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By the Rev. Jonipher Kuponon Kwong

POSTED: 01:30 a.m. HST, May 04, 2014

As a minister, I am deeply troubled by the recent negative attention on sexuality education here in Hawaii.

The idea that we need to withhold valuable and essential health information from our keiki is counterproductive to these youth acquiring the knowledge and skills necessary to protect themselves throughout their life journey. Instead, I encourage us all to support early intervention and prevention education, two components that are key to our health, including our sexual health.

The Pono Choices Culturally Responsive Teen Pregnancy and Sexually Transmitted Infections (STI) Prevention Program is similar to a curriculum that our denomination, the Unitarian Universalist Association, produced in collaboration with the United Church of Christ over a decade ago called OWL, which stands for Our Whole Lives (<http://www.uua.org/re/owl/>).



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OWL is an age-appropriate, scientifically based (and values-based) human sexuality curriculum that teaches our keiki about responsible decision-making when it comes to their bodies and relationships with others. Where else can the conversation between parents and children be safer than a church environment or a classroom?

Ultimately, values are taught and reinforced at home, but we need the help of educators, which is what OWL and Pono Choices are about. Educators need resources that positively affect the lives of our youth, and we need to encourage and support the development of these resources.

From my experience with OWL, there is some hesitation at first both with the child and the parents to enroll in such a sensitive conversation, but after the first session or two, that fear goes away when they find out how engaging it is and how effective it is at building open communication and trust.

OWL and Pono Choices are programs implemented by adults who are trained to deliver the components with integrity.

I applaud all such educators who have demonstrated their commitment to the health and safety of our youth by continuing to provide pregnancy and STI prevention education and by supporting inclusive, medically accurate and age-appropriate sexual health education.

Our OWL success rate can be measured by the fact that those who went through the OWL program have

not had unwanted pregnancies or STIs.

Pono Choices was developed with these same outcomes in mind and is currently being evaluated to determine how these intended outcomes are being realized.

Such a process often results in other powerful impacts. Indeed, we have learned that most OWL alums become the go-to experts for their peers when it comes to sexuality issues, further increasing the support our youth have and promoting healthy behaviors.

One OWL alum, who is now a student at the University of Hawaii-Manoa, recalls an exercise in saying "no" to peer pressure that she still uses today. That is a lesson she will carry for the rest of her life.

We must not let one small segment of our community with its agenda of exclusion and bigotry dominate public discourse. We must, rather, let reason, justice and compassion in human relations be at the core of our respectful dialogue about human behavior and interactions at all age levels.

This is why I am supportive of OWL, Pono Choices and other similar programs.

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