

# Religion, Adolescent Sexuality and Risk Behaviour in the context of HIV/AIDS

## A case study of Teens Ignited, Potchefstroom, South Africa

Tessa Dooms, BA, MA (expected 2008)

University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg, South Africa

### Background

South Africa is a country where both religion and sexual health are important issues. First, according to the most recent national census approximately 75% of all South Africans report a religious affiliation. Christianity is the predominate religion, as 82% of religious South Africans report an affiliation to at least one of the many Christian denominations. Second, South Africa has a fast growing HIV/AIDS rate and is home to one of the largest population of people living with the disease, with young people and women are considered to be at greatest risk. This study into sexuality, sexual risk behavior and religion in the South African context has been prompted mainly by two factors; the high risk sexual behavior among adolescents and the high levels of religiosity among South African adolescents.

Christian youth groups provide a suitable environment to investigate the intersection between religious discourse and sexual risk behavior among adolescents. Teens Ignited is the youth division of a Charismatic Pentecostal church called Christian Fellowship Church (CFC). Teens Ignited are a vibrant youth group with a membership of between 100-140 adolescents who are 13-19 years old. Most youth who attend Teens Ignited are young black African youths, of which approximately 65% are male. Teens Ignited is the field site, all participants in the study are youth group attendees.

### Aims

This study is an exploration of the impact of religion, in the form of Pentecostal Charismatic Christian youth groups on the sexual perceptions, practices and health risk behavior of South African adolescents by means of a case study of Teens Ignited, a Pentecostal Christian youth group in Potchefstroom, South Africa. This study thus seeks to provide an interpretive understanding of the meanings that Christian discourses of sexuality provide for adolescents and the ways in which these impacts on their sexual perceptions, practices and eventually their sexual health.

### Research Question

What is the impact of Christian youth groups such as Teens Ignited on the sexual perceptions, practices and health risk behavior of adolescents in Potchefstroom, South Africa?

This is the question at the heart of the proposed research. In order to properly engage the central research question a number of subsidiary questions will be addressed, which include an examination of the following issues:

- The sources that inform the sexual choices that adolescent in Potchefstroom make that might affect their sexual health.
- The extent to which Christian youth groups in Potchefstroom address the issues of sexuality and sexual health risk behavior.
- The trends in sexual behaviors among adolescents who attend Teens Ignited and factors that contribute to their sexual behavior.

### Method

The study employs both qualitative and quantitative methods. The methodology is a undertaking of the following methods:

- Participant observation
- Participant inquiry research workshops
- Survey questionnaires
- Key informant interviews

Estimated time frame for fieldwork is April 2007-February 2008.

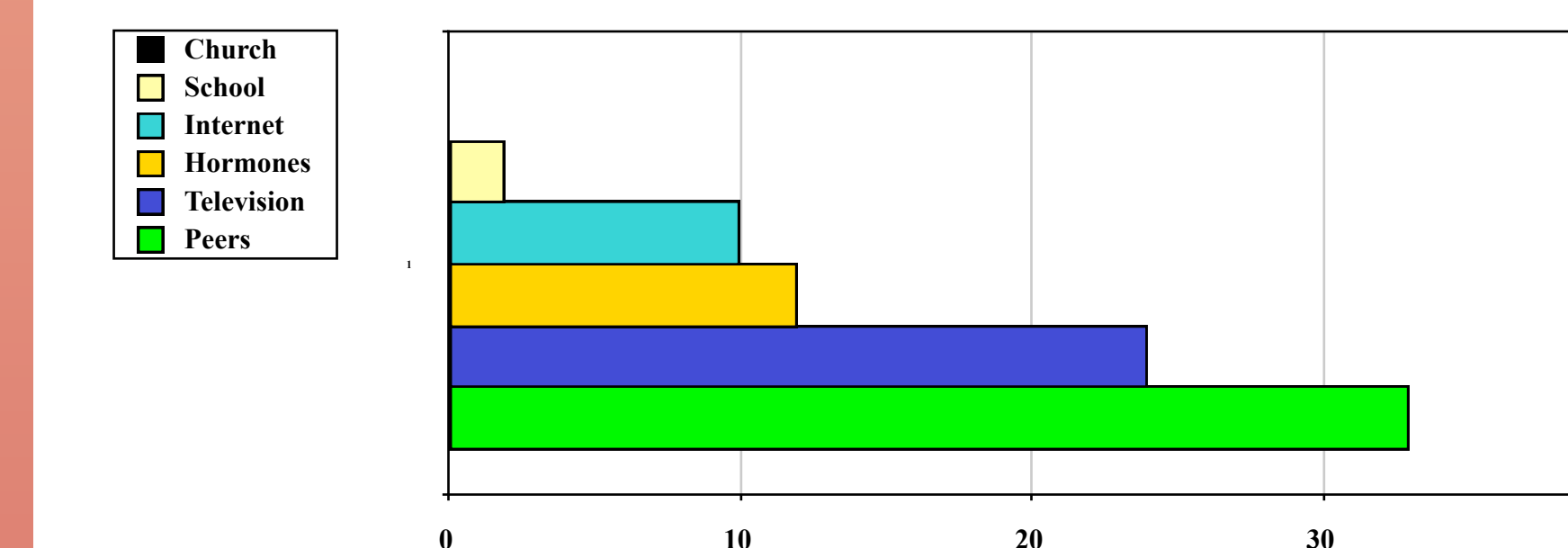
*Captions to be set in Times or Times New Roman or equivalent, italic, 18 to 24 points, to the length of the column in case a figure takes more than 2/3 of column width.*

### Preliminary Findings

#### Quantitative results from participant inquiry workshops

Most important sources about information about sex for adolescents

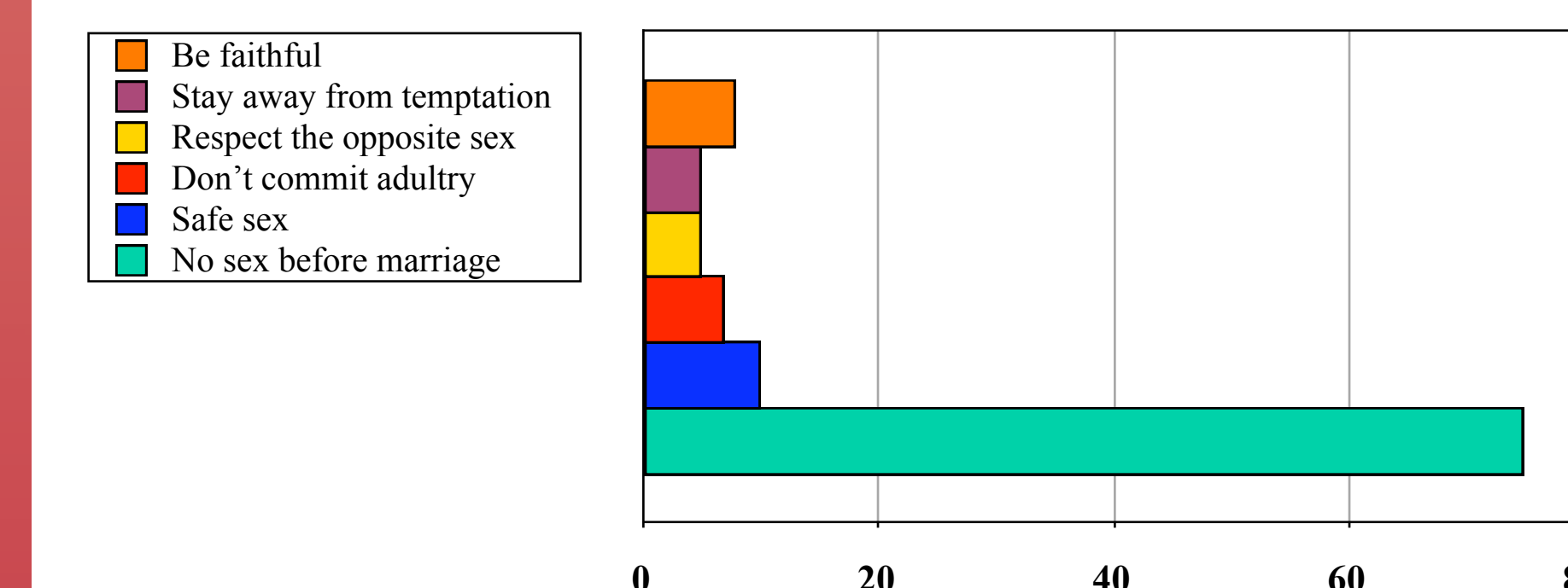
Figure 1



Peers (friends and romantic partners) and television were reported as the most important sources of information about sex. Interestingly, school ranked amongst the lowest sources and church/religion was not suggested as an important source of sexual information, despite the fact that workshops were conducted in during youth group meetings. Participants explained this by suggesting that importance of sources was measured by frequency and the extent to which the source endorses sex.

Most important messages about sex and sexuality adolescents at Teens Ignited

Figure 2

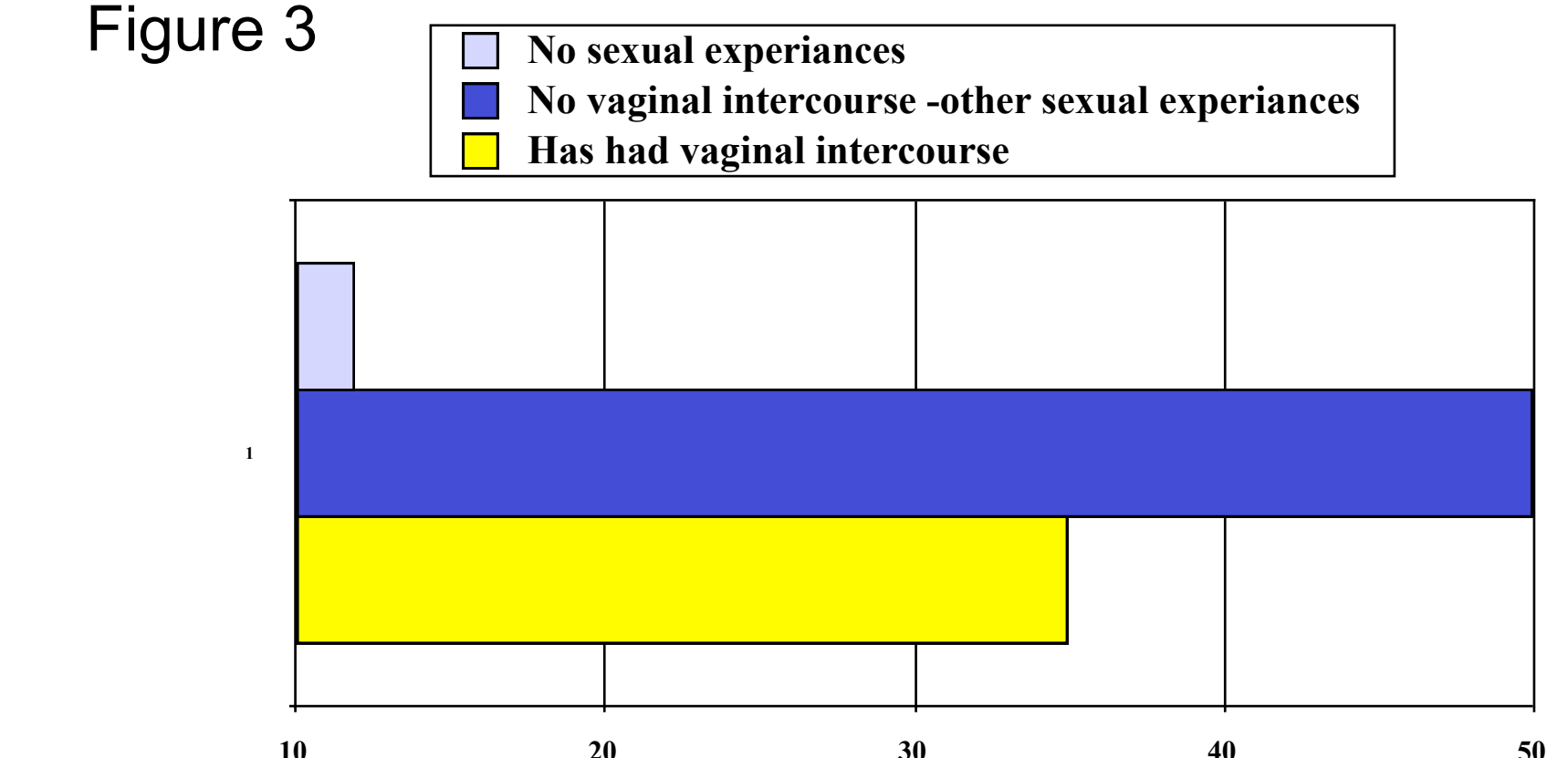


Participants were requested to choose two messages they considered most important to them. 96% of participants at the workshop cited 'No sex before marriage' -or put differently-'sex is only for marriage' as the predominant message within the youth group. The messages are related to behaviour in the context of sexual and dating relationships. These are the messages the participants identify as the official teaching of the youth group leadership and it also comes to represents the official Christian position (the position God prescribes).

Figure 3 reflects the sexual practices reported by adolescent participants at Teens Ignited through anonymous survey. A distinction was made between vaginal intercourse and other sexual behaviours which included kissing and touching in a sexually arousing manner.

Sexual experiences and practices of adolescents attending Teens Ignited

Figure 3



35% of attendees report having had vaginal intercourse. Most attendees report not having already had vaginal intercourse, however, 81% of those who have not had intercourse report experiencing kissing and/or touching in a sexually arousing manner. In a subsequent it was suggested that sex there is contestation amongst youth attendees about what constitutes sex.

The 12% of participants who report not having experienced vaginal sex, sexual kissing or touching all report attending youth every week or often. For these adolescents sexual kissing and touching are also to be avoided.

### Toward Conclusions

•Religion and school are perceived by youth going adolescents as sources of information about sex that provide messages that are 'positive' in that they do not encourage sexual behaviour. However, those messages do not appear to be the most pervasive and influential sources of information.

•The religious leader at Teens Ignited has provided several messages about dating and sex that participants can identify recall. An emphasis seems to be placed on the prohibition of sex prior to and outside of the marriage relationship.

•Despite the evidence that most youth group attendees know that the Teens Ignited teach that against premarital sex, the majority of youth attendees have engaged in sexual behaviour-either in the form of vaginal sex, sexual kissing or touching. This leads to 2 significant observations (1) Most adolescents seem to define sex as the act of vaginal sex (2) those who consider sex before marriage as a prohibition for all sexual behaviour are very regular and committed attendees at the youth group.

### Acknowledgements

Thank you to  
 • Pastor Anton Myburg and the rest of the Christian Fellowship and Teens Ignited church for allowing me access  
 •Research Assistants: Sepetta Molapo, Dionne Klein, Keith Pietersen and Aidan Mosselson  
 •Rev. Paul Germond (Supervisor)