

When a teen becomes pregnant, what should a youth minister do?

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By George Henson

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DALLAS—Every youth minister prays it won't happen in his church. But for many, at one time or another, it does. A girl in the youth group announces: "I'm pregnant."

The youth minister's most important words at that point may be the ones left unspoken, counselors at [Buckner Adoption and Maternity Services](#) agreed.

"This is not a situation (youth ministers) can fix," Erica Penick, a maternity and adoption counselor at the agency, said. "They can help them get through it, but they cannot fix it."

"A lot of people feel that adoption is an easy way out, but for me, parenting really would be. Parenting would put my feelings and emotions at ease while my child's would suffer...."

-Read [a letter from a birthmother](#) explaining why she opted for adoption.

"A vital role for the youth minister is helping this girl talk to her friends in the youth group, and if she hasn't told her parents, he can go with her in that very frightening circumstance. The important part is to walk alongside her when she can feel so alone."

If the youth minister is male, it is important that he bring his wife or some other adult female into the conversation quickly, she added.

"Those young men need to bring a woman alongside who provides a woman's perspective—someone who can understand the emotions, the fears and questions this young girl is feeling. Most girls grow up dreaming of having children and families and maybe even have picked out names years ago for their children. Now all that has become confused, and a woman can better understand those dreams and desires of being a wife and mother this girl has carried with her for so long," Penick said.

Other young people—and perhaps the entire church—are watching to see how the youth minister will respond, she pointed out.

"They should model the behavior they want their youth group to respond with," Penick said.

Young people in a church generally will treat the girl the way their youth minister does. If the youth minister is accepting, they will be also. If the youth minister turns away from her, the church's teens most likely will follow that example.

Since the girl is at such a crucial time not only physically and emotionally, but also spiritually, this can be a determining factor in how this teenager and her family see the church for the rest of their lives, Penick said.

"You don't want to damage a woman," she said.

The youth minister needs to be aware of the large role he plays in this young woman's life, Ashley Hinton, a Baylor University intern at Buckner, pointed out.

"The youth minister is not just modeling moral adult behavior, but as the girl's spiritual adviser, he is to model the acceptance of God. If she doesn't find acceptance and support from the youth minister, she may feel God doesn't accept her," Hinton said.

While some youth ministers may feel acceptance might be interpreted as approval of premarital sex, pregnant teens already are aware of their mistakes, and no one has to reinforce that for them, said Rachael Daugherty, community and family program coordinator for Buckner Maternity and Adoption Services.

While the youth minister should do more listening than talking, he should "help them choose life and promote sanctity of life issues," Penick said.

Youth ministers are walking a tightrope during this situation. It's important for them to remember the limits of their role as spiritual advisers, Daugherty suggested.

"If they get too involved and try to pair the girl up with a family in the

congregation or community who wants a child, it not only raises legal liabilities, but it also blurs their roles," she said.

"Also, when the youth minister focuses on fixing, it makes unconditional acceptance more difficult," Hinton added.

If teen parents accept the advice of the youth minister but later regret the decision, it can poison the youth minister's ability to minister in the future, Penick noted.

The counselors agreed young fathers-to-be should be encouraged to accept the responsibility they bear.

"They have participated in a very adult act, and they need to make very adult decisions about the present and future with the best interests of the child in mind," Penick said.

Youth ministers "don't have to give advice, but they can help them go through the thinking of various courses of action," Hinton said.

"If I do this, this will be the result. On the other hand, if I do this, this will probably happen."

The most important thing the youth minister has to offer is not wisdom, but an accepting presence in a frightening and traumatic situation, Penick said.

Every youth minister's toolbox should contain a list of agencies that can help. While Buckner is known primarily as a place to go when an adoption is planned, Penick said the agency also helps those who decide to parent their child.

While an unplanned pregnancy can be the thing that short-circuits a girl's spiritual life, it doesn't have to be that way, Penick pointed out.

"This is an opportunity for the church to demonstrate the love and

acceptance of Christ and draw them in," she said.

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