

Influence of Faith, Religious Leaders and Faith-Based Organizations



Adventist Development and Relief Agency International (ADRA) implemented a community-focused project designed to increase knowledge and use of family planning in Ethiopia. © 2005 Virginia Lamprecht, Courtesy of Photoshare

Religious beliefs and faiths are powerful influences on individuals and communities worldwide and can affect behaviors, including health practices. A 2006 Gallup poll determined that people in sub-Saharan Africa trust faith-based organizations more than they trust their own national governments.ⁱ Therefore, faith-based organizations (FBOs), especially religious leaders, have an immense opportunity to increase both the access and acceptability of family planning and reproductive health care services.

The term “family planning,” as used by Christian Connections for International Health (CCIH), means enabling couples to determine the number and timing of pregnancies, including the voluntary use of methods for preventing pregnancy, not including abortion, harmonious with their values and religious beliefs.

Reasons for Engaging Men in Family Planning and Reproductive Health Issues

Evidence suggests that men’s active participation in decisions about family planning and reproductive health promotes better health for families.^{ii,iii} Traditionally, efforts to improve information, counseling and access to family planning and reproductive health have been focused primarily on women; however, investigators have found that offering counseling and education to couples and to men in addition to women is more effective.^{iv}

Critical reasons for engaging men include:

- Men usually are the decision makers about sexual activity, and the desired number of children. They often know very little about the health benefits of planning and spacing pregnancies for mothers and children alike. Without accurate information on the benefits and various methods of family planning, they resist supporting family planning use because of misinformation that some methods may harm the woman’s health,^{v vi} or because they believe that women using family planning are more likely to be promiscuous.^{vii}
- Studies confirm that involving men can lead to better health outcomes including those specific to family planning knowledge, intra-spousal communication, and family planning use and continuation.^{viii}
- Engaging men can foster a positive environment for the couple’s broader sexual, emotional and spiritual health.^{ix}

Religious Leaders Are Influential in Reaching Men

Based on World Health Organization and other mapping studies, FBOs provide from 25% to 50% or higher of all health services in many sub-Saharan African countries and regions. Religious leaders offer guidance on health-related matters to encourage healthy behaviors among their followers.^x Religious leaders are:

- More effective in reaching boys and men.^{xi}
- Greatly respected and trusted in societies to:^{xii}
 - Provide marital counseling to couples.
 - Share opinions about acceptability and advisability of family planning and reproductive health services.
 - Disseminate accurate information in communities. (They must be trained and educated to promote the right information.)
 - Answer questions about health, including reproductive health-related issues from congregations.
 - Counsel men on family planning and reproductive issues, particularly how adequate birth spacing (3+ years) improves child health outcomes as well as the health of women and families.
 - Serve as powerful advocates on important issues.
- Frequently receptive to family planning and other reproductive health services^{xiii} once they understand the health and economic benefits of using family planning methods to time and space pregnancies.
- An important resource for advancing positive reforms such as reducing gender-based violence.^{xiv}

Partnering with these leaders can legitimize the work of many FBOs operating in communities.^{xv}

Effective Practices for Mobilizing Religious Leaders to Reach Men

The following country-level program examples illustrate how organizations effectively collaborate with religious leaders:

1. Adventist Development and Relief Agency (ADRA)

Adventist Relief and Development Agency (ADRA) involves men in family planning in several of its programs. In Nepal, ADRA utilized a “Men as Partners” curriculum to create groups for men and boys to discuss topics related to family planning, and ADRA and the Nepal Red Cross Society provided family planning training to the groups. Many of the groups continue to meet after the project has ended. Training topics included:

- The importance of child spacing and utilizing family planning services in health facilities, with the aim of improving the reproductive health of targeted men and their partners.
- Sharing household burdens with women, especially pregnant women.

The program has also focused on linking with health facilities to conduct classes on family planning, track community members that visited health facilities to receive family planning counseling and commodities, and distribute family planning messages to community members, particularly men.

Results: Overall, there was a 12.9 percent increase in the number of married men that utilize a modern method of FP from the level at the beginning of the project in Nepal. One of the critical achievements of the project identified by an independent evaluator was “establishing 66 Men as Partners (MAP) groups that motivated men to be active in local FP, STI and maternal health.” Focus groups identified MAP groups to be

effective in promoting FP among men. Members of these groups demonstrated an extensive knowledge of FP and described how they were active in counseling new couples about FP through meetings and household visits, practicing FP themselves, and educating community members about preventing sexually transmitted infections. They also described how they presented themselves for vasectomy after they had had two children, emphasizing that this was the case even when they had two female children. The establishment of these groups also helped to reanimate Mothers Groups closely associated with the Female Community Health Volunteers.

2. The Institute for Reproductive Health (IRH) and the Christian Health Association of Kenya (CHAK), Kenya^{xvi, xvii}

This project focused on mobilizing religious leaders to:

- Improve community awareness of the contributions of family planning to healthy timing and spacing of pregnancies.
- Consistently and proactively use a Bible study discussion guide: *Love, Children and Family Planning* (www.ccih.org/love-children-family-planning.pdf) to foster a supportive environment for community-based family planning services. The guide was a result of a collaborative effort among community health workers, pastors, church leaders, youths, and congregations.

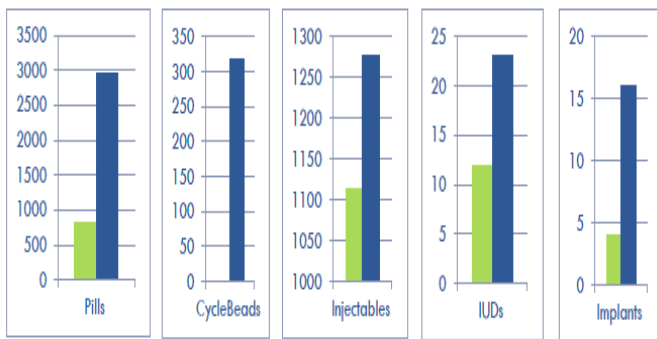
Results: Service statistics from CHAK facilities showed 72 pastors from 32 Christian church denominations had been oriented in advocacy, communication, and social mobilization skills to reach church members and communities with family planning messages.

Change in method uptake Pre and Post Community-based Family Planning Provision

Pills | SDM/CycleBeads | Injectables | IUDs | Implants

Jan-Feb 2011

Jan-Feb 2012



This table portrays family planning results from a community-level project by Chogoria Presbyterian Hospital in Meru South District, Kenya. Project service statistics indicate substantial increases in total family planning methods provided: a major increase in pills (~2300 cycles); a good uptake for a new method, CycleBeads (~320); a modest increase in injections given (~160); and minor increases for IUDs (11) and implants (11), compared to the same months in the previous year (in green).

3. World Vision^{xviii}

World Vision programs focus on:

- Building demand for Family Planning using the health rationale in Healthy Timing and Spacing of Pregnancies (HTSP) that promotes healthy pregnancies. Visit K4Health Toolkit at www.k4health.org/toolkits/htsp.
- Educating religious leaders on the health benefits for mothers, their infants and their communities in timing, spacing, and limiting births to a mother's healthiest years. Religious leaders become advocates for family planning when they see and understand the deleterious effects of frequent child bearing on mothers and children alike. The scientific data on relative risk of infant, child, and maternal mortality serve to reinforce what they have already observed.
- Relating the economic benefits of planning pregnancies to family and community prosperity and well-being, a key interest of religious leaders.

Results: World Vision found that the Lactational Amenorrhea Method (LAM) and the Standard Days Method® (SDM) also increase male involvement in family planning and improve couple communication. LAM (which can only be used if the mother is exclusively breastfeeding, her menses has not returned, and her baby is less than six months old), helps men support their wives in exclusive breastfeeding for the infant's first six months. World Vision has also found that many men support the use of SDM® as it identifies fertile periods through tracking them with CycleBeads®. SDM users manage the fertile days in a variety of ways including abstinence or use of condoms. If couples prefer natural methods of family planning, they can be counseled to practice abstinence during the fertile time, and CycleBeads® are provided with appropriate instructions.

Conclusion: Available data suggest that participation of men in health issues has increased the acceptance, correct usage and continuation of family planning services and subsequently improved pregnancy-related health outcomes. Faith-based programs have an important role in supporting men's participation to ensure family health and well-being.

CCIH | www.ccih.org | Christian Connections for International Health is a 501(c)3 membership association whose global network includes over 350 individuals and 200 organizations (both Christian and affiliate organizations). The CCIH network comprises a diverse community of people dedicated to a vision of a world where all have access to basic health and prevention services. | For questions or more information, contact ccih@ccih.org



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- ⁱ Gallup News Service. (January 18, 2007). Africans' Confidence in Institutions: Which Country Stands Out? *Gallup World*. Retrieved January 24, 2013. From <http://www.gallup.com/poll/26176/africans-confidence-institutions-which-country-stands-out.aspx>.
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