

Variable World of Personal Responsibility

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With the possible exception of parents, no group issues more exhortations to personal responsibility than we clergy. An estimate of the effectiveness of those appeals was given by the social ethicist Reinhold Niebuhr. While he loved to preach, he did not think that people are changed by sermons. He believed that we are more influenced by the moral atmosphere of the society around us.

When considering the issue of personal responsibility, it seems wise to recognize that much depends on the moral and social matrix in which each individual tries to live. For example, if young people are raised in families that are basically functional and caring, go on to higher education, have financial resources backing them, and have a real future, then it is reasonable to expect them to take a great deal of personal responsibility. If they do not wish to have children before they are further along in their careers, they should be responsible by using birth control. If, however, other young men and women have few if any of these supports, are living lives with few opportunities and little hope, then it is understandable, if sad, that they may not care enough about themselves to exercise similar care. In such a situation, demanding personal responsibility without the provision of social supports may not be realistic. Even

though such personal responsibility would be in their own self-interest, young men and women may have simply given up on themselves. These are the young people to whom life just “happens.”

With this in mind, it seems clear that social policies can make personal situations such as unintended pregnancies either better or worse. Things might be somewhat improved if federal and state governments spent more money on programs to make contraception more affordable and available. While that and similar measures could be helpful, they are only a part of what is needed. Research done by The National Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unplanned Pregnancy and other groups has shown that the mere act of giving people contraception does not automatically solve the problem. What matters more than that is that they have realistic prospects for their life and career. When those are present, people are far more likely to take responsibility and avoid unintended pregnancies.

Providing such “realistic prospects” is a tall order for any complex society, but these kinds of programs have been successful before. The GI Bill of Rights put millions of World War II veterans through college at a time when many, if not most, of them would never have gone to college. Personal responsibility alone could not have put those men and women in college.

The more our society is able to break the cycle of poor schools, weakened families, and limited prospects, the more it will strengthen their sense of personal responsibility and reduce unintended pregnancy.

The Rev. Tom Davis is currently the chair of the Planned Parenthood Federation of America Clergy Advisory Board. He is a minister in the United Church of Christ. A native of Scranton, PA, he is a graduate of Dartmouth College and Union Theological Seminary in New York City. He received his Ph.D. from Duke University. He is the author of Sacred Work: Planned Parenthood and Its Clergy Alliances, Rutgers Press, 2005.