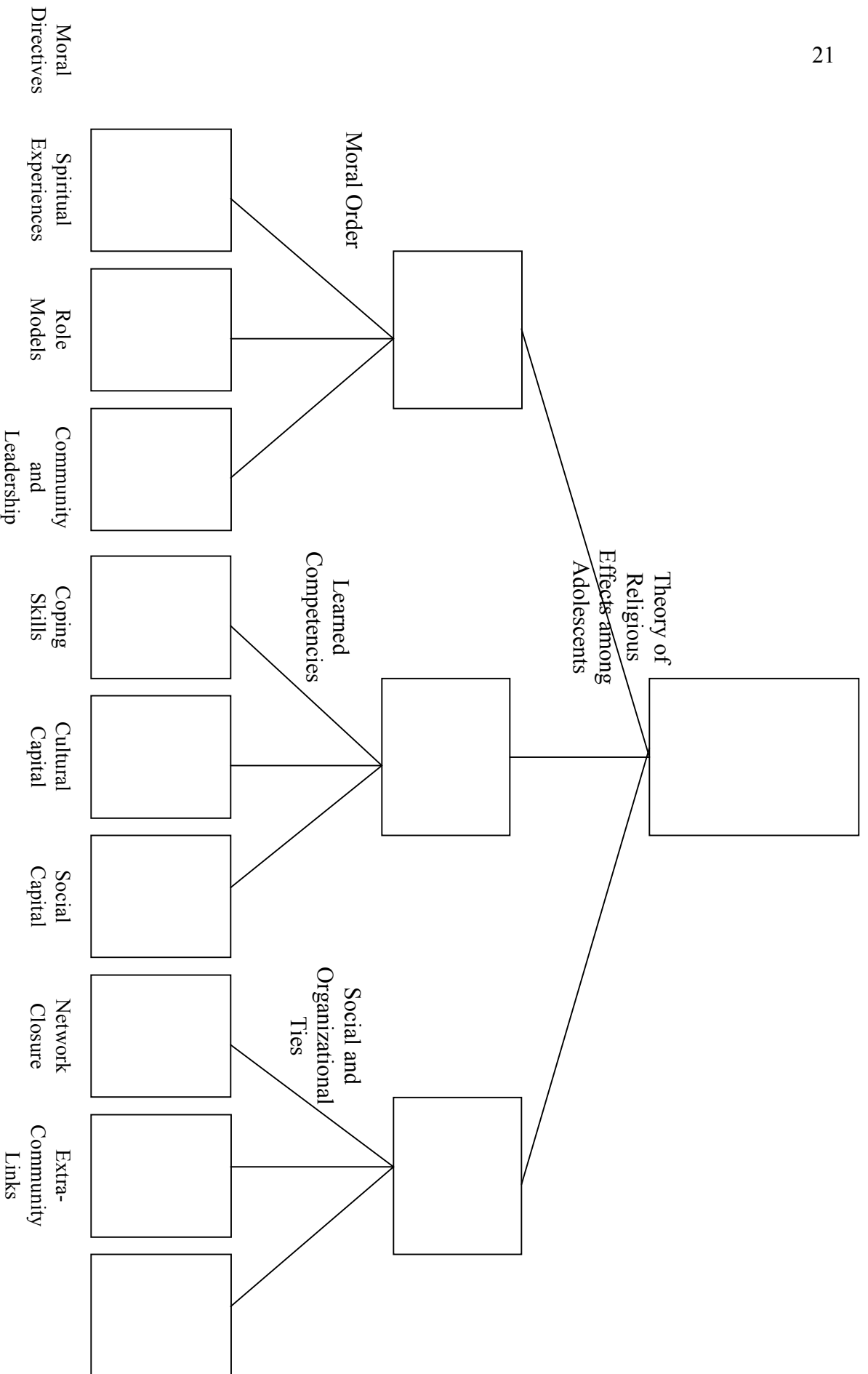


Figure 2. Smith's (2003) Theory of Religious Effects.

***Moral order.*** Moral order is the normative traditions of right and wrong, good and bad that guide human thought and action. These normative traditions are established and reinforced through moral directives, spiritual experiences, and role models. Moral directives are the actual cultural and religious standards that motivate behavior. For example, there may be moral directives that condone sex only in the context of marriage or that relate the body to a temple that must be cherished and preserved. Directives are present in all cultures; thus, adolescents must interpret and navigate directives grounded in religion as well as other cultural traditions (Smith, 2003). Spiritual experiences provide support for truthfulness of the directives. When youth work to follow moral directives, they may rely on God to help them and they may be grateful to God when their positive behavior is rewarded with success and peace. Role models serve as examples of responsible and productive individuals that show youth that it is possible to live by the religious standards they are taught. Role models also can support youth and reinforce these standards as youth may be expected to ascribe to certain religious directives in order to maintain relationships with role models.

***Learned competencies.*** Learned competencies are the skills and knowledge acquired through religious experiences. These competencies are supported through community and leadership skills, coping skills, and cultural capital (Smith, 2003). Youth have opportunities to gain a sense of community and leadership skills when they participate in various Church activities. Participation allows youth to develop a sense of belonging among their peers and Church members. Opportunities such as leading a Bible study discussion or organizing a purity pledge can foster leadership skills.

Coping skills are an especially important learned competency for youth. Participation in Church and the development of a spiritual life can help youth learn new and positive ways to



cope with negative life events including temptations to participate in risky behavior. Rather than giving in to pressure to engage in sex, youth might pray, read the Bible, or call a religious friend to help them resist temptation. Youth also gain cultural capital that contributes to their competency within and outside of the Church. Through attendance and participation in different kinds of activities, teens may learn culturally relevant communication norms, musical techniques, and other ethnic and religious traditions that can increase their sense of identity, efficacy, and confidence. Greater ethnic identity (Beadnell et al., 2003), self-efficacy (Jenkins, 2014), and self-esteem (Ethier et al., 2006) are protective factors against sexual risk.

***Social and organizational ties.*** Social and organizational ties are the network closure, social capital, and extra-community links that youth have access to by interacting with others in the Church context and the larger faith community (Smith, 2003). Network closure describes the close-knit communal nature of the African American Church. Adults form a village-like community around youth and participate in the collective raising and monitoring of them. Adults are able to help monitor youth's behavior and identify issues and problems that parents alone may not observe.

Youth cultivate varying social skills and are exposed to diverse ways of thinking through interactions with people of all ages within the Church congregation. These skills become social capital. Increased social capital may aid youth in interactions outside of the Church where opportunities for sexual risk behavior may arise. Youth who have been exposed to a variety of perspectives related to sexual behaviors and faith may be better equipped to reason in situations of sexual pressure or temptation.

Extra-community links formed between Churches and the community provide opportunities for youth to utilize their social skills in the community and with peers who do not

attend the same place of worship. Extra-community links expand the opportunity for supportive and reinforcing experiences beyond a youth's own Church. Associations with community members and groups provide opportunities for youth to interact positively within the community to buffer against negative interactions in the community. Youth are able to take the directives and skills they have gained into the community to help others, build efficacy, pride, and faith in the moral order. For instance, youth may be involved in discussions about teen sexuality with peers in the community or exploring educational opportunities which also protect against risky sex. All of these experiences work together to form a comprehensive religious experience that can protect against negative behaviors across many levels of influence.

### **Sex Communication in Church**

There has been very limited research on the messages youth are exposed to during participation in Church activities (e.g., worship services, youth group meetings, Bible study, other activities). It is likely that some youth are exposed to messages about sex and others are not. Moreover, the content of messages about sex likely vary across Churches due to several factors, including level of traditionalism, comfort level of parents and leaders in talking about sex, and leaders' knowledge about sexual risk. Understanding message exposure and content is important for understanding the mechanisms by which religiosity is protective for African American teen girls.

**Are Churches discussing sex?** Few researchers have examined exposure to sex education in the African American Church. Several factors including parental attitudes towards sex education, inconsistent perspectives across Church leaders within a Church, lack of resources, and the personal nature of conversations about sex may inhibit Churches leaders from engaging youth in sex education. Jones (2011) surveyed leaders of 53 African American

Churches in the West End/Oakland City area of Atlanta, Georgia. Approximately 35% of the total 14,000 members across the Churches were adolescents. Overall, leaders expressed a commitment to sex education for their youth; however, Jones (2011) reported some inhibition among leaders in providing this education. All of the Church leaders thought sex education should be taught in African American Churches with 88% of leaders believing sex education should begin before age 13. However, only 58% reported some formal or informal sex education occurred at their Churches. Thirty-six percent reported that there was no sex education at their Churches. It is interesting to note that only a little more than half of African American Churches included in the study had some formal or informal sex education when all Church leaders thought it was important.

Church leaders may also make unrealistically positive assessments of youth in their congregation's sexual behaviors relative to other youth. Jones (2011) found that Church leaders believed a greater percentage of youth in the community were having sex relative to youth in their Churches. Perhaps these perceptions, whether accurate or inaccurate, make the need for sex education seem less urgent for youth in the Church congregation.

Moreover, African American Churches may be reluctant to engage in sex education with their youth because leaders believe the responsibility for sex education does not rest with them. Church leaders ranked the responsibility for educating youth about sex as belonging first to parents; second to schools; third to Churches; fourth to television, movie, and video; fifth to friends, peers, and others (Jones, 2011). Church leaders may be hesitant to educate youth because they feel less responsible for their sexual education and behaviors. Conversely, Church leaders reported that youth likely receive most of their sex education from peers, media, school, parents, Churches, and others, in that order (Jones, 2011). Additionally, when asked about the

quality of schools' and parents' discussions of sex, 69% and 61% of Church leaders reported that discussions were poor in quality for schools and parents respectively (Jones, 2011). Church leaders believe that youth are getting more messages about sex outside rather than inside the Church and the discussions of these messages are often poor in quality.

**What are Churches saying about sex?** The messages provided to youth about sex differ across contexts and individuals. In most U.S. schools, adolescents have had a sex education course in their health class by the time they reach high school (Martinez, Abma, & Copen, 2010). There has been a longstanding debate as to whether in-school sex education should be abstinence-only or comprehensive (Stranger-Hall & Hall, 2011). Abstinence-only sex education promotes virginity or not having sex at all. Comprehensive sex education adds information about safer sex practices and contraceptives. Some believe that introducing safer sex practices such as using condoms or birth control to youth may increase their likelihood of engaging in sex. Others acknowledge the fact that many teens are having sex; thus, schools in addition to parents, should equip these teens with knowledge and skills to have safer sex.

This debate has also continued in African American Churches where clergy and other leaders may be tasked with teaching African American adolescents about sex as it relates to religious teachings. Pastors and youth leaders of African American Churches may have similar hesitancy discussing sex or safer sex practices for fear of a perceived approval of premarital sex. The perception that premarital sex is acceptable would contradict principles of the Christian faith and is of concern to some Church leaders.

Although research has investigated religiosity and the link to sexual risk in African American adolescents, they have not thoroughly explored the content and delivery of faith-based messages about sex. It is important to examine and understand these messages, particularly from

the perspectives of the youth who these messages are intended to reach and impact. The assumption is that faith communities are teaching an abstinence-only message; however, some research suggests that many faith communities are moving away from the traditional abstinence-only messages to more comprehensive sex communication.

In a qualitative study involving African American faith leaders, Nunn et al. (2012) found that African American faith leaders supported more comprehensive sex communication and a few even agreed to make condoms available in their Churches. Many of the faith leaders still expressed some discomfort and unwillingness in discussing certain topics, such as oral and anal sex and homosexuality. Most reported that they would not make condoms available in their Churches. These findings illustrate the discomfort many faith leaders have around sex-related topics and the variability in what messages and resources are available across faith communities. There is a need to identify the faith-based messages presented about sex and understand how African American adolescent girls interpret and apply these messages.

**Girls' experience of sex communication in Church.** Not only is there a lack of research on the content of sex-related messages in Church, there is also a paucity of research on African American girls' experiences of these messages. In addition to considering the principles that girls are taught, it is also important to consider their perceptions of these principles and the context in which they are taught. Girls may not always understand the intended purpose or meaning in the messages. Also, girls' levels of comfort with topics related to sex may be important in their experiences of sex messages in Church. Girls who are more comfortable with discussions about sex may be more open to discussions in Church about sex and may feel more positive about these conversations than girls who are less comfortable. Finally, it is important to

understand how African American girls interpret sex communication in Church in light of their own beliefs about sex and their own behaviors.

### **Chapter 3: Study Purpose**

Despite previous exploration of religion and spirituality as a protective factor for African American girls' sex behaviors, researchers, Church leaders, and parents need to know more. The goal of this study was to explore the messages youth receive from the Church from their perspectives and the perspectives of youth leaders. Grounded theory methodology was used to guide this study. There were two primary objectives. The first objective was to explore the content and types of sex-related messages received in Church by African American adolescent girls. Girls were interviewed and asked whether they have been exposed to messages about sex and if so, what the content of these messages have been. Additionally, questions were asked to understand the context in which message exposure occurred. The second objective was to understand African American adolescent girls' perceptions and applications of sex messages communicated in the Church. Girls were asked how they feel about the sex messages they hear in Church, whether the messages influence their behavior, and how these messages might be best presented to reach young African American girls. Similar interview questions were asked of Church youth leaders to understand their perspectives of sex communication in the Church. This study provided important insight into the messages included in discourse about sex behaviors in the African American Church, as well as messages that are not discussed in the Church.

One step in understanding how religiosity impacts girl's sex behaviors is to explore message exposure and content. Investigations of who the message deliverers are, how these messages are interpreted by African American girls, and the congruence or incongruence of girls' behaviors with the messages are needed. There may also be contradictory messages across

different contexts, including Church, home, and with peers. Youth may be taught about sex at Church and then hear different messages or observe contradictory behavior from parents and peers. These factors may be important elements of African American girls' experiences of sex communication in the Church. Through qualitative inquiry, I explored African American girls' exposure to sex communication in Church, their feelings about it, and the impact these messages may have on their behavior.

A deeper understanding of sex messages communicated to African American girls in the Church better enables researchers to develop and effectively implement faith-based prevention and intervention programs to promote religious practices that may protect against risky sex behaviors. The knowledge generated from this research can also have positive implications for the health and lives of African American youth, families, and communities.

## **Chapter 4: Method**

### **Grounded Theory**

Research has shown the potential impact religiosity has on African American adolescents' sex behaviors; however, there has been very little description or study of the religious context and how African American youth experience faith-based messages about sex. Therefore, qualitative inquiry is an important first step in describing what these faith-based messages about sex specifically are for African American youth in a Christian Church setting. Qualitative methodology is designed to learn about and understand the experiences different people have from their own perspective and in their own words. The experiences of African American girls and youth leaders were captured in this study. In analyzing these experiences, I gained a better understanding of the sex messages African American Churches send to their

youth, whether youth receive these messages, how they interpret these messages, and how these messages impact their sex behaviors.

This research employed a grounded theory approach. Grounded theory is ideal for research questions on topics that have not been substantially researched and is often used in exploratory research. Theory is driven by and derived from the data when employing a grounded theory approach (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Glaser, 1992). The researcher assesses the beliefs, content, or experiences of a given subject in order to better understand the topic area and describe it in the participant's own words. Grounded theory entails beginning with a blank canvas and interpreting participants' statements to achieve a rich understanding of underlying processes of meaning (Glaser, 1978). Simultaneous data collection and analysis are integral to grounded theory (Charmaz, 2006). Data are analyzed and coded as new data are collected to facilitate inductive derivation of categories. Grounded theory also assumes that only as much data as is necessary is collected to access all novel ideas. Grounded theory is a helpful approach when the research interest is in inner processes that may not be appropriately grasped through quantitative inquiry or other qualitative methodologies. This process results in theory constructed through the integration of categories that are driven by participants' data (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Charmaz, 2006).

When using a grounded theory approach, data are coded constantly to discover emergent themes or categories as they come up. When all new data fits into categories that emerged previously in the coding process and no discrepant data or novel categories are found (Strauss & Corbin, 1998), saturation is reached. Saturation indicates that there is no longer a need to collect additional data as no new information is derived from the most recent data. Once coding is complete, statements from the data are sorted into themes. The themes are then summarized as



theory that has emerged from the data. Participants' own words are used to develop thick, accurate descriptions of themes and theory to describe meaning and maintain participants' voices.

Grounded theorists typically engage in bracketing to maintain the participant-driven nature of grounded theory research. Bracketing is the process by which researchers engage in some activity, typically writing or journaling, to access and acknowledge their preconceptions about the research topic that may impact data analysis (Tufford & Newman, 2010). Bracketing helps to minimize the potential for researcher bias and increase validity of the findings (Ahern, 1999).

I acknowledged my personal investment as a youth leader working with the target population, as well as my past experience as an adolescent in an African American Church. I also noted any unusual occurrences, personal insights and reactions following each interview. These bracketing strategies better enabled me to be led by the data in discovering themes and making meaning rather than being led by my personal beliefs or experiences.

### **Participants**

A community sample of 20 adolescent girls and eight youth leaders was engaged in this study. Tables 1 and 2 contain demographic information for youth and youth leaders respectively. Participants included African American girls recruited from African American Christian Churches, religious community events, and by word of mouth. Youth participants ranged in age from 13 to 17 years old, and were recruited from 14 Churches of varying sizes and denominations. Twelve of the girls were affiliated with Baptist churches, one was non-denominational, one was Catholic, two were in the Church of God in Christ (COGIC) and the remaining four girls either did not know or did not indicate their affiliation. Twelve girls attend

worship services once a week or more. Participants also included youth leaders who were recruited from 8 African American Christian Churches in the Richmond metropolitan area.

Table 1

*Youth Participant Demographic Information*

Participant Number	Age	Grade	Religious Affiliation	Regular Worship Attendance*	Participation in Other Church Activities
001	17	12	Baptist	3	Yes
002	16	11	Baptist	4	Yes
003	14	9	Don't know	2	Yes
004	17	11	Baptist	2	No
005	14	8	Don't know	1	Yes
006	16	10	COGIC	2	Yes
007	14	8	Baptist	3	Yes
008	17	12	Baptist	2	Yes
009	17	12	Baptist	4	Yes
010	15	9	Non-Denominational	4	Yes
011	13	8	Don't know	3	No
012	14	8	Baptist	2	No
013	13	8	Baptist	3	Yes
014	15	10	Baptist	3	Yes
015	14	9	Baptist	3	Yes
016	13	8	Baptist	3	Yes
017	13	8	Catholic	3	Yes

Table 1 (Continued)

Participant Number	Age	Grade	Religious Affiliation	Regular Worship Attendance*	Participation in Other Church Activities
018	16	11	Baptist	2	No
019	16	11	COGIC	3	No
020	13	9	Missing	2	Yes

\*Note. 0 = Never; 1 = Once or twice a year; 2 = Once or twice a month; 3 = Once a week; 4 = more than once a week

Table 2

*Youth Leader Participant Demographic Information*

Participant Number	Age	Gender	Formal Ministry Training	Religious Affiliation	Regular Worship Attendance*	Participation in Other Church Activities
101	36	M	Yes	Non-Denominational	4	Yes
102	27	M	Yes	Non-Denominational	4	Yes
103	35	F	Yes	Non-Denominational	3	Yes
104	40	F	Yes	Baptist	3	Yes
105	57	F	No	Baptist	3	Yes
106	45	F	No	Baptist	3	Yes
107	30	F	Yes	Baptist	3	Yes
108	35	M	Yes	Baptist	3	Yes

\*Note. 0 = Never; 1 = Once or twice a year; 2 = Once or twice a month; 3 = Once a week; 4 = more than once a week

**Inclusion criteria.** Inclusion criteria for youth were (1) African American; (2) female; (3) at least 12 and not older than 17, and (4) attend an African American Christian Church at least once per month. Attendance at a Christian Church was a necessary inclusion criterion because participants were asked questions about sex messages they heard or received at Church. Youth who do not attend Church at all or who attend Church less than once a month are less likely to be exposed to sex messages in Church given their sporadic attendance. Participants had to attend a predominantly African American Christian Church, specifically, because religious directives about sex and strategies to convey these directives to adolescents may differ across religious and ethnic groups. Approximately 78% of African Americans are affiliated with a Christian Church and 59% are affiliated with a historically African American denomination (PEW, 2009). Historically African American denominations include Baptist, Methodist, Holiness, Pentecostal, Nondenominational, and several others (PEW, 2009).

The inclusion criteria for youth leader participants were (1) African American; (2) at least 18 years old; and (3) have been a youth leader at a predominantly African American Christian Church for at least one year. It was important that youth leaders had been a youth leader in an African American Church for at least one year to ensure they had been in their role long enough to experience or facilitate the discussions of sex and related topics with girls. Youth leaders who have been in their role for a shorter period may not have had opportunities to participate in a discussion about sex.

It was important to include both youth and youth leaders to better understand the different perspectives of the adults delivering and youth receiving messages about sex within the context of the faith institution. Multiple data sources also allowed for triangulation, a comparison of data from multiple sources to examine instances of agreement and disagreement (Guion, Diehl, &

McDonald, 2002/2011). Data triangulation increases the validity of the study by asking questions of different groups of stakeholders (Guion et al., 2002/2011).

## **Procedure**

**Procedure for youth participants.** Approval to conduct the proposed study was obtained from the Institutional Review Board (IRB) at Virginia Commonwealth University (VCU) prior to participant recruitment. Several methods were utilized to recruit youth participants.

A convenience sample was recruited. I contacted leaders from African American Churches in the Richmond area to describe the project and engage their Church as a recruitment source. In my initial contact with the Churches, I provided flyers with the study details and contact information (both phone and email) to be displayed at the Church's location or to be given to participants. I also contacted acquaintances of mine in the faith community to obtain contact information for girls they knew and provided them with flyers. Furthermore, I attended religious events in the community, including an annual gospel concert in Byrd Park and a youth retreat at a local Church. Snowballing techniques were also employed by which participants were asked to tell others about the study and encourage them to participate.

Interested girls were scheduled at the time of recruitment when parents were available and scheduling was possible. Otherwise, participants were asked to call the researcher or give the researcher permission to call them to set up an interview appointment. During the initial meeting or call, I screened potential participants to confirm their eligibility. Girls not meeting eligibility criteria were thanked for their interest and encouraged to remain involved in their communities. If eligible girls and their parents/guardians agreed to the girls' participation, an appointment was set for the interview. Consent was obtained from parents and assent from

youth prior to the interview. In some cases, parental consent was obtained prior to the interview from parents who did not accompany their daughter to the interview. This most often happened with older girls. A phone or text reminder was sent two days prior to the interview, when the interview was scheduled at least two days in advance, to minimize missed appointments. Interviews were conducted in a location that was convenient for the participants, most often at a local Church and occasionally in the participant's home.

At the time of or prior to the interview, I described the study to youth and their parents/guardians, reviewed the consent and assent forms, and answered their questions. I emphasized privacy and confidentiality of youth's responses and clearly stated the limits to confidentiality during the consenting process. Furthermore, participants were informed that they were free to withdraw or not answer a question at any time if they did not want to or felt uncomfortable. Once all questions about the study were answered, participants were asked to sign the assent form. Participants then completed a brief demographic questionnaire which took about five minutes to complete. I then conducted the semi-structured interview in a private room or area away from the presence of parents/guardians, or others. Interviews lasted approximately 10 to 43 minutes. Youth were provided a small gift and \$10 for participating in the study.

**Procedure for youth leader participants.** I experienced great difficulty recruiting youth leaders. Seven of the youth leaders who participated in the study were acquaintances that I met in the faith community prior to the start of the study. I attempted to recruit additional youth leaders from local African American Christian Churches by sending correspondence to the Church or pastor. I contacted over 30 Churches via phone, email, and mail to obtain contact information for their youth leaders. I contacted youth leaders directly when their contact information was available via the faith institutions' websites, brochures, or word-of-mouth. I

emailed these youth leaders two to three times each; however, I did not receive any response from them. To further aid in recruitment, I contacted the Baptist General Convention, a major Christian organization for African American Churches with a chapter in Richmond, to obtain direct contact information for local pastors and ministers who work with youth. I received email addresses for approximately 15 youth leaders. I emailed this group of youth leaders two to three times with no response from most of them. I scheduled phone interviews with three youth leaders from this group; however, only one completed an interview. The other two youth leaders did not answer the phone for their interviews and I was unable to reschedule them.

When contact was successful with youth leaders, I described the study and gauged their interest in participating. Youth leaders were screened to make sure they met eligibility criteria. All leaders met the eligibility criteria. An appointment for the interview was set if the youth leader agreed to participate.

Interviews with youth leaders lasted approximately 18 to 30 minutes. The interviews were conducted over the phone. At the start of the interview, I described the study in detail, answered any questions, and had them give verbal consent. Then I asked for some demographic information and followed with the interview questions. There was no financial compensation for youth leader participants. However, they will be provided with a summary of the findings from this study which may inform their work in Church with adolescent girls.

**Data collection and management.** I was the interviewer for all youth and adult participants. I have experience facilitating groups, conducting interviews, teaching, and working with African American youth and leaders in a Church setting. These experiences supported my interviewing efforts for this research. All youth interviews were conducted in person. Youth leaders were interviewed via phone. All interviews were audiotape-recorded on a digital

recorder for later transcription. I made note of nuances and nonverbal communication during the interviews to add context to the interview transcripts. Additionally, a trained research assistant accompanied me to all interviews and took notes. Participant numbers were assigned to each participant. Audio files were uploaded to a password-protected computer.

### **Interview Questions**

**Demographic questionnaire.** Youth participants completed a brief demographic questionnaire (see Appendices A and B for questionnaire items). This questionnaire included items regarding the participants' age, education, religious affiliation, and Church involvement. Youth leader participants were asked similar questions.

**Semi-structured interview for girls.** Semi-structured interviews were conducted with all participants to gain an understanding of youth's exposure to messages about sex in Church, the content of these messages, and youth's perceptions of these messages (see Appendix C for youth interview questions). The youth interviews began with a question about Church attendance and participation (e.g. How often do you attend Church?; What activities do you participate in at Church?). The next set of questions explored the sex-related messages participants have heard in Church, from Church members, family, and peers. Youth were asked about the context in which they have experienced these messages, such as during specific Church activities and at what age. Additional questions probed youth's comfort with the messages they have heard and any impact they think the messages have on girls' behaviors. One question asked youth to share sex messages they have heard in Church that are not based on religious principles, but may be more general in nature. Finally, youth were asked to comment on how faith-based messages about sex can best be communicated to reach African American adolescent girls.



**Semi-structured interview for youth leaders.** Youth leaders were asked similar questions to examine their perceptions of the messages they and others deliver in Church about sex (see Appendix D). The interview questions also helped me gain a sense of youth leaders' perceptions of faith-based sex communication and how youth experience it. Different than youth participants, youth leaders were asked how youth-oriented their Church is and at what age should sex communication begin with girls in Church. The perspectives of the youth leaders were important for triangulation in order to explore possible consistencies and inconsistencies in the message deliverers and recipients.

### **Qualitative Data Analysis Plan**

Grounded theory data analysis is a multi-step, iterative process to garner theory from participants' data (Creswell, 2007). The four primary steps include (1) data collection; (2) data sorting to create categories; (3) developing categories into well-defined themes; and, (4) describing how the themes relate to form theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). First, data was collected from African American girls and Church youth leaders. I conducted the interviews and trained research assistants assisted with note-taking during interviews. Following the completion of each interview, I documented verbal or non-verbal details (e.g., hesitancy to answer questions, fidgeting, eye contact or lack of eye contact, etc.) observed during the interview. These notes were reviewed along with the research assistant's notes to provide for a more comprehensive account of the interview.

All interviews were digitally recorded. Each completed interview recording was downloaded from the digital recorder. Two trained research assistants completed the transcriptions. I reviewed and compared each transcription to the digital recording to verify that

the participants' words were accurately documented. Accompanying interviewer and research assistant notes were also typed. Transcriptions were then uploaded into the NVivo 9 software.

Once I reviewed and approved each transcription, coding began. A trained research assistant and I reviewed transcripts independently and assigned codes to meaningful statements. The research assistant and I coded the transcripts and compared our coding for each transcript to establish interrater reliability. We discussed each discrepancy as it arose and came to an agreement about what codes to assign. This process continued through each transcript using existing codes and creating new codes as needed. These codes reflected categories of responses to the interview questions. The categories were continuously evaluated and re-evaluated to group into themes. Participant quotes were utilized to illustrate and support the themes developed. This process continued until no new codes or themes emerged from the data and saturation was reached (Charmaz, 2006) for youth participants. It is not clear whether saturation was reached for youth leaders given the recruitment issues discussed. However, there were a variety of perspectives rich descriptions discussed across the youth leader participant, despite the lack of possible saturation. Engaging in this iterative process of data analysis enabled me to highlight emergent themes supported by participants' own descriptions, interpretations, and beliefs (Creswell, 2007).

**Trustworthiness.** Several efforts were made to ensure the trustworthiness of the findings and the rigor of the research process. Both African American girls and youth leaders were interviewed to triangulate the data and increase credibility (Bowen, 2009; Jacelon & O'Dell, 2005). To further increase credibility, interviews were continuously transcribed and coded to determine when saturation was reached (Morrow, 2005).

The methodology, participants, data, interpretation of the data, and findings were described in great detail to provide a clear understanding of how the study was conducted. This detailed description of the study is also intended to aide readers in understanding how the findings may or may not be transferable to other populations and contexts (Morrow, 2005). Participants' words were used to illustrate and support the emergent themes and theory. I kept memos throughout the coding process to describe the decisions made regarding codes, themes, meanings, and interpretations.

An additional coder reviewed and coded the data to increase dependability and confirmability. Both coders continuously compared codes and had regular coding meetings to determine the extent of agreement on codes and themes. We discussed any disagreements until a consensus was reached. This helped to reduce researcher bias and increased the validity of the findings. I also engaged in bracketing to increase the validity of the findings. I documented my own experiences as a youth coordinator and Bible study teacher in an African American Church. I also documented my experiences as an African American girl growing up in Church and receiving messages about sex. Additionally, I took notes after each interview to document any of my personal observations and thoughts during the interview. Together, these strategies decreased the likelihood that descriptions and interpretations of the data and emergent theory would be colored by my own experiences and prior knowledge. Finally, I engaged two additional African American teen girls and two adults with experience working with youth in Church, none of whom were interviewed for this study, to review my results to ensure they reflect the thoughts of the population and are clearly understood.

**Bracketing.** My interest in the study topic is largely related to my experiences growing up in an African American Church as a girl and as a youth leader in that same African American

Church as an adult. I have been a member of an African American Christian Church in Richmond, Virginia my entire life. Growing up as a girl, I was always very involved in Sunday School before Sunday morning worship services, Wednesday night Bible Study, Youth Ministry outings (e.g. bowling, skating, lock ins, etc.), choir rehearsals, services at other Churches, choir engagements on the road, and many other weekend and weeknight services. From very early in life, I accompanied my mother to meetings at Church and have always been completely immersed in the Christian Church culture.

As a teen girl, I remember having an idea of what the Church thought about sex, primarily that sex was a bad thing. It was especially bad for teens and unmarried adults. My understanding of the Church's view of sex, and ultimately God's view, was less about explicit teaching but more about situations and rumors around the Church. I remember hearing that "shacking up" and having babies out of wedlock was wrong during sermons or in a comment in Bible study, but there was no open dialogue about sex. I also remembered two teen girls who got pregnant and how everybody in the church whispered about it. These girls seemed to feel and be shamed. At the same time that the Church was not talking about sex. My parents also were also not talking about sex.

My only real memories of talking about sex in Church or with Church members did not come until a group of teen girls started a step team at Church. I was part of this team; we periodically had sleepovers at our sponsor's house. Our step team sponsor was a young adult woman at our Church. At those sleepovers, we were free to talk about relationships, sex, and anything else we needed to discuss. I felt like the opportunity to really talk should have been provided much earlier and should not have been only left for these sleepover conversations that felt almost "secret".

Fast forward to when I returned home from college and officially took on a leadership role in our Church's Youth Ministry. I became the Co-Coordinator of the Youth Ministry with a good friend at the Church who was my mother's age but very forward thinking and open in her perspective of Church and Youth Ministry. I began teaching Youth Bible Study and planned activities such as lock-ins and rap sessions for the youth to have candid conversations. I went on to become the Coordinator of the Youth Ministry and developed close mentor-mentee relationships with the teens in the Church, most of whom were girls. As a youth leader, my perspective was always that talking about sex in an open and honest way could only help and not hurt. This was a departure from my experiences as a child and the idea that talking about sex encourages youth to engage in sex. I constantly assured the youth that they could come to me about anything and that I would rather them tell me and find out how to practice safer sex, rather than being secret and being unsafe. I was very open with them about my own struggles with the Church's stance and approach to sex education or lack thereof. I did experience some resistance from one or two parents; however, I believed I should teach children, regardless of their choices and behaviors. This line of research was largely inspired by working with teen girls in my Church. This study was a step in first understanding what messages are being communicated to African American girls, how they perceive these messages, and how they impact their behavior.

### **Chapter 5: Results**

Youth and youth leader interview transcripts were coded for individual units of meaning, which are meaningful statements or phrases, as well as categories, and emergent themes. Tables 3 and 4 show the number of units of meaning coded in each of the youth and youth leader interviews. Several themes and subthemes emerged from groupings of the coded statements,

which are organized by interview questions and defined in Appendix E for youth interviews and Appendix F for youth leader interviews.

Table 3

*Total Number of Units of Meaning (UOM) Coded for Youth*

Participant Number	UOM	Participant Number	UOM
001	59	011	28
002	36	012	27
003	26	013	23
004	22	014	34
005	26	015	28
006	53	016	21
007	30	017	18
008	41	018	19
009	20	019	22
010	26	020	23

Table 4

*Total Number of Units of Meaning (UOM) Coded for Youth Leaders*

Participant Number	UOM	Participant Number	UOM
101	51	105	47
	34	106	31
102	38	107	33
103	60	108	37
104			

A combined 32 themes emerged from youth and youth leader interviews. Fifteen themes emerged for youth and 14 for youth leaders across 6 primary questions: (1) Do you like your Church? (2) What information is communicated to girls in your Church about sex? (3) Is this information based on religious principles? (4) How do girls typically react to conversations about sex? (5) Does information about sex communicated in Church affect girls' behavior? and (6) How can we best communicate information about sex to girls in Church? An additional three themes emerged for youth leaders for two additional questions that only this group was asked. These questions included: (1) How youth-oriented is your Church? (2) What is your Church's position on sex education? Themes and illustrative quotations are detailed below, first for the overlapping questions, followed by the additional youth leader questions.

### **Do You Like Your Church?**

Youth and youth leader interviews began with discussion around participants' likes and dislikes at their Churches. Questions regarding whether and why participants like or dislike their Churches were included in the interview to get a sense of their feelings about their Church and provide context for subsequent questions. At the outset of the interviews, 17 girls said they liked their Churches. They shared a variety of characteristics and activities that they enjoy in their Churches. Three girls indicated that they did not like their Churches. Three themes emerged as to why youth like their Churches, including connections to the pastor, the Word or biblical teachings, and the congregation,

**Connection to pastor.** Several girls cited a connection to their pastor as the primary reason they like their Church. When asked why she likes her Church, one girl stated, "because I feel like the pastors, they interact with everybody – the children, older people. They just feel welcoming". Another participant explained, "well it's like... I don't like going to other

Churches because like the pastor old. The pastor be old and I don't really understand. See my pastor, he can relate to me".

**Connection to the Word.** Several of the girls also said they like their Church because they can understand and/or relate to the Word, meaning the Biblical or scriptural message delivered during worship service. Girls mentioned the sermon being easy to understand and relatable to their own lives. "He's like straightforward wit you. He gives you a visual... the way he explains the Word so you're not just bored", one girl stated. Another participant alluded to personally relating to the message. She said, "Like some stuff he, some things he be talking bout be true".

**Connection to congregation.** Other girls shared that they enjoy a familiarity with other members of the congregation at their Churches. Some described their Church as being smaller or more family-oriented than some other Churches, particularly larger Churches. One participant explained:

Because, I mean, I usually don't like big Churches. I like small Churches and I feel like you know everybody. I don't know. I just like to be heard and, you know, sometimes I feel like the pastor is talking to me. But you know that's why I like it. Everybody's nice there. It feel like a big happy family, but you know in the big Churches, like no one notice you and you know.

Youth leaders were asked what they like about their Church and what they would change about their Church. Two themes emerged regarding what youth leaders liked about their Churches and one theme represented what they would change. Youth leaders indicated the connection with the congregation and the youth ministry as what they like. They indicated a need for more youth engagement as an element they would change.



**Connection to congregation as a highlight.** Like youth participants, youth leaders indicated enjoying their Churches' orientation toward family and connectedness. One youth leader described it as community. "Uh I love its community so everybody is like family." Another highlighted a sense of love between everyone. She described, "...the home feeling, like you just feel like everyone loves each other. You know, a real true feeling of love there from the pastor going down to the ushers. Just seems like they really care".

**Youth ministry as a highlight.** Additionally, several youth leaders shared that the presence and activity of youth is one of the things they like about their Churches. One youth leader stated:

We have youth, mostly teen and college-aged as far as our youth and young adult ministries per se...um I love the fact that all of them come to Church regularly and feel like they are a part of the Church...um, they contribute ideas. Um, they are active in different events and services and things that we have. And then, um, there are a few of them that are kind of in a quasi-leadership role working with other adults, and so they, they really are excited about it and they put a lot into it.

**Need for more youth engagement.** Youth leaders also shared what they would change about their Churches. Multiple youth leaders expressed a need for more youth engagement, noting this as one thing they would change. Some youth leaders expressed a desire to increase youth attendance and participation. One youth leader mentioned a need for better understanding of culture to engage more youth. He said, "What things would I change? I'd definitely change its relevance or its understanding of culture. I think they're behind the curve".

### **What Information is Communicated to Girls in Your Church about Sex?**

Participants were asked about information discussed with adolescent girls in their Churches about sex. Twelve girls reported that there was some type of sex communication at their Church, while 8 girls reported no discussion of sex in their Churches. All youth leaders reported at least some mention of sex in their Churches. Youth who reported some level of sex communication in Church discussed the different topics that comprise the content of the messages about sex they have heard in Church. Three themes emerged for youth including, an abstinence-focused message, to use protection when engaging in sex, and who is supposed to have sex. Two themes emerged for youth leaders including abstinence-focused message and “Be safe, be smart, be secure”.

**Abstinence-focused message.** Overwhelmingly, youth reported receiving an abstinence-focused message about sex. “I mean I think the most common one is just you always in religion you’re taught to wait until marriage, umm and so you try to practice that, umm yea,” stated a participant. Youth’s responses also indirectly suggested that young ladies should pursue abstinence as a goal, as it is something they will have to work towards. One participant shared:

Um one of our youth pastors told us like it's something that should be holy and you should wait for, and you shouldn't just be quick to do it because it's not just anything you do on a regular basis. You should like-because he said it's against the um commandments to like have sex before you're married. [...] But no one is better than anyone else, but if you're doing it, you should work on it.

Another participant described a program focused on promoting abstinence that ends in a promise ring to signify a commitment to abstinence. She described:

There’s like a, a program we have for us to stay abstinent-abstinence, that we-that um

you can choose to go through and people will like give you different experiences tell you give you different facts and at the end there's like a ceremony where you um you get like this ring to say that says you promise to stay abstinent and that's pretty much it.

**Use protection.** Youth participants also shared that they have heard information and advice about using protection if they do engage in sex. Fewer girls had heard about using protection in Church than those who received abstinence messages; however, some girls did report having had discussions about condoms. One youth said, “Well, they teach us that not all relationships are about sex, and if we do it make sure it is protected and all that.” Another youth detailed the different types of condoms her youth minister discussed. She said her youth leader had discussed:

Um abortions, um condoms. He told us about all kinds of condoms not just you know the boy ones. He showed us all condoms. And I think he showed us like a lil...ahh...it was like a lil pad or napkin or something for oral sex.”

This statement was an example of a youth leader taking a more comprehensive approach to communicating with girls about sex. This message contained the most detailed information about condoms reported by any youth participant.

**Who should have sex.** Youth discussed receiving messages about who should be having sex. A few different ideas were shared. Some girls discussed messages that sex is only appropriate for adults. “Hmm, well they tell you, well they do like really tell you that you can't do it, they say it's not good for you. For kids at least,” stated one participant. Another said, “I mean...you not posed to do it at a young age”.

Youth also mentioned messages around heterosexuality and homosexuality. Participants were told “don't be gay” and that sex “should be a man and a woman”. Messages also suggested

to some youth that sex between same-sex individuals is sinful. One participant stated, "...so like we talking about um like homosexual sex and all that. He was saying that that's a sin that gets more attention than others."

Furthermore, youth were advised that if they do have sex, they should wait for the "right" person. "Like um you know cuz in the Bible it says you shouldn't have sex till you're married and you should you know save it for the right person," said one participant. Another participant recalled advice that the right person should have intentions of maintaining a relationship after sex. She said, "mmmm, well they teach us not to do it at a young age and to know like if yall do it then they need to be protected and make sure they not just gonna have sex with you and leave you".

Youth leaders also discussed the content of the messages about sex they have heard in Church. Two themes emerged for youth leaders including, an abstinence-focused message and "Be safe, be smart, be secure".

**Abstinence-focused message.** Youth leaders indicated the presence of abstinence messages, as did youth participants. Girls are encouraged to wait until marriage to engage in sexual activity. For some Churches, abstinence is the primary focus of conversations about sex with little to no discussion of sexual safety or alternative options to abstinence. One youth leader explained:

[...] we had a lesson to talk about abstinence but not to really talk about keeping yourself safe, or, it wasn't really a sex education class. It was just talking about what the Bible says about preserving your body...And how to, um, what does God want for women to do and what's His way, and how we honor Him. So the class was not on sex but it was from the Bible standpoint so it wasn't a true sex educational class about, whatever,

what's out there to use, or, or if you decide to engage in sex what are your options. It was nothing like that.

As is reflected in this youth leader's response, messages are not necessarily explicitly abstinence-only, but rather focus on abstinence without including discussion of other sex-related topics or perspectives.

**“Be safe, be smart, be secure”.** Youth leaders discussed topics around sexual safety, being smart in relationships, and secure with oneself. This was a more comprehensive perspective of safety, focusing on more than just using protection during sex. One youth minister provided a very detailed account of the various sexual safety topics discussed with his teen girls. He stated:

Uhh with my teen girls we discuss everything (chuckles) everything ummm from, from you know abstinence to those that are actually having sex. Umm I, I've taught them about condom usage and condom negotiation. Umm they'll, they should be, they should be fully aware of all condoms umm the female condoms and the umm flavor condoms. How to put em on. They uhh umm they should be knowledgeable of all STDs and HIV. We are very free over there when we talk about umm when we talk about sex. Umm and we also talk about umm sharing of pictures and stuff like that you know, Kik and Instagram and stuff like that. We talk about nudity as well, nude pictures.

Another youth leader was less explicit in her response, but talked about relationships and how to find what they need when things, perhaps sex, happens. She said:

And so during that time we're talking to them about relationships, [...]. We're talking to them about, ya know, if you do mess up, how to get the support that you need. We talk to them about, um, ya know, just being mindful of their bodies.

### **Is this information based on religious principles?**

Youth and youth leaders were asked whether discussions about sex is based on religious principles. A theme emerged for both youth and youth leaders, which pointed to a religious basis for sex communication. Both groups of participants also indicated the inclusion of more general messages and real-world language.

According to youth, the messages they receive about sex in Church are often faith-based. Those who deliver the messages relate them to biblical principles or religious ideals. One youth described:

Um one of our youth pastors told us like it's something that should be holy and you should wait for, and you shouldn't just be quick to do it because it's not just anything you do on a regular basis. You should like-because he said it's against the um commandments to like have sex before you're married.

Another youth mentioned a reference to the Bible, "Like um you know cuz in the Bible it says you shouldn't have sex till you're married and you should you know save it for the right person." The religious principles youth mentioned were typically directives about what the Bible says one should not do. One youth referenced punishment for not being abstinent. She said, "Like, people say if you have sex before marriage you going to hell." Several girls did mention that although information about sex is often faith-based, it is also often put into the message deliverer's own words or mixed in with more general messages not based in religious principles. "It's like...he'll switch it up, like you know, he'll put it into his words but also you know it come from the Bible and it's like he just put it all into one."

Youth leaders also discussed engaging girls in a relatable and relevant real-world conversation about sex and basing that conversation on a foundation of spiritual or Biblical

principles. One youth leader mentioned beginning the conversation with spiritual principles. He stated:

That's actually how I bring it up to them. I tell them you know about the fact that you know God created sex. Sex is not a bad thing. [...] We deal wif all of that, that's the foundation of every conversation that I umm, that I have in Church.

Another youth leader explained, “[...] although we use the Word for that, we also talk about everyday stuff too. So we try to make it real life stuff for them and try to give them a chance to express themselves”. One leader quantified the amount of focus on a spiritual basis versus a more practical discussion based on the reality of the times. He said:

I would say about 75% of it... definitely a traditional thought process of waiting till marriage, that sex is valuable, that something that you're only offer to your husband-your virginity. That's probably what's communicated to them. However, the other 25% we try to communicate is practicality. Um the reality of it is if they were to make the decision to be your own person and to not follow that belief system, be safe, be smart, and be secure about who you are and what you're doin, because it is a big decision that you have to make.

### **How do girls typically react to conversations about sex?**

Girls discussed their perceptions of teen girls' reactions to conversations about sex. They expressed varying ideas about whether girls are comfortable or uncomfortable having conversations about sex. Two themes emerged for girls, including girls are comfortable and girls are uncomfortable.

**Girls are comfortable.** Many youth expressed a belief that talking about sex is normal and for many girls, “it's just like, a conversation”. One youth described, “Most of the girls are

like...they're like pretty chill. They have questions, like normal questions anyone else would have". Another youth described girls comfort level in the context of desensitization. She said, "Everybody talk about it now so...but you have some who don't get that talk, but um, you hear it a lot though". Her perception was based on the idea of girls being comfortable in conversations about sex because the topic is discussed often.

**Girls are uncomfortable.** Despite some youth's perceptions that girls are comfortable having conversations about sex, other youth perceived girls to be uncomfortable discussing sex. Several reasons for this discomfort were mentioned. Some youth suggested that girls are shy discussing sex with adults. One girl said, "I think, I mean most get shy, most don't want to talk about it in front of older people or adults and such". Another participant explained that youth may particularly be uncomfortable talking to adults who attend Church with them. She shared:

Well for me personally I think that it's kind of awkward to talk about it with somebody you don't know and then that are a part of your Church cuz I mean they're going to tell you what they basically what God would want you to do.

Youth leaders also discussed girls' reactions to conversations about sex. Youth reactions to conversations about sex may provide information to consider as youth leaders determine effective ways to better engage and connect with youth around topics related to sex. A theme of youth discomfort emerged from youth leaders along with three subthemes that may provide some reasoning for girls' discomfort.

**Youth discomfort in conversations.** Leaders consistently indicated youth's discomfort in having conversations about sex. Three subthemes emerged to further characterize youth's discomfort, including immaturity during conversations about sex, embarrassment to discuss sex with adults, and hiding their awareness to avoid judgment.



**General immaturity.** Youth leaders generally described an immaturity in youth during conversations about sex. This immaturity may be evidenced by laughs and giggles, as one youth leader described, “[...] some you know, joking, laughing, especially that middle school age group.” Discomfort due to general immaturity was connected to younger youth in some cases.

**Embarrassment with adults.** Some youth leaders described youth’s discomfort as embarrassment to discuss sex with adults, especially in Church. One youth leader imitated his teen girls’ reactions when he starts in on a discussion about a sex-related topic. “Oh my God Minister Markus [fictitious name]! Oh my God”, he imitated. Another youth leader similarly imitated her teen girls. She described the girls as “umm...very shy and almost like embarrassed that the conversation is happening, like ‘oh my God I can’t believe we’re talking about this’”.

**Hiding awareness to avoid judgment.** Youth leaders also contextualized youth’s discomfort as girls trying to hide their awareness about sex. In his explanation, a youth leader described girls as putting on “the double face”. He said:

They always try to act like they don’t understand what’s goin on but I find that typically they’re very receptive. They just don’t want to show how much they’re aware of. I guess I’ll say I experience a sense of reservation and how much can I show these people of what I’m really aware of.

Additionally, a youth leader shared her belief that girls may not want adults, particularly in the Church, to know that they think about sex for fear that the adults will think negatively of them. She explained, “I think they are, a fear of being judged. Maybe thinking like they...having unpure thoughts and someone is looking at them, judging them, because the questions they might wanna ask”.

Participants also discussed whether they believe girls' comfort discussing sex increases with age. A theme emerged for both girls and youth leaders which indicated a perception of girls' increased comfort with age. Many girls shared the belief that girls do become more comfortable with sex conversations as they get older. Some girls simply stated, "I think girls become more comfortable with talking about it as they get older" and "umm I guess they mature to talk about it." One girl described the progression of the relationship between girls and boys to explain girls' increased comfort discussing sex as they get older. She explained:

Cuz like in elementary school, it's like boys are nasty and then in middle school boys like you and sometimes you have a boy as a best friend and then there's like high school where everyone has a boyfriend. Yeah so I think the older you get the more of a connection they feel.

Some youth leaders also identified an increased comfort in discussions about sex as girls get older. Their responses suggested that perhaps girls may still experience some discomfort but they are able to move beyond it and engage in the conversation. One youth leader described how a conversation might begin with older girls. He said:

So, depending on what their age is. If they're young, they're-they-typically, you know, they tend to cringe, they be like 'ewww!' Whatever, whatever, umm, my teenagers they just be like "Oh my God! Oh my God!" But soon as the conversation, you know, get going...BOOM! They gone! (laughs) They take the conversation over, actually.

One youth leader proposed that girls become more comfortable to discuss sex as they become less "submissive as children" and less content with a limited presentation of Biblical perspectives on sex. He believed girls want more Biblical truth as well as truth from their youth leaders as they get older. He stated:

Um when you get older you notice that the end is near and you're about to be on your own and you feel more maturity coming on. I think the simple fact is what I've been taught religiously doesn't really match as far as realistically what the Bible says. There are spaces. To be more specific, what I've experienced with a lot of sixteen-, seventeen-year-olds is, what does the Bible say about oral sex? It really doesn't! [...] These are the type of questions I'm encountering with fifteen-, sixteen-, and seventeen-year-old girls, who are saying don't just tell me what you been told all your life, tell me what you really believe.

**Sexual activity and varying comfort level.** A subtheme emerged across youth interviews associating girls' increased sexual activity as they get older with their increased or decreased comfort level discussing sex. Youth participants believed that as girls get older, they initiate or increase sexual behaviors, which results in a change in girls' comfort level discussing sex in Church. Several girls believed that girls' comfort level increases with their increased sexual activity. One participant stated, "Because like, some girls like done it and they don't care to talk about it or not and some girls like you know they, like more closed to talk about their sexual life and all that kinda stuff". Another participant described an increased boldness that might make girls less worried about discussing sex. She said, "Yeah some, if you know they're sexually active, then they start, you know, feeling themselves a little bit. They're more stank...uh just like their demeanor, just the way they act".

Other girls believed that as girls get older and become sexually active, they become less comfortable discussing sex in Church. One participant stated:

I feel like your conversation about sex as a teen only changes when you start doing it.

That's how I feel, cuz if you're not really doing it you can talk about sex all the time. And

of course people gon think that you havin sex cuz you know so much about it but...when you really start to have it you start to get more quiet.

Another participant similarly stated, “Well when you’re older, that’s when you’re most likely to be sexually active so you probably wouldn’t want to go through or hear something like that than if you’re younger and you’ve never really done anything like that”. To summarize, participants were split on whether girls are comfortable or uncomfortable discussing sex in Church. They generally believed girls’ comfort increased with age; however, youth were split on whether older girls’ greater sexual activity results in increased or decreased comfort discussing sex.

### **Does information about sex communicated in Church affect girls’ behavior?**

Participants considered the impact that messages about sex communicated in Church have on girls. Girls were also directly asked whether religious or non-religious girls are more likely to abstain from sex. Two themes emerged from youth interviews regarding the impact of Church messaging about sex on girls’ behavior. The themes include, religious girls are more likely to abstain and not the religion but the girl.

**Religious girls are more likely to abstain.** Many girls expressed their belief that religious girls are more likely to abstain from sex than girls who are not religious. Thus, girls seem to think there is some positive impact of Church and perhaps Church messages about sex on girls’ behavior. One girl shared:

Because... not that she doesn’t have like values and morals but like when you’re religious like most religions teach kids to wait till marriage to have sex and like if she doesn’t have that like kind of instilled in her then she’s more likely to have sex rather than the girl who’s religious.

Girls tended not to go into detail about the added benefit religiosity may provide religious girls that increased their likelihood of abstaining. Rather, they discussed the idea that girls who are not religious may lack certain values and accountability that if present, would possibly decrease their likelihood of having sex. For instance, one participant explained, “Because she doesn't have the connection with God. She doesn't know the rights or wrongs of it”. Another participant reasoned, “Because they really don't have any motivation to be abstinent and to wait, so they just figure why not”.

A small group of girls felt that religiosity did not have a positive impact on girls' sexual behavior, and possibly religiosity might have a negative impact. These participants believed that religious girls are more likely to have sex than girls who are not religious. Messages from these participants provide some insight into how abstinence-only messages in Church might disadvantage youth. One participant stated:

Umm only because we're taught like basically right and wrong instead of basically if you do wrong, or like basically I feel like in Church we're always taught about consequences and we're not really taught about like what you could actually do and what could happen. Like uhh we're not uhhh we're not, ok, we just learned consequences but we don't learn outcomes if I guess that makes sense. Like we learn what could happen. Like oh if you have sex until you're not, I mean if you have sex when you're not married that's bad. God is upset when you do that and it's like they're like oh shhh, like shy of it but like I feel like they're not understanding peer pressure maybe. They're not understanding the real world...of sex a little bit. It's like they're babied. So it's like when they actually get out there someone could easily like take advantage of them. Cuz they don't really know much about the real world of, with sex.

Another participant explained that adult monitoring is less likely for girls who are religious than girls who are not religious, perhaps due to an assumption that religious girls are not having sex.

She explained:

Cuz it's like, everybody got their eye on the non-religious girls that you know the religious girls they just go out and do it. Cuz they think they so sweet and all this other stuff, but you know I know-I know a lot of religious girls that be actin wild, so yeah and I know a lot of girls that's not religious that just be chillin so yeah I think it's the religious girls.

Despite these few comments on the negative impact of religiosity, a majority of girls shared the belief that religious girls are less likely to engage in sexual behavior.

**Not the religion, but the girl.** Some participants expressed a belief that religiosity may not have a significant impact on sexual behavior for girls. They suggested that each individual girl's character or ideals matter more in impacting her decisions around having sex. When asked if she believed sex communication in Church affects girls' sexual behavior, one participant simply replied, "No. Not really. They just do it. They just do it". Another youth responded:

Honestly I don't think so because I feel like, people gon' do what they wanna do and if sex is really as goo- (laughs), if sex is really as good as people say it is, then they're going to continue to do it because it feels so great. And, I don't think that's gonna change anything.

Some youth implied that being affiliated with religion alone may not matter, but rather how well a person's life lines up with their religious principles. One participant stated:

They're either, it's either one because like you can be religious and not livin like it. You can be not religious but you're livin a pretty good life because you're just not umm you're

just not baptized yet or like you haven't gave your life to Christ. It's all about like the girl like who they are. You can't just like, by saying she's a Christian and she's umm Muslim who you think is going to have sex first, it all depends on who they are so I wouldn't guess to say either one.

Youth also shared their experiences with religious peers who have sex in support of their belief that religion does impact girls' sexual behavior. One youth shared, "Because, they like, I have a friend who has had [sex], and she goes to Church, and she hears about it a lot, and she doesn't think anything of it". Another participant shared:

Well I, I can't... I don't know, cuz you know, it's usually the pastor's children the worst. Cuz, my cousin, pastor's daughter, she is off the chain. And you know me, I don't really do much, so I mean I can't...it depends on the person. I can't really speak on it.

Youth leaders also provided insight on how sex communication in Church may impact youth's behaviors. Two themes emerged from youth leader interviews regarding the impact of sex communication in Church. They discussed an impact on girls through cultivating a caring community for girls, as well as heightening their awareness of sex and their bodies.

**Caring community.** Youth leaders reflected on the community that is cultivated in the Church for youth. They highlighted the care and love youth may experience being a part of a Church family and this context as a positive place to frame how they view their bodies and self-worth. One youth leader explained:

Um, I think like if, when they feel more comfortable about sharing and open, especially in a environment, cause the Church posed to be an environment where you feel safe and you feel love and you feel accepted. So I think when they are able to share and receive the information straight from the Church, it's better for them

Moreover, this sense of community can also facilitate accountability, as explained by this youth leader's statement:

So I feel like that place has the ability to influence greatly, the decisions that a young lady makes and it also has the ability to impact how they view themselves and how they view their bodies. Um, and you may say why would you say how they view their bodies, because if they feel confident and loved, or if they feel like maybe somebody's gonna be disappointed with me if I behave in a certain way, they may be more mindful of their presentation.

**Heightened awareness.** Discussions around sex and related topics in Church may also impact girls by developing a heightened awareness of their bodies and behavior. The information girls receive provides basic knowledge. "I think when, um, I think when they hear, um, especially from someone they respect or look up to, about how their bodies should be, um, viewed, it makes them more aware". The knowledge girls gain in Church can then be cause for reconsideration when girls encounter decision-making about sex. One youth leader described the information as a foundation against which girls can bounce and compare information they receive in the world. He stated:

I think it gives them a foundation, um, that is –that is rooted in reality [...] so I think what the conversation does, it platforms at least to stand on that at least my starting point is something. A lot of us allow our children's starting point to be what culture tells them and we're reacting instead of pro-acting, you know, and I think that's a part of the greater benefit. Let's be the first to build the foundation. Are kids gonna influence it?

Absolutely! They're gonna hear some things where they're not gonna [inaudible] but at



least they're balancing or bouncing the information off of the foundation that we laid and not the foundation that their friend laid in middle school.

Youth leaders indicated unique ways and opportunities the Church may influence sex education that may not be the same as in other contexts such as the peer or school context.

### **How can we best communicate information about sex to girls in Church?**

To conclude the interview, youth and youth leaders were asked to provide suggestions for how adults can best communicate with girls about sex in Church. Youth participants gave a variety of suggestions as to how and what to discuss about sex with girls. Three themes emerged including, be real, keep it casual - don't force it, and provide examples of negative consequences.

**Be real.** Youth expressed their desire for those delivering sex communications in Church to be real and direct in their communication. They explained that adults should not "sugar coat" what they have to say. "Umm I think that... could... hmmm in Church ugh I would say like be like straight up and forward with them, instead of like sugar coat it all and making it all sweet and juicy and all that," stated one participant. Another participant recommended:

Umm I don't know. For me I just don't, I'm not a big like sugar coat person. Umm I think honesty and just a lot of people can learn through experiences. [...] I just like directness more so than sugar coating, and then girls have like the idea that you know they're confused because it's not direct umm or they're saying you know, maybe this is okay because she didn't directly say that.

Some youth suggested that adults in Church should be more realistic about sex and about youth having sex rather than just telling kids to abstain or threatening punishment. One youth said, "Umm basically be more open with the girls. Stop tryna like pat them on the shoulder and like, don't have sex, stay in school, don't do drugs. But like tell them, like you know, what could

really happen if you have sex”. One girl thought adults should be less religious in discussing sex with girls. She said, “Uhhh not be so like, religious about it. Like, if you have sex, you going to hell. Like, be like, like realistic about it too”.

**Keep it casual, don’t force it.** Several youth also emphasized their desire that adults not force the conversation about sex, or try to force youth to agree with their perspectives. One participant said, “Don't be like, like strict about it or like down their throats. Like just talk to them like normal and like try to get them to understand the best way you can”. Rather, youth desired for adults to have more casual conversations about sex with youth, and be open to understanding youth’s perspectives. One participant stated:

Kind of the same thing. You want them to be abstinent but you still want to hear them out hear what they think and what they know and what they feel about it and then you know try to motivate them but don’t try to just force it to them because that’s what best for them but you want to hear what they have to say and what they think before, you just force them to think something.

Similarly, another participant shared the same suggestion for adults to understand youth’s feelings and perspectives rather than trying to force their perspective. “I think the best way is to try and conversate with them. Get to know how they feel and what they know more than just trying to shove it down our throat and force us to do it”, she said.

**Provide examples of negative consequences.** The third theme that emerged as a suggestion for sex communication in Church was for adults to provide examples of negative consequences that can occur if girls do have sex. One youth shared an experience she had in driver’s education class in which real life facts on fatalities were used to stress the danger in

drunk driving. She connected this to the importance of the same type of real life information to stress the potential danger in girls having sex. She shared:

But what they did was start by showing everybody that died that day. And I didn't know so many people died that day, like so many people died that day! [...] And this one lady actually came in there and she had no arm. She had, like she barely had no leg [...] she still living like, everything that happened to her. So I'm guessing to talk about like, stuff that can happen. ya know. And not just, not just, on a video of stuff. Have someone actually come in and talk to them. Like, when the lady actually came in talking to us, I was like, yo, this is really real like. So, that's what, you know, changed me. You know, somebody actually coming in, talking to you. Telling you like, it's not a joke, like.

Another youth shared an experience of a man with HIV speaking at her Church that stuck with her. She said:

This guy had AIDS. Caught it from...he was gay. So he got it in the butt. So uh (laughs), he had AIDS and he didn't know and his guy partner left him right after it. And then they, he called and said, 'I'm sorry.' (Laughs) But yeah they should bring people into the Church and talk about it. Emotional people that's gonna cry so they can feel it in the heart.

Youth also suggested discussing STD's and pregnancy. One participant shared that a discussion in Church about STD's and condoms stopped her from having sex. She stated:

I feel like there is no best way to talk about it and they get it. I mean we talk about umm STDs and stuff and they still doin what they wanna do. Um I feel like that would be the only way cuz I was um...I wanted to do it one time then they started talking about STDs

and stuff and condoms aren't 100%, can have holes and stuff and you gotta check. I think that's the only way cuz that sho stopped me (laughs).

One participant suggested bringing in girls who had experienced teen pregnancy and started having sex early to share their experiences with youth in Church. She said:

Umm I think you'll have to sit down with the group of girls and get people who have experienced pregnancy at a young age and having sex too early, and that will get to them so they know what to do and what not to do." Youth participants seemed to be impacted by examples of negative consequences related to sex and believed their peers might also be impacted.

Youth leaders were also asked to provide suggestions for effective sex communication with girls in Church. Additionally, youth leaders were asked at what age they thought girls should begin to receive information about sex in Church. Youth leader responses centered around four themes regarding strategies for sex communication. These themes include begin at 10, mentorship, open and ongoing communication, and "Partnering with Parents". Themes in this category represent strategies that youth leaders reported currently using in sex communication with girls, as well as suggestions for effective communication.

**Begin at 10.** Most youth leaders responded that they believe sex communication should begin with girls around age 10 or when students start middle school. Some youth leaders reasoned that this is about the time when youth's bodies start to develop. One respondent highlighted the transition to middle school as an important crossroads for teen girls in terms of the introduction of sexuality and a crucial time to reach them. He stated:

Now? Ten or eleven. Because the reality of it is the introduction of it will be middle school and so you really hit middle school when you're twelve. I think at the age of

twelve we are hot. That's where we lose em at so. The seed isn't planted when they get to high school. The conversation is in middle school, so if we wait till high school, we're already behind.

**Mentorship.** The importance of mentorship was echoed both as a current strategy of some Churches as well as a highly recommended strategy for engaging girls in sex communication at Church. Youth leaders highlighted formal mentor programs in their Churches. One such example was a biweekly program called "I Am Me," which was described as "young adult women discussing issues around sex and relationship and self-worth with girls". Youth leaders also mentioned informal opportunities for mentoring teen girls. A youth leader described:

Um, we also have like the one on one chats and typically those will happen right after Bible study. We may go get something to eat or on Sundays after Church we may spend time with a small group of them. You know, invite them to the house to eat dinner, um and just kinda, we're hanging out but at the same time we're building them up through the different experiences that they have.

Youth leaders also discussed the importance of mentorship in their recommendations for ways to communicate with girls about sex. "I really believe in the power of mentoring (laughs). Um, I believe that it's very effective. Group and individual mentoring of teens. I truly believe it", stated one youth leader. Another leader emphasized the significance of mentors' ability to be transparent about their own experiences with the girls they mentor. He suggested:

Yea I think uhh I don't want to say the wrong thing but I think what I would call authentic relationships with young adults...umm who aren't given the space to be transparent. I think that's one. You know, tell me how many times you fell so that, so I

won't ever wanna fall. Umm I would also say another mechanism would be uhh I don't...yea, so yea I, I would definitely say yea that piece again, some type of, I guess I'll use the word mentorship...umm with young adults but you have to give them the space to be transparent and tell authentic stories. They can't just be biblical scriptures.

**Open, ongoing communication.** According to youth leaders, open and ongoing communication is vital to effective sex communication with teen girls. One youth leader cited girls' social nature as an important reason for open communication about sex. She reasoned:

I believe that it's important to have a lot of open dialogue because girls, especially teenage girls, are very social. They're very caught up in discussions. They're very caught up in being able to socialize with their peers and things of that nature.

Another youth leader shared a perspective on open communication to lessen girls' feeling that they need to hide their thoughts or behaviors. He said:

So, to try to keep them, cause we all do stuff, and everybody's doing it in secret we need to really talk about it out in the open. I think that's where they get messed up at cause they walk around hiding it.

He indicated that girls' decisions to hide the sexual activities they may be engaging in can get them into troublesome circumstances. As a recommendation for engaging youth in open, ongoing communication, one youth leader suggested:

And I don't think it should be a one-shot deal. I think it should be, ok so what do you think about Bible study? How do you think Bible study went? [...] Is there anything that you would change if we did this again...like what do you think we should add, you know, about sex or is there something that you would want to know more in depth? So kinda like a informal survey type thing, um, to really gather that feedback from them.

**“Partnering with parents”.** Using the words of one of the youth leaders, “partnering with parents” is an important component of the context of sex communication with teen girls. According to one of the youth leaders, “we only see kids probably for 2-5 hours a week if you really think about it like youth leaders and youth directors. The greatest forming to their understanding of sexuality is gonna be at home”. Youth leaders discussed the importance of including parents in the sharing of sex information at Church and supporting them to engage in further conversation and example-setting at home. “If as a parent you don’t engage in healthy dialogue with your child about sex, we’re losing”, stated one youth leader. He further expressed:

“You gotta be able to have the conversation at home without getting into a argument, and without [laughs] you know putting people on punishment. If you flip over tables like Jesus in the temple [interviewer laughs] that’s the last thing they’re ever gonna share with you.

This quote indicates the significance youth leaders placed on parent-child communication about sex.

A few youth leaders also shared programs and strategies they currently employ in their Churches to better engage parents sex communication with teen girls. One youth leader shared a six-week program called “Exploring the World of Your Child” which he described as a “cultural boot camp for parents”. He shared:

We watched [a video] which was a eighth grade girl...a ninth grade girl who had a video online where she was giving oral sex to a guy. We watched the video in class, and I told them this is what your child has access to and this is what is one of the popular discussions of the time. We talked about various issues but we spent two weeks on sex specifically. And I found that after that class, ninety percent of my parents were like first

of all where can I sign up for next year and what do I need to do for my child to be protected from this stuff and create a healthy sexual dialogue for my child.

One pastor described an orientation towards “family ministry” in her Church as a strategy to engage parents with their teens in discussion about sex. “You have some Churches that you know, do more isolated youth ministry but I believe in family ministry. So not just teaching that to the young people, but also teaching that to their parents”. She explained that this family focus in ministry facilitates opportunities for families to learn about sex together in Church and engage together in the application of what they learn at home.

And then they have a chance as a family to kinda go home and process, ok this what we talked about in Bible study and let’s kinda walk this out as a family versus it just being a responsibility of the child to walk it out on their own. Their parent is also getting the same info that they’re getting and then they have an opportunity to decide how they want to use it in their homes.

### **How Youth-Oriented is Your Church?**

Participants responded to a series of introductory questions regarding their feelings about the Churches they were affiliated with. Youth leaders were specifically asked how youth-oriented they perceive their Churches to be. Youth leaders described their Churches as being very youth-oriented. They outlined programs and activities available for youth at their Church. One youth leader explained, “...we’re very youth-oriented. Uhh outside of morning worship, like we have a lot of activities for them. We do stuff with em”. One of the participants who is a pastor credited her Church’s strong youth orientation to her previous experience in Church as a youth pastor and her experience outside the Church working in schools. She stated:



I would say very and I think that that is because of my experience being a youth pastor and working with youth in the schools, um, and some of the issues that I've seen. I really believe that young people are a vital part of the Church. A lot of times you have, you know, some older ministries they'll say kids need to be out of sight out of mind. Um, but I just, I don't agree with that perspective. I believe that you know, the Bible says train a child in the way that it should go and when they get old they will not depart and I really try to implement that.

### **What is Your Church's Position on Sex Education?**

It is important to consider a Church's stance on sex education, when examining youth's exposure to sex messages in Church. Only youth leaders were asked to discuss their Church's position on sex education. They were also asked if their Church's stance is consistent with their own personal beliefs. Youth leaders' responses delineated the significance of openness of youth and Church leaders as well as that of the congregation and parents. Within this category, two main themes emerged, including youth leader openness, and congregation and parent lack of openness. Responses indicated that youth leaders and the congregation, particularly parents, differ in their positions on sex communication in Church.

**Youth leader openness.** The youth leaders generally indicated their own openness to sex education in the Church. One leader said:

I truly believe that youth are already inundated with information. They have access to information at the drop of a phone. Um, I do believe that because they have so much access to information, it is the Church's responsibility to help them to filter through that and to apply it to the Word of God. Um, to really understand what God's Word says about the everyday stuff, which is really the foundation for how I do ministry. I believe in

ok, we have these different things that are going on, these different trending situations, you know, social media and all of that to impact your decisions. Let's discuss how that affects your everyday life. So I really believe that it's important for the Church to really educate youth about every topic that could affect their decision making.

Another youth leader passionately proposed that Church is the best place for conversations about sex. She stated:

When they're...especially when they're in a place that should be love and trust and you should feel safe. So what better place than the Church to bring forth the true discussion of sex and rights and wrongs? Like, I would just think it would be the best place to learn and hear it.

**Congregation and parent lack of openness.** In contrast, youth leaders indicated a resistance on the part of congregants including parents to have conversations around sex with youth. One youth pastor described this resistance as a “tragedy”. He stated:

I think that...there were two tragedies that I experienced. One is that parents were ignorant to the reality of their child's exposure, and so what in turn was happening was, they thought they were protecting their child when in reality what they were doing was making their child more vulnerable. And so I think that we have had some experiences with that.

Youth leaders discussed parents' and other congregants' resistance as a hindrance to more sex communication in Church, despite pastors' greater openness to discuss sex. One youth leader detailed an example of a situation in which an issue erupted due to differences in openness to conversations about sex between pastor, congregant, and parent. She shared:

I think... I think overall...my pastor and his wife probably would like to cover it. But I

think, just because of some of the, some of the Church members, not wanting to uh, yeah. Because of our members, our Church, cause we had, we did have a situation, um that one of our Church members blew up, over um...it was during...now it's coming back to me. It was about His Butterflies and the topic that I was just sharing with you, that the young lady was sharing about birth control and stuff and um...I guess the other young lady had shared something with her mentor, and went home and told her mom what she shared with her mentor. And her mom was mad because she felt her mentor shoulda come to her mother and shared it right away.

Church openness to sex communication is important and complex. Youth leaders in this study highlighted more openness on the part of youth leaders and pastors and less openness on the part of parents and other congregants. One youth leader's comment sums up the difficulty of cultivating a level of openness in the Church when he said of his Church, "Um, they are 100% for it. I fought for it but I think that they're there [...]".

### **Chapter 7: Discussion**

The purpose of the present study was to explore sex communication among African American girls in Church. Two primary objectives guided the development of the interview questions. The first objective was to explore the content and types of sex communication African American girls receive in Church. The second objective was to explore African American girls' perceptions of sex communication they receive in Church and the impact it has on their behavior. Semi-structured interviews were used with African American adolescent girls and youth ministry leaders to gain some understanding of the topic.

There are several contributions of the present study. Previous research on sex communication in the African American Church is very limited. The current study engaged

both youth and youth ministry leaders in discussing sex communication. Given the limited nature of previous research, a qualitative, grounded theory approach was utilized to begin to understand the many aspects of sex communication in the Church. This approach allowed the researcher to access youth's and youth leader's perspectives and experiences around sex communication in Church in an exploratory way. The investigator then used participants' own words to vividly illustrate their perceptions and begin to create a foundational understanding of what girls are learning about sex in Church and how they experience these sex messages. The findings provide some insight into the occurrence, content, perception, and impact of sex communication for African American adolescent girls in Church.

An additional contribution of the present study is the focus on African American adolescent girls and African American youth leaders who attend predominantly African American Churches. This focus on the African American Church and African American girls is important because of the historic role the Church has played in the African American community. Religiosity may be experienced differently and Church attendance is more frequent for African Americans when compared to other racial/ethnic groups (Mattis & Mattis, 2011); therefore, the potential to expose youth to sex communication may be greater. Also given cultural values about the importance of religiosity (PEW, 2009), African American youth and adults may place importance on information learned in the religious context.

A third contribution of the study is that information collected from two groups provided the ability to triangulate the findings. Youth and youth leader responses were compared to explore how emergent themes converged and diverged for the two groups. The ability to triangulate the findings increases the validity of study findings and provides multiple perspectives of sex communication in Church. This next section discusses the major findings

and indicates how these findings converged and diverged for youth and youth leaders. Findings are grouped by the study objective that they address.

### **Major Findings**

The first research objective was to examine content and type of messages communicated in Church to African American girls about sex. Girls who reported receiving sex communication at Church said they received the messages mostly in youth group meetings and special youth programs. Youth and youth leaders converged on a theme of abstinence-focused messages being the primary content of sex communication. Although other topics were mentioned, there were more instances where abstinence was mentioned. Youth and youth leaders reported that girls are advised to wait until they are married to have sex. While all sex messages were not explicitly abstinence-only, abstinence is clearly viewed as a primary focus. This finding is consistent with research that has found faith leaders to be uncomfortable discussing certain sexual topics (e.g., oral sex, anal sex, and homosexuality (Nunn et al, 2012).

Sexual safety was the most common secondary topic included in sex communication according to participants. Safety was mentioned far less frequently than abstinence and was not the preferred path for youth. Youth's reports of discussions of sexual safety were mostly about using protection during sex, namely condoms. There was some convergence here between youth and youth leaders; however, youth leaders indicated a more holistic view of safety that includes sexual safety, but also provided advice for girls to value and protect their bodies. Additionally, youth leaders were more likely to mention being smart in romantic relationships.

Youth diverged from youth leaders and revealed one topic that was not mentioned in youth leader interviews. Some youth participants discussed the topic of for whom sex is appropriate. These conversations included the idea that sex is only for adults and for

heterosexuals. This topic was mentioned much less frequently than abstinence and safety, but came up in a few youth interviews. Youth leaders did not mention this topic at all.

In addition to the topics of abstinence and sexual safety, youth and youth leaders converged upon a theme that sex communication in Church has a foundation in religious principles. Youth leaders tended to shape their discussions around a combined focus on religious principles and use of real-world application to reach the youth. Some youth also mentioned that the religious-based messages they received were re-worded by the adults delivering the message to facilitate their understanding.

One important theme that may help to provide context for the typical infrequent and narrow nature of sex discussions is a lack of openness to sex communication in the Church. Only youth leaders were asked about their Churches' positions on sex education and how they relate to their own personal beliefs. Youth leaders discussed a primary issue with parents not being open to Churches discussing sex or certain topic areas with their daughters. According to youth leaders, pastors and youth leaders may support sex discussions but often experience pressure from parents and other congregants to not have these discussions. They may not discuss sex at all or may address the topic more superficially to avoid negative reactions from parents.

This finding is consistent with previous research. Jones (2011) surveyed western Atlanta pastors who all expressed a belief that Churches should be engaged in sex education. However, only 58% reported any type of structured sex education in their Churches. Additionally, these same pastors rated parents as those most responsible for educating their children about sex. Thus, the struggle several of the youth leaders perceived between what they and their pastors were open to versus parents' hesitancy makes sense. Perhaps because Churches have traditionally steered away from any substantial discussion of sex, and due to the taboo nature of

the topic, parents have become resistant to sex communication in Church. Parents need to be educated on the unique role the faith community can play in establishing a religious standard for sexual behavior for their youth and in cultivating an environment of mentorship and accountability with like-minded youth and adults.

The second research objective was to examine how African American adolescent girls perceive and are impacted by sex communication in Church. Youth and youth leader themes diverged such that youth themes emerged supporting girls being both comfortable and uncomfortable having conversations about sex, whereas youth leaders primarily discussed youth's discomfort. According to some youth participants, youth are comfortable having conversations about sex because it is a normal conversation to have and many girls have become desensitized to the topic.

Other youth participants believed girls are uncomfortable discussing sex in Church. Youth and youth leaders converged on the perception that girls are uncomfortable with the topic of sex. Both participant samples cited an embarrassment discussing sex with adults as the reasoning for girls' discomfort. Additionally, youth leaders believed girls to be immature, and thought girls hid their awareness to avoid judgment. This perceived fear of judgement is interesting as it seems to contradict the connectedness that both youth and youth leaders expressed as a positive attribute of their Churches.

Both youth and youth leader participants also believed that girls get more comfortable as they age. Youth participants raised the idea that girls' increased comfort as they get older is linked to their increased sexual behavior. Other youth participants suggested that girls get less comfortable with the conversations as they become more sexually active. The perceived decrease in comfort with an increase in sexual activity is likely related to youth leaders' perception that

youth may hide their awareness of sex and related topics in order to avoid feeling judged by adults in Church.

Youth and youth leaders had varying perspectives about the impact of sex communication in Church on girls. Findings converged for both participant samples that indicated a positive impact on girls' sexual behavior through developing a foundation in religious principles. Most youth believed that religious girls are more likely to abstain from sex than non-religious girls, due to the religious foundation they have. Youth leaders described sex communication in Church as a foundation against which girls can compare and measure the information they receive and temptations they experience outside of Church.

Findings from the two groups diverged such that some youth believed that religiosity alone does not impact girls' sexual behavior. They believed that other personal characteristics (e.g., whether a girl is living right, whether girls want sex, etc.) have a greater impact on girls' sexual behaviors than religiosity. Although youth leaders did not explicitly discuss the influence of other factors on girls' sexual behavior, some did mention the importance of family communication in supporting Church communication for the messages to be most effective. Therefore, youth leaders may agree that there are other factors that may cultivate or counteract the impact of religiosity on girls' sexual behaviors. Youth leaders also discussed the caring environment and accountability that youth have access to in Church that may help keep them on track with the messages they receive. Girls expressed their affinity to the connectedness in their Churches; therefore, it is possible they have experienced some protective effects of the caring environment and accountability youth leaders highlighted. Findings pointing to a positive impact of sex communication in Church suggest that despite heightened rates of sexual activity



for African American girls (CDC, 2013), the sex communication that has been occurring may be helping some girls make better decisions.

Youth and youth leaders were asked to give suggestions for how to best discuss sex with African American girls in Church to achieve the greatest impact. Across youth and youth leader interviews, there were seven primary recommendations. Youth and youth leaders converged with themes related to open and honest conversations in which adults are real and upfront with girls. Additionally, youth suggested adults engage youth in casual conversations rather than trying to force their beliefs on them. Youth also recommended that adults use examples of negative consequences of sex to emphasize the seriousness of sex and the potential for severe negative effects. Youth leaders emphasized a need to begin sex conversations earlier, around age 10. They also stressed the importance of both mentorship and working together with parents to help them understand and maintain open communication with their children about sex at home. Many of these themes, including open communication, mentorship and engaging parents, relate to the connectedness that youth and youth leaders highlighted as reasons for liking their Churches. Therefore, it is likely that following these recommendations may help bolster the positive impact of sex communication in Church for African American girls.

There are several main findings of this study that help to provide an understanding of the content, experience, and impact of sex communication for African American girls in Church. Sex messages focus primarily on abstinence and sometimes include conversations about safety in sex and relationships as a secondary focus. Sex communication is most often grounded in religious principles. According to participants, girls vary in their comfort level with sex discussions and typically get more comfortable as they get older. Sex communication in Church reportedly impacts girls positively by providing foundational knowledge and principles regarding

sex. Finally, participants shared several suggestions to improve sex communication in Church, including having open and honest communication, utilizing examples of negative consequences of sex, engaging parents, and facilitating mentorship. The findings from this study provide insight into sex communication in Church and have some important implications for the research and faith communities.

### **Findings in Relation to Theoretical Frameworks**

It is helpful to connect the findings to both Bronfenbrenner's (1979) and Smith's (2003) models. This study utilized an adapted version of Bronfenbrenner's (1979) Ecological Model to depict the Church as an ecological system. The findings primarily line up with the individual and microsystem levels. Youth and youth leaders' responses were mostly related to personal beliefs & relation to God (individual) and relationships with Church peers, members, and leaders (microsystem). Participants discussed their own beliefs about how girls perceive sex communication in Church and how it impacts girls' behavior. They also shared their beliefs about how sex should be discussed in Church. Youth and youth leaders' own beliefs about sex as it relates to God were not discussed; however, this is likely because the focus of the interview was on what messages are communicated rather than what participants themselves believe about sex. Girls and youth leaders may also have limited opportunities to share their own personal beliefs about religion as it relates to sex because of the Church's focus on promoting abstinence until marriage as the only option with a positive outcome. Participants made frequent mention of the importance of connection and relationship to their pastors, congregation, and youth leaders as reasons for liking their Churches.

Smith's (2003) Theory of Religious Effects among Adolescents was also employed as a theoretical framework for this study. The major findings align mostly with the moral order

category. Most of the participants' response (e.g., recommendations to abstain from sex until marriage), reflected moral directives presented in the faith community. Participants also alluded to the idea of role models in their discussion of the characteristics they liked about their pastors and the importance of connection to adults and youth leaders in the Church. Youth and youth leader's reported experiences of Church-based sex communication did not address the learned competencies or social and organizational ties categories; however, their recommendations of how to engage girls in sex communication implied a desire to include these components in their experiences of sex communication. Youth's suggestion to include examples of negative consequences of engaging in sex and youth leaders' suggestion to begin at age 10 to have ongoing conversations have implications for developing competency around sex and spirituality. These recommendations also may indicate opportunities to develop coping skills to work through situations that may make abstaining difficult. Moreover, youth leader's suggestions to emphasize mentorship and parent engagement relate to social ties and developing a network of consistent messaging and accountability for youth. Mapping the findings on the ecological and religious models helps to highlight the contexts in which sex communication might already be impacting girls based on their perceptions of the messages. The theories also help to illuminate unutilized contexts of impact that could potentially increase the positive impact of sex communication for girls in the Church.

### **Recommendations for Church Leaders and Youth Leaders**

There are some recommendations for Church leaders and youth leaders based on the major findings of the present study. First, Church leaders and youth leaders should work to engage parents in focused conversations to facilitate open sharing of information with youth about sex. Youth leaders have a unique opportunity to impact youth in Church given their role in

the youth ministry and oftentimes as facilitators of conversations about sex with youth.

However, the point that there is a lack of openness to sex communication within the Church is an important indicator that youth leaders may feel limited in the depth and breadth of conversations in which they are able to engage youth about sex. Leaders should discuss these imposed limitations on discussions about sex and the potential for these discussions to be vague and confuse youth rather than provide them a greater understanding. It is also important that Church leaders and youth leaders engage parents in conversations and trainings to maintain open lines of communication with their daughters and support the messages delivered at Church. Youth leaders might host parenting seminars on a variety of topics, such as “How to Discuss Sex with Your Daughter”, “Discussing Sex in the Media with Your Daughter”, and “How to Supervise Your Daughter Dating”.

Second, Church leaders and youth leaders need to cultivate a safe space for open and honest communication about sex. This theme was apparent across youth and youth leader interviews. It is reasonable to believe that conversations may not feel open and realistic to girls given the hesitancy of many in Churches to even begin a conversation in the first place. The typical focus on abstinence also contributes to youth’s and youth leaders’ perspectives that conversations about sex should be more open and take a more realistic perspective. For instance, youth leaders may emphasize a “judgment-free zone” during youth activities. Youth leaders might also share some of the sex-related questions they had growing up to get the conversation going and encourage youth to feel comfortable asking their questions. Furthermore, youth leaders could train slightly older girls to facilitate discussion groups or organize peer accountability groups.

Youth's desire for more open communication about sex is promising as it suggests that youth do want to learn more and to engage in discussion to figure out how their religiosity relates to their sexuality; however, it is important to note that youth will not be comfortable in an environment that is perceived as judgmental. Girls are willing to and want to talk but in order for them to completely be themselves, and to ask questions, they need to feel unjudged. Moreover, adults in Church, whether the youth leader, the pastor, or some other adult, need to feel comfortable being open and honest with youth without fear of a backlash from parents or other congregants. Youth leaders could benefit from training in facilitating discussions about sex in a way that is comfortable for girls and for themselves as facilitators. All adults involved should focus on the potential positive effects of open and ongoing conversations to help youth make sense of sex in the context of their religious beliefs.

Third, Church leaders and youth leaders should expand the conversation with girls to provide a more comprehensive exploration and education about sex. Many Churches that do discuss sex, may stop at abstinence, or focus more heavily on abstinence than other important aspects of sexuality. Abstinence may be viewed as an ideal, particularly in the faith community; however, the reality that African American girls are more sexually active (CDC, 2013) than other racial/ethnic groups indicates that girls need more sex education than just abstinence-focused messages. African American girls are also at greater risk for earlier sex initiation (CDC, 2013; Dancy, Crittenden, & Ning, 2010) and multiple sex partners (CDC, 2013) than other racial/ethnic groups. African American girls are having sex and not always doing it safely. Therefore, it is important for faith communities to recognize the potential role they can play in educating girls to protect them against having sex and experiencing the negative consequences of sex (e.g. STDs, HIV, and teen pregnancy).

Churches should consider engaging youth in evidence-based sex education programs to help youth leaders and facilitators expand the conversation about sex. Evidence-based programs have a proven record of effectively preventing risky sex behaviors and often include comprehensive education content. “Get Real”, for example, is an evidenced-based prevention program created by Planned Parenthood to promote delayed sex initiation and safer sex practices. The program focuses on four key components including: (1) Sexual health as an integral part of health education; (2) Parents and caring adults as primary sex educators; (3) Relationship skills as a key to comprehensive sexuality education; and (4) Protection methods for adolescents who do become sexually active (Grossman, Tracy, Charmaraman, Ceder, & Erkut, 2014). “Promoting Health among Teens (PHAT) is another example of an evidence-based program aimed at promoting abstinence and safer sex practices. One third of the modules is devoted to each of the following topics: encouraging abstinence, encouraging condom use, and general content related to HIV and STIs (Jemmott, Jemmott, & Fong, 2010). Families Talking Together (FTT) is an evidence-based program designed to help parents communicate with their teens about sex (Guilamo-Ramos et al., 2011). Parents receive a manual on child development with a few modules for their teens to complete regarding relationships and safe sex practices. Youth leaders could adapt evidence-based program to be more culturally relevant for African American girls. Moreover, youth leaders could integrate religious principles and scripture to be more relevant in the Church context.

There are several contributions of the present study for the faith community and parents. Youth leaders and pastors may review these findings and compare with observations of their own Churches to see if similar messages are given and received and if the suggestions are of value.

They may also use the structured interview guides and findings to develop their own discussion questions for youth and adults in their Churches.

### **Recommendations for Future Research**

The present study findings provide some initial insight in sex communication in Church and its impact on African American adolescent girls. The following are some recommendations for future research. One, researchers should explore the implicit messages youth may receive in Church related to sex. One implicit message, for example, could be that sex is bad or unnatural given the Church's hesitancy to discuss it. Some of the youth participants who said there were no messages provided about sex in their Church, shared responses in the interview that indicated some knowledge of unspoken expectations. It is possible that youth participants who discussed the sex messages provided at their Churches also perceive some implicit messages in Church. For example, youth might perceive an implied message that it is worse for teen girls to engage in sex than boys because adults in their Church may talk to girls about sex more often than boys. Youth may also perceive these implicit messages from parents and peers. This study focused on explicit messages and the researcher did not follow up with participants regarding implicit messages. Both explicit and implicit messages are important in understanding how youth conceptualize sex in the context of their religiosity. Both types of messages likely impact girls' behavior.

Two, researchers should investigate other factors that may impact sex communication in Church. One of the themes suggest that some youth believe it is other factors that have a greater influence on girls' sexual behavior than messages they receive in Church. These might for example include, factors such as peer religiosity, having a boyfriend, length of romantic relationship, and sexual behaviors of parents and peers. Furthermore, the sex messages girls

receive from other sources, namely peers, family, school, and the media likely intersect with the messages they receive in Church. Additionally, researchers might ask youth about the relationship- and sex-related behaviors they have observed from adults in their Church communities and how their observations align with and impact their understanding of the sex messages they have heard. Potential incongruences may delegitimize sex communication from the Church. Girls' peer network within the church also likely plays an important role in their perceptions and implementation of sex-related recommendations in Church. It is important to understand how youth navigate and consolidate all the verbal and non-verbal sex messages they receive in Church in order to gain a more holistic understanding of how sex communication in Church may have an impact on African American girls.

Three, researchers might culturally adapt and evaluate the effectiveness of sex communication that is provided outside of the Church context. Programs and messages regarding sex that are not faith-based may provide foundational information as well as delivery approaches that might not otherwise be considered or included in faith-based messages. Researchers could adapt a program to fit both the African American teenage female as well as to reflect some religious inspiration. Then, researchers should evaluate the effectiveness the adapted message has on girls' perceptions and behaviors.

Finally, future research should include development of a questionnaire that could be used more widely to obtain responses from a larger number of youth and youth leaders. The present study sampled a small number of youth and youth leaders from a few Churches in the Richmond area. These findings may or may not apply to the larger African American faith community or to African American Churches in other geographical locations. Eventually, it will be important for researchers interested in the protective effects of religiosity on African American girls' sexual



behaviors to collect data from a much larger number of youth, youth ministry leaders, pastors, and parents. Hopefully, the present study will be a catalyst for other studies to further explore sex communication in the African American Church as it relates to not just African American girls, but boys as well. The elevated level of sexual-risk taking (Parks et al., 2009; Eaton et al., 2012) suggests that this line of research is necessary and urgent.

### **Study Limitations**

There are some limitations to the present study. The researcher experienced great difficulty recruiting participants, particularly youth ministry leaders. Only eight youth leaders were recruited. Given the taboo nature of the topic, one reason for low recruitment of Church leaders may have been perceptions that their responses would not be anonymous. For example, a few youth leaders inquired as to whether the interview would be anonymous for them and the Church with which they were affiliated. The researcher assured them that they nor their Churches would be identified; however, this fear of identification may have led to some hesitancy. Furthermore, youth leaders may have some uncertainty as to what their Church's definitive message is about sexual behavior, particularly given the limited conversations that occur in many Churches. Youth leaders may have been hesitant to discuss sex, given this potential uncertainty, for fear of responding in a way that is not viewed as religiously sound.

A related limitation was that all youth leader interviews were conducted on the phone. Youth leaders were given an option to be interviewed over the phone for greater convenience, which could be why they elected to interview via phone. The potential reasons previously mentioned for the difficulty of recruitment of youth leaders might also have contributed to the election of phone interviews. If youth leaders were uncomfortable with the interview topic, they

may have believed a phone interview to be a little less uncomfortable than a face-to-face interview.

Another limitation was that youth and youth ministry leaders were not necessarily from the same Church. There was some overlap in Church affiliation for youth and youth leaders; however, there was not youth and youth leader representation for each affiliated Church. Having both youth and youth leaders from the same Church would have helped to triangulate the data even further. It would also help examine any differences in messages a youth leader may provide and how youth may interpret those messages.

Additionally, this study sampled girls and youth leaders who were involved in the Church. Given the frequent hesitancy of Churches to discuss sex, recruitment of participants from Churches could have increased youth and youth leaders' hesitancy to participate and impacted the validity of their responses. Also conducting the interviews in the Church might have also hindered participants' openness.

Recruitment of youth and youth leaders from a small group of Christian Churches in the Richmond, Virginia area specifically might have also limited the scope of the study. Other religious groups who are not Christians may be more or less likely to receive sex messages, especially abstinence messages. Furthermore, Christian Churches in other geographical areas may engage in distinctive styles of worship and youth education. Youth participants were also recruited only from Churches rather than other faith-based organizations which may have different messages. Therefore, the current study's findings may or may not apply to other African American girls affiliated with other Churches, faith-based organizations or faiths. Future research should include a larger sample of Churches and faith-based organizations across

different geographical areas to increase the generalizability of the findings to a larger population of African American girls in faith-based contexts.

## **Conclusion**

The purpose of the current study was to gain an understanding of the sex messages communicated to girls in Church about sex, their experiences of the messages, and how these messages impact their behavior. The major findings provide an important foundation for understanding that sex messages do not stop at abstinence; however, Churches do focus on abstinence and position it as an ideal. Some girls seem to be receiving messages about sexual safety as well as messages about honoring their bodies and themselves in their relationships.

Findings indicated girls discomfort discussing sex with adults, particularly in Church, for several reasons. These reasons included immaturity and a fear of judgement. There was also some indication of youth's desensitization to sexual topics and thus, a potential comfort with the discussions. Girls appear to experience increased comfort as they get older.

Current communication about sex in Church appears to have some positive impact on girls' sex behaviors. Religiosity is perceived to be a foundation to help girls make positive decisions. Moreover, the connection with other Christians experienced in Church may provide some protective context for girls. Some girls highlighted the impact of additional factors that may interact with faith-based sex messages to affect girls' sexual behavior. Further study is necessary to examine additional factors such as peer group, and interest in sex, among others, to better understand how they impact the potential benefit of faith-based information about sex.

This study is a launching point into a line of research around sex communication with adolescent girls in the African American Church. Implications for Church leaders and youth leaders, as well as communication strategies suggested by youth and youth leaders, provide some

important suggestions and information for the faith community. Risky sex behaviors and the negative effects continue to be a problem in the African American community. It is important for both the research and faith communities to further examine the protective context of religiosity and the Church against African American adolescent girls' risky sex behaviors.

## References

- Adamczyk, A., & Felson, J. (2006). Friends' religiosity and first sex. *Social Science Research, 35*, 924 – 947.
- Ahern, K. J. (1999). Ten tips for reflexive bracketing. *Qualitative Health Research, 9*, 407 – 411.
- Bachanas, P. J., Morris, M. K., Lewis-Gess, J. K., Sarett-Cuasay, E. J., Sirl, K., Ries, J. K., & Sawyer, M. K. (2002). Predictors of risky sexual behavior in African American adolescent girls: Implications for prevention interventions. *Journal of Pediatric Psychology, 27*, 519 – 530.
- Ball, J., Armistead, L., & Austin, B-J. (2003). The relationship between religiosity and adjustment among African-American, female, urban adolescents. *Journal of Adolescence, 26*, 431 – 446..
- Beadnell, B., Stielstra, S., Baker, S., Morrison, D., Knox, K., Gutierrez, L., Doyle, A. (2003). Ethnic identity and sexual risk-taking among African American women enrolled in an HIV/STD prevention intervention. *Psychology, Health & Medicine, 82*, 187 – 198.
- Belgrave, F. Z., & Brevard, J. (2015). African American boys: Identity, culture, and development. New York, NY: Springer.
- Belgrave, F. Z., Marin, B. V., & Chambers, D. (2000). Cultural, contextual, and intrapersonal predictors of risky sexual attitudes among urban African American females in early adolescence. *Cultural Diversity and Ethnic Minority Psychology, 6*(3), 309 – 322.
- Bowen, G. A. (2009). Supporting a grounded theory with an audit trail: An illustration. *International Journal of Social Research Methodology, 12*, 305 – 316.
- Brener, N. D., Kann, L., Shanklin, S., Kinchen, S., Eaton, D. K., Hawkins, J., & Flint, K. H.

- (2013). Methodology of the Youth Behavior Surveillance System - 2013. *Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Reports*, 62, 1-20.
- Brewster, K. L., Cooksey, E. C., Guilkey, D. K., & Rindfuss, R. R. (1998). The changing impact of religion on the sexual and contraceptive behavior of adolescent women in the United States. *Journal of Marriage and Family*, 60, 493 – 504.
- Bronfenbrenner, U. (1979). *The Ecology of Human Development: Experiments by Nature and Design*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC). (2009). *Sexually Transmitted Disease Surveillance, 2008*. Atlanta, GA: U.S. Department of Health and Human Services
- Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC). (2012). Vital signs: HIV infection, testing, and risk behaviors among youths - United States. *Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report*, 61, 1 – 4.
- Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC). (2013). *Youth Risk Behavior Survey*. [Data file]. Retrieved from <http://www.cdc.gov/healthyyouth/yrbs/data/>
- Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC). (2014, February). *HIV among African American youth*. Fact Sheet. Retrieved from <http://www.cdc.gov/nchstp/newsroom/docs/CDC-Youth-AAAs-508.pdf>
- Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. (2017). *Sexually Transmitted Disease Surveillance 2016*. Atlanta: U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. Retrieved from [https://www.cdc.gov/std/stats16/CDC\\_2016\\_STDS\\_Reportfor508WebSep21\\_2017\\_164.pdf](https://www.cdc.gov/std/stats16/CDC_2016_STDS_Reportfor508WebSep21_2017_164.pdf)
- Charmaz, K. (2006). *Constructing grounded theory*. London: Sage.

- Cooksey, E. C., Rindfuss, R. R., & Guilkey, D. K. (1996). The initiation of adolescent sexual and contraceptive behavior during changing times. *Journal of Health and Social Behavior*, 37, 59 – 74.
- Creswell, J.W. (2007). *Qualitative inquiry and research design: Choosing among five approaches* (2nd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Dahl, R. E. (2004). Adolescent brain development: A period of vulnerabilities and opportunities. *Annals of the New York Academy of Science*, 1021, 1 – 22.
- Dancy, B. L., Crittenden, K. S., & Ning, H. (2010). African American girls' initiation of sexual activity. *Women's Health Issues*, 20, 146 – 155.
- Eaton, D. K., Kann, L., Kinchen, S., Shanklin, S., Flint, K. H., Hawkins, J., Wechsler, H. (2012). Youth Risk Behavior Surveillance - United States, 2011. *Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report*, 61, 1 – 162.
- Ethier, K. A., Kershaw, T. S., Lewis, J. B., Milan, S., Niccolai, L. M., & Ickovics, J. R. (2006). Self-esteem, emotional distress and sexual behavior among adolescent females: Inter-relationships and temporal effects. *Journal of Adolescent Health*, 38, 268 – 274.
- Forhan, S. E., Gottlieb, S. L., Sternberg, M. R., Xu, F., Datta, S. D., McQuillan, G. M., ... Markowitz, L. E. (2009). Prevalence of sexually transmitted infections among female adolescents aged 14 to 19 in the United States. *Pediatrics*, 124, 1505 – 1512.
- Glaser, B.G. (1978). *Theoretical sensitivity: Advances in the methodology of grounded theory*. Mill Valley, CA: Sociology Press.
- Glaser, B. G. (1992). *Basics of grounded theory analysis*. Mill Valley, CA: Sociology Press.
- Glaser, B. G., & Strauss, A. L. (1967). *The discovery of grounded theory: Strategies for qualitative research*. Chicago, IL: Aldine Publishing Company.

- Grant, K. E., O'koon, J. H., Davis, T. H., Roache, N. A., Poindexter, L. M., Armstrong, M. L., ... McIntosh, J. M. (2000). Protective factors affecting low-income urban African American youth exposed to stress. *Journal of Early Adolescence*, *20*, 388 – 417.
- Grossman, J. M., Tracy, A. J., Charmaraman, L., Ceder, I., & Erkut, S. (2014). Protective effects of middle school comprehensive sex education with family involvement. *Journal of School Health*, *84*(11), 739 – 747.
- Guilamo-Ramos, V., Bouris, A., Jaccard, J., Gonzalez, B., McCoy, W., & Aranda, D. (2011). A parent-based intervention to reduce sexual risk behavior in early adolescence: Building alliances between physicians, social workers, and parents. *Journal of Adolescent Health*, *48*(2), 159 – 163.
- Guion, L. A., Diehl, D. C., & McDonald, D. (2011). *Triangulation: Establishing the validity of qualitative studies*. (Department of Family, Youth, and Community Sciences No. FC56014). Gainesville, FL: Institute of Food and Agricultural Services. (Original work published 2002).
- Hamilton, B.E., Martin, J.A., Osterman, M. J. K., & Curtin, S. C. (2015). *Births: Final Data for 2014*. Hyattsville, MD: National Center for Health Statistics. Retrieved kfrom [http://www.cdc.gov/nchs/data/nvsr/nvsr64/nvsr64\\_12.pdf](http://www.cdc.gov/nchs/data/nvsr/nvsr64/nvsr64_12.pdf) - PDF.
- Hensel, D. J., & Sorge, B. H. (2014). Adolescent women's daily academic behaviors, sexual behaviors, and sexually related emotions. *Journal of Adolescent Health*. Advance Online Publication.
- Jacelon, C. S., & O'Dell, K. K. (2005). Analyzing qualitative data. *Urologic Nursing*, *25*, 217 – 220.
- Jemmott, J. B., III, Jemmott, L.S., & Fong, G.T. (2010). Efficacy of a theory-based abstinence-



- only intervention over 24 months: A randomized controlled trial with young adolescents. *Archives of Pediatrics & Adolescent Medicine*, 164(2), 152 – 159.
- Jenkins, M. (2014). A concept analysis of self-efficacy and adolescent sexual risk-taking behavior. *Nursing Forum*. Advance Online Publication. (Masters thesis).
- Jones, D. L. (2011). *A strategy for a successful Christian sexual education ministry in the African American Church*. Retrieved from Digital Commons.
- Kahn, L., McManus, T., Harris, W. A., Shanklin, S.L., Flint, K. H., Hawkins, J., ..., Zaza, S. (2016). Youth Risk Behavior Surveillance – United States, 2015. *MMWR Surveillance Summaries*, 65(No. SS-6), 1 – 174.
- Kaplan, D. L., Jones, E. J., Olsen, E. C., & Yunzal-Butler, C. B. (2013). Early age of first sex and health risk in an urban adolescent population. *Journal of School Health*, 83, 350 – 356.
- Kirby, D. (2002). Antecedents of adolescent initiation of sex, contraceptive use, and pregnancy. *American Journal of Health Behavior*, 26, 473 – 485,
- Koenig, H. G. (2009). Research on religion, spirituality, and mental health: A review. *Canadian Journal of Psychiatry*, 54, 283 – 291.
- Krishnakumar, A., & Black, M. M. (2003). Family processes within three-generation households and adolescent mothers' satisfaction with father involvement. *Journal of Family Psychology*, 17, 488 – 498.
- Landor, A., Simmons, L. G., Simons, R. L., Brody, G. H., & Gibbons, F. X. (2011). The role of religiosity in the relationship between parents, peers, and adolescent risky sexual behavior. *Journal of Youth and Adolescence*, 40, 296 – 309.
- Lincoln, C. E., & Mamiya, L. H. (1990). *The black church in the African American experience*.

- Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Manlove, J., Logan, C., Moore, K. A., & Ikramullah, E. (2008). Pathways from family religiosity to adolescent sexual activity and contraceptive use. *Perspectives of Sexual and Reproductive Health, 40*, 105 – 117.
- Martinez, G., Abma, J., & Copen, C. (2010). *Educating teenagers about sex in the United States*. (NCHS Data Brief No. 44). Hyattsville, MD: National Center for Health Statistics.
- Mattis, J. S. (2000). African American women's definitions of spirituality and religiosity. *Journal of Black Psychology, 26*, 101 – 122.
- Mattis, J. L., & Mattis, J. H. (2011). Religiosity and spirituality in the lives of African-American children. In N. E. Hill, T. L. Mann, & H. Fitzgerald (Eds.), *African-American children's mental health: Development and context*, vol. 1. (pp. 125 –149). Santa Barbara, CA: ABC-CLIO, Inc.
- McCree, D. H., Wingood, G. M., DiClemente, R., Davies, S., & Harrington, K. F. (2003). Religiosity and risky sexual behavior in African-American adolescent females. *Journal of Adolescent Health, 33*, 2 – 8.
- Meier, A. M. (2003). Adolescents' transition to first intercourse, religiosity, and attitudes about sex. *Social Forces, 81*, 1031 – 1052.
- Montgomery-Walters, G. P. (2010). *Resilience and African American early adolescents: The protective function of religion and structured after-school activities*. (Doctoral dissertation). Retrieved from ProQuest. (3419849).
- Morrow, S. L. (2005). Quality and trustworthiness in qualitative research in counseling psychology. *Journal of Counseling Psychology, 52*, 250 – 260.
- Nunn, A., Cornwall, A., Chute, N., Sanders, J., Thomas, G., James, G., ... Flanigan,

- T. (2012) Keeping the faith: African American faith leaders' perspectives and recommendations for reducing racial disparities in HIV/AIDS infection. *PLoS ONE*, 7, e36172.
- Parks, K. A., Hsieh, Y-P, Collins, R. L., Levonyan-Radloff, K., & King, L. P. (2009). Predictors of risky sexual behavior with new and regular partners in a sample of women bar drinkers. *Journal of Studies on Alcohol and Drugs*, 70, 197 – 205.
- Perper, K., Peterson, K., & Manlove, J. (2010). *Diploma attainment among teen mothers*. (Fact Sheet Publication #2010-01). Washington, DC: Child Trends.
- PEW (2009). *A religious portrait of African Americans*. Pew Research Center, Washington: DC. Retrieved from <http://www.pewforum.org/2009/01/30/a-religious-portrait-of-african-americans/>
- Pfleger, J. C., Cook, E. C., Niccolai, L. M., & Connell, C. M. (2013). Racial/ethnic differences in patterns of sexual risk behavior and rates of sexually transmitted infections among female young adults. *American Journal of Public Health*, 103, 903 – 909.
- Pleck, J. H., Sonenstein, F. L., Ku, L., & Burbridge, L. C. (1996). *Factors modifying male adolescent risk behavior* (Paper No. 406604). Urban Institute Policy and Research Report, 24 – 25. Retrieved from <http://www.urban.org/publications/406604.html>
- Rector, R., & Johnson, K. A. (2005, August). Teenage sexual abstinence and academic achievement. Paper presented at the meeting of the Abstinence Clearinghouse Conference, Washington, DC.
- Rostosky, S. S., Wilcox, B. L., Wright, M. L. C., & Randall, B. A. (2004). The impact of religiosity on adolescent sexual behavior: A review of the evidence. *Journal of Adolescent Research*, 19, 677 – 697.

- Sabia, J. J., & Rees, D. I. (2009). The effect of sexual abstinence on females' educational attainment. *Demography*, *46*, 695 – 715.
- Satterwhite, C. L., Torrone, E., Meites, E., Dunne, E. F., Mahajan, R., Ocfemia, M. C., ... Weinstock, H. (2013). Sexually transmitted infections among US women and men: prevalence and incidence estimates, 2008. *Sexually Transmitted Diseases*, *40*(3), 187 – 193.
- Smith, C. (2003). Theorizing religious effects among American adolescents. *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, *42*, 17 – 30.
- Smith, C., Denton, M. L., Faris, R., & Regnerus, M. (2002). Mapping American adolescent religious participation. *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, *41*, 597 – 612.
- Steinman, K. J., & Zimmerman, M. A. (2004). Religious activity and risk behavior among African American adolescents: Concurrent and developmental effects. *American Journal of Community Psychology*, *33*, 151 – 161.
- Stranger-Hall, K. F., & Hall, D. W. (2011). Abstinence-only education and teen pregnancy rates: Why we need comprehensive sex education in the U.S. *PLoS ONE*, *6*, e24658.
- Strauss, A. & Corbin, J. (1998). *Basics of qualitative research*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.
- Taylor, R. J., Chatters, L. M., & Levin, J. (2004). *Religion in the lives of African Americans: Social, psychological, and health perspectives*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Temple, J. R., Paul, J. A., van den Berg, P., Li, V. D., McElhany, A., & Temple, B. W. (2012). Teen sexing and its association with sexual behaviors. *Archives of Pediatrics and Adolescent Medicine*, *166*, 828 – 833.

- The National Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unplanned Pregnancy. (2012). *Why it matters: Teen childbearing, education, and economic wellbeing*. Retrieved from <https://thenationalcampaign.org/sites/default/files/resource-primary-download/childbearing-education-economicwellbeing.pdf>
- Titilayo, A., Agunbiade, M. O., & Okanlawon, K. (2009). Perception and attitudes of Christian youths toward condom use: Implications for HIV/AIDS in Nigeria. *African Research Review, 3*, 47 – 60.
- Tufford, L., & Newman, P. (2010). Bracketing in qualitative research. *Qualitative Social Work, 11*, 80 – 96.
- Valois, R. F., Oeltmann, J., Waller, J., & Hussey, J. R. (1999). Relationship between number of sexual intercourse partners and selected health risk behaviors among public high school students. *Journal of Adolescent Health, 25*, 328 – 335.
- Vasilenko, S. A. & Lanza, S. T. (2014). Predictors of multiple sexual partners from adolescence through young adulthood. *Journal of Adolescent Health, 55*, 491 – 497.
- Ventura, S. J., Hamilton, B. E., & Mathews, T. J. (2014). *National and state patterns of teen births in the United States – 1940-2013*. (National Vital Statistics Report Vol. 63 No. 4). Hyattsville, MD: National Center for Health Statistics.
- Wiemann, C. M., Rickert, V. I., Berenson, A. B., & Volk, R. J. (2005). Are pregnant adolescents stigmatized by pregnancy? *Journal of Adolescent Health, 36*, 352.e1 – 352.e7.

## Appendix A

## Youth Demographic Questionnaire

1. Date of Birth \_\_\_\_\_
2. What grade are you in? \_\_\_\_\_
3. Do you consider yourself to be Hispanic or Latino / Latina?  
[A person who is Hispanic or Latino / Latina comes from a Cuban, Dominican, Mexican, Puerto Rican, Central American, South American, or other Spanish culture or background]
  - Yes
  - No
3. Please indicate your religious affiliation below.
  - Baptist
  - Catholic
  - Methodist
  - African Methodist Episcopal (A.M.E.)
  - Seventh Day Adventist (SDA)
  - Apostolic
  - Church of God in Christ (C.O.G.I.C.)
  - Church of Our Lord Jesus Christ (C.O.O.L.J.C.)
  - Non-denominational
  - Don't know
  - Other \_\_\_\_\_

4. Please indicate how often you participate in the following religious activities. Add any activities not listed.

Activity	Never	Once or twice a year	Once or twice a month	Once a week	More than once a week
Weekly worship service					
Bible Study					
Sunday School					
Youth group activities held at Church					

Youth group activities held outside the Church (e.g. trips, skating, bowling, etc.)					
Weeknight services (e.g. revival or other worship services)					
Community service					
Other:					
Other:					
Other:					
Other:					

## Appendix B

## Youth Leader Demographic Questionnaire

1. Date of Birth \_\_\_\_\_

2. What is your gender?

- Male
- Female

3. Please indicate your highest level of education completed.

- Some high school
- High school diploma
- Some college
- Associate's Degree
- Bachelor's Degree
- Master's Degree
- Doctoral Degree

4. Have you had any formal education/training in Christianity, ministry, etc.

- Yes
- No

If so, please list your education/training/degrees earned and the subject area.

5. Have you had any formal education/training in working with youth?

- Yes
- No

If so, please list your education/training/degrees earned and the subject area.

6. Do you consider yourself to be Hispanic or Latino / Latina?

[A person who is Hispanic or Latino / Latina comes from a Cuban, Dominican, Mexican, Puerto Rican, Central American, South American, or other Spanish culture or background.]

- Yes
- No

7. Please indicate your religious affiliation below.

- Baptist
- Catholic
- Methodist
- African Methodist Episcopal (A.M.E.)
- Seventh Day Adventist (SDA)
- Apostolic



- Church of God in Christ (C.O.G.I.C.)
- Church of Our Lord Jesus Christ (C.O.O.L.J.C.)
- Non-denominational
- Don't know
- Other \_\_\_\_\_

8. How long have you been a youth leader in Church?

- Less than 6 months
- 6 months to 1 year
- 1 to 2 years
- 2 to 5 years
- More than 5 years

10. Please indicate how often you have participated by leading or helping with the following religious activities. Add any activities not listed.

<b>Activity</b>	<b>Never</b>	<b>Once or twice a year</b>	<b>Once or twice a month</b>	<b>Once a week</b>	<b>More than once a week</b>
Weekly worship service					
Bible Study					
Sunday School					
Youth group activities held at Church					
Youth group activities held outside the Church (e.g. trips, skating, bowling, etc.)					
Weeknight services (e.g. revival or other worship services)					
Community service					
Other:					
Other:					
Other:					
Other:					

## Appendix C

## Youth Interview Questions

1. How often do you attend Church?
2. Do you like your Church?
  - Follow up: Why or why not?
3. What activities do you participate in at Church?
  - Follow up: Are there youth activities available? Which ones?
4. Do you decide whether you go to Church or participate in Church activities?
  - Follow up: If not, who makes this decision?
5. Tell me what information about sex has been discussed with youth at your Church?
  - Follow up: Is the information based on religious beliefs?
    - Follow up: If so, what beliefs is this information based on?
  - Follow up: What information about sex, if any, has been discussed with teen girls specifically at your Church?
6. What other information about sex have you heard from Church members and Church leaders?
7. When is information discussed with teen girls about sex (i.e., during what Church activities)?
  - Follow up: In worship service? In youth group? In conversations?
8. When do you first remember hearing information about sex at your Church?
  - Follow up: How old were you?
9. How do girls typically react or respond to discussions?
  - Follow up: Do girls react differently as they get older?

10. Do you believe that sex-related information communicated to teen girls in Church affects the way they act?

- Follow up: If no, why do you think it doesn't make a difference in how girls act?
- Follow up: If yes, how do you think it makes a difference in how girls act?

11. What other information about sex have you heard from your family?

12. What other information about sex have you heard from your friends?

13. From what other sources/places do you receive information about sex?

14. How can information about sex best be communicated or told to teen girls?

- Follow up: What about in Church?

## Appendix D

## Youth Leader Interview Questions

1. How long have you been a youth leader?
  - Follow up: What is your position?
2. What do you like about your Church?
3. What things would you change about your Church?
4. How youth-oriented would you say your Church is?
  - Follow up: How so?
5. Is any information about sex provided for youth at your Church?
  - Follow up: If so, tell me what information about sex has been discussed with teen girls at your Church.
    - Follow up: Is the information based on religious beliefs?
      - Follow up: If so, what religious beliefs is this information based on?
    - Follow up: What information about sex, if any, has been discussed with teen girls specifically at your Church?
6. Is there any other sex-related information that has been discussed?
7. When is this sex information discussed with teen girls (i.e., during what Church activities)?
  - Follow up: In worship service? In youth group? In conversation?
8. Around what age do you think girls should be exposed to information about sex in Church?
9. How do girls typically first react or respond to discussions?
  - Follow up: As they get older?

10. Do you believe that sex-related information communicated to teen girls in Church affects the way they act?

- Follow up: If no, why do you think it doesn't make a difference in how girls act?
- Follow up: If yes, how do you think it makes a difference in how girls act?

11. How do you think faith-based information about sex can best be communicated to African American teen girls?

- Follow up: What about in Church?

## Appendix E

*Coding Categories and Definitions for Youth Participants*

Question	Theme	Definition
Do you like your Church?	Connection to pastor	Responses related to youth liking their Church because of an affinity for their pastor, feeling as though their pastor helps them, or feeling as though their pastor understands their lives
	Connection to the Word	Responses related to youth liking their Church because of an understanding of the scriptural and religious message presented, feeling as though the message presented applies to their lives or was meant for them
	Connection to congregation	Responses related to youth liking their Church because of the positive relationships they have with other members of the Church or a general affinity for the close-knit, family-oriented environment in their Church
What information is communicated to girls in your Church about sex?	Abstinence-focused message	Responses that girls are told not to have sex until marriage specifically, or not to have sex more generally without specific mention of marriage
	Use protection	Responses that girls are told to use protection if they have sex or more specifically to use condoms
	Who should have sex	Responses that sex should be between a man and a woman or sex is for adults
Is this information based on religious principles?	Messages have religious basis	Responses that indicate an underlying religious belief or principle that sex messages are based on
	Real-World Language	Responses that indicate a use of secular language in sex messages with no specific connection made with religious principles

## Appendix E (Continued)

Question	Theme	Definition
How do girls typically react to conversations about sex?	Girls are comfortable	Responses that girls are comfortable discussing sex, or that discussing sex is just talking like any other conversation
	Girls are uncomfortable	Responses that girls are uncomfortable discussing sex, or avoid conversations regarding sex
	Sexual activity and varying comfort level	Responses that girls' comfort level discussing sex is related to whether they are having sex or not, such that sexual activity could increase or decrease girls' comfort level
Does information about sex communicated in Church affect girls' behavior?	Religious girls are more likely to abstain	Responses that indicate the belief that girls who are religious are more likely not to have sex than girls who are not religious
	Not the religion, but the girl	Responses indicating that religiosity alone does not determine whether a girl is sexually active, but additional individual characteristics play a role
How can we best communicate information about sex to girls in Church?	Be real	Responses that suggest the importance of adults being real, open, and honest in their communication about sex with teen girls
	Keep it casual, don't force it	Responses that suggest the importance of a casual, comfortable environment to discuss sex with girls without becoming pushy or aggressive with the messaging
	Provide examples of negative consequences	Responses that suggest the importance of highlighting potential negative consequences of sex to deter girls from having sex

## Appendix F

*Coding Categories and Definitions for Youth Leader Participants*

Question	Theme	Definition
Do you like your Church?	Connection to congregation as a highlight	Responses related to youth leaders liking their Church because of the positive relationships they have with other members of the Church or a general affinity for the close-knit, family-oriented environment in their Church
	Youth ministry as a highlight	Responses related to youth leaders liking their Church because of an active youth ministry that engages the youth in learning and fellowship
	Need for more youth engagement	Responses that indicated a need for greater engagement of more youth in the Church
What information is communicated to girls in your Church about sex?	Abstinence-focused message	Responses that indicate girls are told not to have sex until marriage specifically, or not to have sex more generally
	“Be safe, be smart, be secure”	Responses indicating that girls are encouraged to make smart decisions for their bodies, use protection if having sex, or be secure in who they are
Is this information based on religious principles?	Messages have religious basis	Responses that indicate an underlying religious belief or principle that sex messages are based on
	Real-World Language	Responses that indicate a use of secular language in sex messages with no specific connection made with religious principles
How do girls typically react to conversations about sex?	Youth discomfort in conversations	Responses indicating that girls are uncomfortable discussing sex, or avoid conversations regarding sex



## Appendix F (Continued)

Question	Theme	Definition
	<i>General immaturity</i>	Responses that attribute girls' discomfort generally to a lack of maturity, excessive laughing, or silliness during conversations
	<i>Embarrassment with adults</i>	Responses that attribute girls' discomfort to an embarrassment discussing sex with adults
Does information about sex communicated in Church affect girls' behavior?	Caring community	Responses indicating that sex information discussed in Church impacts girls' behavior because they have a caring environment in Church to encourage them and hold them accountable
	Heightened awareness	Responses indicating that sex information discussed in Church impacts girls' behavior by raising their awareness of sex, how it might impact them, and the need for positive decision-making
How can we best communicate information about sex to girls in Church?	Begin at 10	Responses suggesting the importance of beginning conversations about sex in Church with youth earlier, around the age of 10
	Mentorship	Responses suggesting the importance of positive, mentor relationships with caring adults to guide youth and support their positive sexual decision-making
	Open, ongoing communication	Responses suggesting the importance of communication that is open, free from judgment, and ongoing to ensure a safe space for youth to discuss sex in Church
	"Partnering with Parents"	Responses suggesting the importance of building a rapport and working with parents to engage them in open sex communication with their youth and supporting them hold their youth accountable

## Appendix F (Continued)

Question	Theme	Definition
How youth-oriented is your Church?	Very youth-oriented Church	Responses indicating a Church that is very youth-focused, as well as a Church that has various youth activities
What is your Church's position on sex education?	Youth leader openness	Responses indicating the youth leader is comfortable having open, honest conversations with girls about sex in Church, and the youth leader believes the conversations are necessary
	Congregation and parent lack of openness	Responses indicating the congregation generally or parents specifically exhibit a hesitancy or lack of openness toward sex communication with girls in Church

### Vita

Brittany Money Berry was born on May 26, 1988, in Richmond, Virginia, and is an American citizen. She graduated from Maggie L. Walker Governor's School for Government and International Studies, Richmond, Virginia in 2006. She received her Bachelor of Arts in Psychology from The University of Virginia, Charlottesville, Virginia in 2009. She received her Master of Science in Psychology with a concentration in Developmental Psychology from Virginia Commonwealth University, Richmond, Virginia in 2011. She currently works as a High School Site Coordinator with Communities in Schools of Richmond.