

# Atlanta Freethought News

*Dare to Think for Yourself*

An AFS Publication • Volume 15 Number 1 • January 2009

## The January AFS Meeting

At the January 11 AFS meeting, AFS President **Steve Yothment** will speak on "Views on the Historicity of Jesus." This talk will present lots on information that you will never hear in church or Sunday School!

The meeting will be at **Atlanta Freethought Hall**, 4775 N. Church Lane SE, Smyrna, GA, at 1:00 PM.

To get there, take I-285 (the perimeter road around Atlanta) to Exit 16 (Atlanta Road). Turn toward Atlanta. Go ½ mile and then turn right onto N. Church Lane. Go only 300 feet to Atlanta Freethought Hall, which is on the left.

## Election Results

Congratulations to the following AFS officers and board members elected to serve in 2009:

Steve Yothment, President	Mark Banks, Board
Judy Thompson, VP, Int.	Steven Fant, Board
Freya Harris, VP, Ext.	Doug Hattersley, Board
Diane Buckner, Treasurer	Jack McKinney, Board
Dennis Martin, Secretary	

Steven Fant fills the board position vacated by Diane Buckner due to her election as Treasurer. Tony King and Lew Southern will continue their 2-year terms into next year.

Also on the ballot was a Bylaws change to allow the board to change membership renewal to the same month for all members. The change passed with 88% of the vote.

## The AFS Social

The next **AFS Social** will be at Las Margaritas Restaurant, 1842 Cheshire Bridge Road, Atlanta, on Friday, January 16, at 7:00 PM. To get there, take I-85 to the Cheshire Bridge Road exit (Exit 88) on the north side of Atlanta. Turn east at the light and go about 1.5 miles. The restaurant will be on the right.

## AFS Sells Roswell Property!

On December 19, AFS President Steve Yothment signed papers at the closing on the Roswell property, the former **Atlanta Freethought Center**. The closing allows several creditors to be reimbursed for their loans to AFS and leaves us in much better financial shape. (Hurray!)



Steve Yothment accepts a check from closing attorney David Belle Isle (Photo by Jack McKinney)

## AFS Meetings and Activities

Jan 11: AFS Board Meeting at AF Hall, 11:00 AM.  
Jan 11: AFS General Meeting at AF Hall, 1:00 PM.  
Jan 16: AFS Social, Las Margaritas Restaurant, 7:00 PM.

## Other Meetings of Interest

The **Fellowship of Reason** meets on the first Sunday of every month at 1:00 PM at the Northwest Unitarian Universalist Congregation, 1025 Mount Vernon Hwy, in Atlanta. For details, see <http://www.fellowshipofreason.com>.

The **Humanists of Georgia** will meet at the AF Hall on Sunday, January 18, at 12:30 PM. This meeting will include voting for officers for the new year.

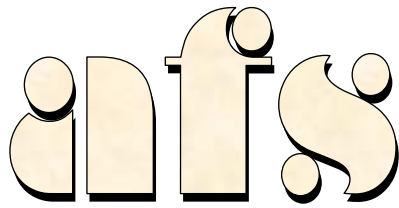
**GUST** (Gwinnett: Understanding Secular Truths) will meet at the Unitarian Universalist Church of Gwinnett (12 Bethesda Church Road, in Lawrenceville) on Wednesday, December 10, at 7:00 PM. (See <http://gust.domek.org/>.)

Read about the **Raising Freethinkers Seminar** by Dale McGowan on page 4! It's in Atlanta on January 11 at UUCA.

A **Freethought Discussion Group** meets in Peachtree City, GA on Wednesdays at 7:00 PM at Starbucks on Hwy 54. The group also meets for lunch on the first and third Saturday of the month at the Irish Bred Pub, 275 Hwy 74 N. For details, contact Shelby at [freediscussion@hotmail.com](mailto:freediscussion@hotmail.com).

There will be a "**meetup**" for Atlanta atheists on Sunday, January 11, at 6:00 PM at Thinking Man Tavern, 537 W. Howard Ave, in Decatur, GA.

Yet another **meetup** for Atlanta atheists is scheduled for Sunday, January 25, at 4:00 PM at Five Seasons Brewery, 5600 Roswell Rd, in Atlanta.



# Atlanta Freethought Society

## Programs and Speakers

All programs are on the second Sunday of each month at the AFS Center, 1170 Grimes Bridge Road, Roswell, GA, unless otherwise noted. Programs start at 1:00 PM, but feel free to arrive at 12:00 for socializing. Visitors are always welcome.

Jan 12: Steve Yothment will speak on "Views on the Historicity of Jesus."

Feb 8: Lori Lipoma, an English professor at the Univ. of West Georgia, will speak.

Mar 15: Jim Haight, editor of the Charleston, WV *Gazette*, will give a Power Point presentation on religious atrocities from his books *Holy Horrors* and *Holy Hatred*. This is a joint AFS/HGA meeting on the third Sunday of March.

Apr 12: TBD

## AFS Email Lists

The **AFS eNews** Announcement list provides subscribers with reminders and updates on AFS activities and news. The **AFS Forum** is a place for discussions of freethought, atheism, agnosticism, church-state separation, and religion. Visit the AFS website at <http://www.atlantafreethought.org> for more info or to subscribe.

The Atlanta Freethought Society is a member-run organization dedicated to advancing freethought and protecting the rights and reputation of free-thinkers, agnostics, atheists and humanists.

We welcome anyone who is interested in learning about living a good life free from religion through attending AFS speeches, debates, and discussions. We employ protests, letters to the editor, broadcast appearances, and any other reasonable and civil means available to achieve our mission.

We define *freethought* as "the forming of opinions about life in general and religion in particular on the basis of reason and the evidence of our senses, independently of tradition, authority, or established belief."

We actively support a strict separation of church and state as the best means to guarantee liberty for all, regardless of religious belief or lack of belief.

We seek to educate ourselves on many topics but especially on religion and non-religion. We do this through a series of thought-provoking speakers and programs, and by maintaining a web forum and an extensive library of freethought, religious, and related books, pamphlets, videotapes, and audiotapes.

We provide an organization where freethinkers and non-theists can develop friendships, talk freely, socialize and enjoy each other's company. We do not discriminate against anyone on such irrelevant grounds as race, sexual orientation, age, gender, class, or physical disability. We welcome members and leaders of all political parties and preferences.

Because we are designated by the IRS as a 501(c)(3) educational organization, contributions to AFS are tax deductible.

Any who are like-minded are welcome to join us.

## Atlanta Freethought News an AFS publication

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Steve Yothment

### How to Contact the Editor

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## Atlanta Freethought News

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**AFS Webmaster:** Freya Harris

Call and leave messages on the

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# Suit Filed to Stop Injection of God into Inauguration

**On December 31, eleven non-theistic organizations and twenty-nine non-theistic individuals, led by Michael Newdow, filed suit in the U.S. District Court for the District of Columbia to stop plans to include prayer and a religious oath in the forthcoming inauguration of Barack Obama as president of the United States.**

**T**he complaint was filed by Michael Newdow, famous for litigation on the Pledge of Allegiance, the American Humanist Association, Freedom From Religion Foundation, Atheist Alliance International, and others. It addresses constitutional concerns regarding the intended use of the phrase “so help me God” in the swearing-in ceremony and sectarian prayer in the invocation and benediction. Included as defendants in the suit are Chief Justice John Roberts, Senator Dianne Feinstein, Major General Richard J. Rowe Jr., Reverend Rick Warren and Reverend Joe Lowery.

“The use of sectarian prayer and religious phrases during the inauguration not only violates a clear reading of the First Amendment, it serves as a justification for the breach of church-state separation in other areas,” said Bob Ritter, staff attorney for the Appignani Humanist Legal Center, the legal arm of the American Humanist

Association. “This is a foundational suit—to challenge the origination of many Establishment Clause and Free Exercise Clause violations.”

In the complaint, which levels six counts against inauguration plans, the plaintiffs declare their belief that Chief Justice Roberts will “infuse the inaugural ceremony with purely religious dogma” in the form of the words “so help me God” added to the secular language of the presidential oath spelled out in the constitution. The plaintiffs argue that anticipated use of the Bible in the inauguration suggests government endorsement of the religion. Further, the plaintiffs charge that the government will violate the Establishment Clause when it uses inaugural prayers of a clearly religious nature. And they charge that the government will violate the Free Exercise rights of nontheists and others when it requires them “to confront official endorsements of religious

dogma with which they disagree” as “the price to pay for observing a governmental ceremony,” one that is “the grandest ceremony in our national existence.”

In response to the observation that, in the past, other suits have been launched concerning sectarian prayer on Inauguration Day, Roy Speckhardt, executive director of the American Humanist Association, noted that “Those suits were thrown out due to issues of standing. But we’re confident in the current suit, involving multiple plaintiffs, that our standing is sound. We therefore expect this case to move forward.”

The suit was filed at the U.S. District Court in Washington, DC, and calls upon the court to decide the matter before the January 20, 2009, inauguration ceremonies. The full text of the complaint is available online.<sup>1</sup>

[From a January 1 press release by the American Humanist Association.]

<sup>1</sup>See the full text of the complaint at <http://www.humanistlegalcenter.org/cases/Invocation/Invocation.html>.

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## Some Details on the Inauguration Lawsuit

The oath of office that presidents take on Inauguration Day is right there in the U.S. Constitution—at the end of Article II, Section 1. Take a look, and you will see that the oath does not include the words “so help me God” at the end, though presidents and the chief justices who swear them in have apparently added the words in every inauguration since 1933. Some historians say George Washington used the same words in the first inaugural, but others dispute that, and in any case the practice did not become common until the inaugurations of Franklin Roosevelt.

California atheist Michael Newdow—famed for challenging the words “under God” in the Pledge of Allegiance—has gone to the U.S. District Court for the District of Columbia seeking an injunction to prevent Chief

Justice John Roberts Jr., as well as the congressional sponsors of the Jan. 20 inaugural and several other defendants, from inserting the words “so help me God” into the oath.

According to the complaint the plaintiffs “have no objection at this time” if Obama chooses to add the words himself. “The president, like all other individuals, has Free Exercise rights, which might permit such an alteration.” But, the complaint adds, “no such free exercise rights come into play on the part of the individual administering the oath to the President.”

In other words, it would be okay if Obama adds the phrase on his own. But if Roberts “prompts” Obama to recite the offending phrase by offering the words himself, that would amount to a “state actor” endorsing religion, Newdow asserts. And that would vio-

late the First Amendment’s establishment clause, as well as the Religious Freedom Restoration Act, according to Newdow.

The complaint also states, “It is well known that defendant Roberts is a Catholic” and adds that Rev. Rick Warren, whom Obama has chosen for the invocation, has repeatedly said he would never vote for an atheist. Inclusion of an invocation and a benediction in the program, Newdow adds, is “completely exclusionary, showing absolute disrespect to plaintiffs and others of similar religious views.”

Joining Newdow in the suit are several individual atheists, the American Humanist Association, the Freedom From Religion Foundation, and other atheist groups.

[From a Dec. 30 “Blog of Legal Times” at <http://legaltimes.typepad.com/>]



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# Americans United Applauds Federal Court Ruling Against South Carolina's "Christian" License Plate

Federal Judge Blocks Issuance of "I Believe" Automobile Tag Featuring Cross and Stained-Glass Window

A federal judge ruled on December 11 that the state of South Carolina may not issue a special "Christian" license plate featuring a cross, a stained-glass window and the words "I Believe."

Americans United for Separation of Church and State, which sponsored the litigation to stop issuance of the plate, hailed the decision.

"The 'I Believe' license plate is a clear example of government favoritism toward one religion," said the Rev. Barry W. Lynn, executive director of Americans United. "The court drove home an important point: South Carolina officials have no business meddling in religious matters."

U.S. District Judge Cameron McGowan Currie issued a preliminary injunction forbidding the state to issue or manufacture the plates. She also ordered the state to inform people who requested the plates that they will not be available and to remove information about the plates from the state website.

Americans United brought the

*Summers v. Adams* legal challenge on behalf of four local clergy; the Rev. Dr. Thomas A. Summers, Rabbi Sanford T. Marcus, the Rev. Dr. Robert M. Knight and the Rev. Dr. Neal Jones as well as the Hindu American Foundation and the American-Arab Anti-Discrimination Committee.

In legal briefs, AU asserted that the "I Believe" license plate was unlike other specialty tags offered by the state. The measure authorizing the special plates was passed unanimously by both houses of the legislature, with the active support of Lt. Gov. Andre Bauer.

Americans United also pointed out that some legislators openly admitted that they would not vote for similar plates for minority faiths. Asked by a reporter if he would support a license plate for Islam, Rep. Bill Sandifer replied, "Absolutely and positively no.... I would not because of my personal belief, and because

I believe that wouldn't be the wish of the majority of the constituency in this house district."

Said AU Legal Director Ayesha N. Khan, "The 'I Believe' license plate sends the message that South Carolina has a favored religion. That's one message the state is not permitted to transmit."

Khan argued the case in Columbia before Judge Currie, assisted by AU Madison Fellow Elizabeth J. Stevens. Aaron J. Kozloski of Capitol Counsel, a Columbia, S.C. law firm, served as local counsel.

[From a December 11 press release by Americans United for Separation of Church and State.]



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## Raising Freethinkers Seminar in Atlanta

Sunday January 11, 2009 1:00-5:00 pm

An ALL NEW SEMINAR by the author/editor of *Parenting Beyond Belief*

The **Parenting Beyond Belief Seminar** at UUCA in March 2008 centered on a general philosophy of nonreligious parenting. The **Raising Freethinkers Seminar** takes a more practical approach, centered on the questions, activities, and resources in *Raising Freethinkers*, the forthcoming "sequel" to *Parenting Beyond Belief*.

Register at [http://parentingbeyondbelief.com/seminars/sem\\_atlanta.htm](http://parentingbeyondbelief.com/seminars/sem_atlanta.htm)

(\$25 per person or \$40 per couple)

Unitarian Universalist Congregation of Atlanta  
1911 Cliff Valley Way NE, Atlanta GA 30329

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# Role of Religion In Presidential Campaign Heads 2008 “Top Ten” List of Church-State Stories

From radioactive clergy to media inquisitions, religion was a hot topic in this year’s race for the White House, say editors of *Church & State* magazine

The role of religion in the presidential campaign tops the 2008 “Top Ten” list of top church-state stories, according to the editors of *Church & State*.

The monthly magazine, published by Americans United for Separation of Church and State, is the nation’s only news periodical devoted exclusively to the intersection of religion and government.

Said *Church & State* publisher Barry W. Lynn, “It was a wild and crazy year. To tell you the truth, I’m glad it’s coming to a close. I’m hopeful 2009 will be a lot better.”

After studying the past 12 months of news, the editors selected the following 10 stories as the most important and most interesting church-state developments for the year.

- 1. The Role of Religion in the Presidential Campaign:** Not since 1960 when John F. Kennedy the first Roman Catholic president was elected, has religion played such a large role in a presidential campaign. News media representatives grilled candidates on what sins they had committed and what their favorite Bible verses were. Barack Obama fought false rumors that he is secretly a Muslim, and Mitt Romney’s Mormonism became a controversial topic. Candidates were held accountable for the incendiary comments of their pastors and their clergy supporters, such as the Rev. Jeremiah Wright and TV preacher John Hagee. Many observers thought the whole thing was an unholy mess, especially in a nation that separates religion and government.
- 2. The Resurgence of the Religious Right:** While pundits and progressives have proclaimed the demise of the Religious Right, the fundamentalist political movement remained extraordinarily powerful. Republican John McCain found it necessary to name evangelical Sarah Palin as his

running mate to mollify the GOP’s restive religious base, and Religious Right forces rammed through bans on same-sex marriage in California, Florida and Arizona. Moderate evangelical Richard Cizik was forced out as government affairs representative at the National Association of Evangelicals after coming under fire from Religious Right forces.

- 3. The Battle Over Gay Marriage:** Bans on same-sex marriage were approved in California, Florida and Arizona with conservative religious forces leading the drive. California’s approval of Proposition 8, with massive funding from members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, was particularly contentious. The Mormons, joined by the Roman Catholic hierarchy and evangelical Protestant congregations, were successful in passing a constitutional amendment that takes away the right of same-sex couples to marry and reflects church doctrine in civil law. The issue now moves back to the state Supreme Court.

- 4. The Ascendancy of Rick Warren:** Once known primarily as a megachurch pastor and best-selling author (*The Purpose Driven Life*), the Rev. Rick Warren has rapidly moved into position as the nation’s most prominent preacher, despite right-wing views on reproductive freedom, gay rights and church-state separation. Warren, a Southern Baptist who heads Saddleback Church in Lake Forest, Calif., is viewed by progressives as Jerry Falwell in a Hawaiian shirt with an ace PR team. After hosting a presidential debate stacked toward John McCain and being asked to give the invocation at Barack Obama’s inauguration, many think Warren seems destined to be the new Billy Graham.

- 5. Religious Right Influence at Justice Department:** Religious Right influence at the U.S. Department of Justice

(DOJ) was exposed this year. According to an internal DOJ investigation reported in the media in July, senior aides in the department used religious and political criteria to hire staff members for non-political positions. Monica Goodling, a top adviser to the attorney general, checked to see if job applicants were “pro-God in public life” and held right-wing views on abortion, homosexuality and other issues. (Goodling is a graduate of TV preacher Pat Robertson’s Regent University.) The DOJ also posted a legally dubious memorandum this year insisting that the federal government may give grants to “faith-based” social service agencies that discriminate in hiring, even if Congress has explicitly banned such bias.

- 6. Battles Over Creationism in Public Schools:** New battles have erupted over the teaching of evolution in public schools. Blocked by the courts from teaching fundamentalist religious concepts directly in biology classes, Religious Right forces are trying a backdoor strategy. They are demanding that schools teach the “strengths and weaknesses” of evolution, a euphemism for creationist ideas. Over the heated objections of educators, scientists and civil liberties activists, the Louisiana legislature approved an “academic freedom” law encouraging such instruction in the state’s schools. Now the Texas State Board of Education is debating a similar proposal as part of its 10-year review of science standards.

- 7. Church Politicking Plot:** The Religious Right’s dream of building a fundamentalist church-based political machine took a big step forward in 2008 when more than 30 pastors used their pulpits to endorse Republican political candidates. They acted at the behest of the Alliance Defense Fund (ADF), a wealthy Religious Right legal outfit that wants to challenge the fed-

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## 2008 “Top Ten” List of Church/State Stories (*continued*)

eral tax law ban on partisan politicking by tax-exempt groups. The ADF, which was founded by TV preachers and other religious broadcasters, hopes the Internal Revenue Service will revoke participating churches' tax exemptions leading to a court showdown.

**8. Defeat of Jeb Bush Referenda:** Florida Gov. Jeb Bush saw his school voucher subsidies for religious and other private schools overturned by the state Supreme Court in 2006. Undeterred, the now former governor's allies on an obscure tax commission engineered two measures onto the November 2008 ballot that would have repealed the state constitution's ban on public funding of religion as well as diluted its provision for a strong system of public schools. To Bush's dismay, the state Supreme Court on Sept. 3 struck the referenda

from the ballot, derailing the scheme.

**9. Blocking of 'Christian' License Plate:** The South Carolina legislature unanimously approved a special "Christian" license plate featuring a bright yellow cross, a stained-glass church window and the words "I Believe." Backed by Americans United for Separation of Church and State, four local clergy and two minority faith groups challenged the government favoritism toward one faith. On Dec. 11, a federal district court blocked issuance of the plates. The judge's action may forestall similar sectarian plates under consideration in other states.

**10. The Christmas Wars:** It has become an annual holiday tradition. Religious Right groups and their allies in the right-wing media launch a yearly crusade to stop the alleged secularization of Christmas and to pressure govern-

ment to include Christian symbols in the holiday mix. They rail against stores' use of the term "Happy Holidays" and insist that advertisements say "Merry Christmas" instead. This year, much of the attention focused on a Washington State battle where an atheist Winter Solstice sign was positioned near a Christian Nativity scene in the state capital. Fox News pundit Bill O'Reilly and an array of Religious Right scolds lambasted Gov. Christine Gregoire for allowing the anti-religious sentiment. Ironically, credit for the atheist display actually should go to the Alliance Defense Fund, a Religious Right legal group that sued Gregoire last year, insisting that the Capitol is an open forum where a Nativity scene (and all other forms of speech) must be allowed.

[From a December 29 press release at <http://www.au.org>.]

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## Pastor Steps Down from Powder Springs Church

Officials cite “inappropriate sexual behavior” involving founder Jim Bolin

**T**he congregation of the 7,000-member Trinity Chapel in Powder Springs, GA learned on Sunday, December 14, that founding pastor Jim Bolin had stepped down from his position because of “inappropriate sexual behavior.”

During an emotional 90-minute service, church officials said Bolin would go through a two-year “restoration process,” which includes counseling, through the Church of God. Bolin did not attend the service and no details were released about what he'd done wrong.

Bolin, 56, will be inactive in the ministry during that period, said Justin Harley, Trinity Chapel's director of counseling. Bolin's 32-year-old son, Jason Bolin, raised in the church his parents started in an Austell Road

storefront 25 years ago with five families, will take over as head pastor, assisted by his wife Sarah Bolin. He had been on the church staff the last 10 years, most recently as executive pastor.

The announcement was made from the pulpit by Donald M. Walker, the state administrative bishop for the Church of God. Walker called the day “rueful and sobering” and often choked up and dabbed his eyes. He began by reading a letter to the congregation from Jim Bolin. Bolin opened the letter by saying “I have sinned against God” and that he takes “full responsibility and blame” for the circumstances that have rocked the church during the last week. He provided no other details. “Today you see what a wrong choice has caused,”

Bolin wrote. “Please learn from this.” Bolin also said that “the road to restitution is long,” adding, “I'm not finished yet.”

The more than 2,000 people in attendance for the first of two morning services often gave standing ovations to Walker and Jason Bolin when they asked forgiveness for their founding pastor, and called on the church to unite and move forward.

“I think the church will be stronger than ever,” said Teri Burns of Powder Springs, a member for six years. “Jim Bolin was my hero. But he is also human and I forgive him. It's been a tough week, but it's over. There's a new week ahead.”

[Condensed from a Dec 14 article by Drew Jubera in the *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*]

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See lots of articles about Charles Darwin and Evolution in the January 2009 issue of *Scientific American* magazine.

Some of the magazine articles can be found at <http://www.sciam.com/sciammag/>.

Read about the very successful Atheist Bus Campaign in London: 800 buses have signs that read “There's probably no God. Now stop worrying and enjoy your life.” Click here: <http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/2009/jan/06/religion-atheism>



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# Bush-Era Abortion Rules Face Probable Reversal

Obama team looks to undo “right of conscience” rule set in December by Pres. Bush

The outgoing Bush administration finalized a regulation in December establishing a “right of conscience” allowing medical staff to refuse to participate in any practice they object to on moral grounds, including abortion and other procedures.

In transition offices across town, officials in the incoming Obama administration have begun considering how and when to undo it.

The regulation is one of a swath of abortion and other reproductive-health issues under review by the Obama team, which is preparing to reverse a variety of Bush measures, according to officials close to the transition. The review is part of a sweeping scrutiny of Bush-era legislation and regulation on issues across the federal government, from environmental and labor rules to defense spending.

On abortion and related matters, action is expected early on executive, regulatory, budgetary and legislative fronts.

Decisions that the new administration will weigh include: whether to cut funding for sexual abstinence programs; whether to increase funds for comprehensive sex education programs that include discussion of birth control; whether to allow federal health plans to pay for abortions; and whether to overturn regulations such as one that makes fetuses eligible for health-care coverage under the Children’s Health Insurance Program.

Women’s health advocates are also pushing for a change in rules that would lower the cost of birth control at college health clinics.

Obama aides will have to settle many of these questions in issuing their first budget in February.

“We have a lot of work to do to fix the damage the Bush administration has done,” said Nancy Keenan, president of NARAL Pro-Choice America.

As one of his first actions, Mr. Obama is likely to issue an executive order lifting President George W.

Bush’s restrictions on funding for research using embryonic stem cells, a move with bipartisan support.

Women’s health advocates also expect early action on the “global gag rule,” which bars foreign organizations from using their own money for abortion services or advocacy if they accept U.S. aid for family planning. This policy was instituted by President Ronald Reagan, immediately overturned by President Bill Clinton and then reinstated by Mr. Bush.

The abortion debate in the next year is likely to focus on the Freedom of Choice Act, a bill that would codify *Roe v. Wade* into federal law.

Mr. Obama is also expected to restore federal funding for family planning to the United Nations Population Fund soon after taking office. This policy also has gone back and forth with control of the White House, with Republicans arguing that the U.N. agency supports coercive abortions because of its work in China with its one-child policy, and Democrats saying that the agency doesn’t.

Messrs. Clinton and Bush took action on those two issues in the opening days of their administrations. It isn’t clear whether Mr. Obama will follow suit. He has suggested that he wants to find middle ground on abortion-related issues, and some Democrats worry about the politics of making abortion policy one of his opening moves.

As they face Democrat-controlled Washington, antiabortion activists are gearing up to fight the Freedom of Choice Act, or FOCA, which would codify *Roe v. Wade* into federal law. Mr. Obama said last year that he would sign the bill. Depending on how it is interpreted, the bill could overturn state laws regulating abortion, such as parental notification and mandatory waiting periods.

“Our No. 1 concern would be the FOCA bill,” said Connie Mackey, senior vice president of Family Research Council Action, a conservative

group that focuses on social issues. “We have to appeal directly to the American public.”

While many abortion-rights supporters would like to see Congress pass FOCA, their advocates in Washington have concluded that there aren’t enough votes in Congress and that it isn’t politically smart to push such a divisive measure. A coalition of nearly 60 liberal and women’s groups submitted a list of 15 requests for action in the Obama administration’s first 100 days, and FOCA isn’t on the list.

“We’re going to be smart and strategic about our policy agenda to bring people together to make progress for women’s health,” said Cecile Richards, president of Planned Parenthood Federation of America. “The Freedom of Choice Act is very important...but we have a long list of things to get done that I think can address problems immediately that women are facing, that are really immediate concerns.”

Among them is the “right of conscience” regulation that was published in the December 19 *Federal Register*. It will take effect 30 days after publication, on January 20<sup>th</sup>, the day of Mr. Obama’s inauguration.

For decades, federal law has said that doctors and nurses can’t be compelled to perform abortions. The new regulation broadens that to make clear that all health-care workers may refuse to provide information, such as a referral, to patients looking for an abortion. The Department of Health and Human Services estimates the regulation would affect 584,000 hospitals, doctor’s offices and pharmacies.

The rule could be blocked by Congress, or Health and Human Services could begin the laborious process of issuing a new regulation reversing course. Officials close to the transition have signaled that they intend to begin the regulatory process anew.

[From Dec. 19 articles at foxnews.com, hhs.gov and the Wall Street Journal.]

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# Premarital Abstinence Pledges Ineffective, Study Finds

## Teenagers Who Pledge Are Just as Likely to Have Sex, and Less Likely to Use Protection

**T**eenagers who pledge to remain virgins until marriage are just as likely to have premarital sex as those who do not promise abstinence and are significantly less likely to use condoms and other forms of birth control when they do, according to a study released on December 29.

The new analysis of data from a large federal survey found that more than half of youths became sexually active before marriage regardless of whether they had taken a “virginity pledge,” but that the percentage who took precautions against pregnancy or sexually transmitted diseases was 10 points lower for pledgers than for non-pledgers.

“Taking a pledge doesn’t seem to make any difference at all in any sexual behavior,” said Janet E. Rosenbaum of the John Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health, whose report appears in the January issue of the journal *Pediatrics*. “But it does seem to make a difference in condom use and other forms of birth control that is quite striking.”

The study is the latest in a series that have raised questions about programs that focus on encouraging abstinence until marriage, including those that specifically ask students to publicly declare their intention to remain virgins. The new analysis, however, goes beyond earlier analyses by focusing on teens who had similar values about sex and other issues before they took a virginity pledge.

The findings are reigniting the debate about the effectiveness of abstinence-focused sexual education just as Congress and the new Obama administration are about to reconsider the more than \$176 million in annual funding for such programs.

“This study again raises the issue of why the federal government is continuing to invest in abstinence-only programs,” said Sarah Brown of the

National Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unplanned Pregnancy. “What have we gained if we only encourage young people to delay sex until they are older, but then when they do become sexually active—and most do well before marriage—they don’t protect themselves or their partners?”

James Wagoner of the advocacy group Advocates for Youth agreed: “The Democratic Congress needs to get its head out of the sand and get real about sex education in America.”

Rosenbaum analyzed data collected by the federal government’s National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health, which gathered detailed information from a representative sample of about 11,000 students in grades seven to 12 in 1995, 1996 and 2001.

Although researchers have analyzed data from that survey before to examine abstinence education programs, the new study is the first to use a more stringent method to account for other factors that could influence the teens’ behavior, such as their attitudes about sex before they took the pledge.

Rosenbaum focused on about 3,400 students who had not had sex or taken a virginity pledge in 1995. She compared 289 students who were 17 years old on average in 1996, when they took a virginity pledge, with 645 who did not take a pledge but were otherwise similar. She based that judgment on about 100 variables, including their attitudes and their parents’ attitudes about sex and their perception of their friends’ attitudes about sex and birth control.

“This study came about because somebody who decides to take a virginity pledge tends to be different from the average American teenager. The pledgers tend to be more religious. They tend to be more conservative. They tend to be less positive about sex. There are some striking

differences,” Rosenbaum said. “So comparing pledgers to all non-pledgers doesn’t make a lot of sense.”

By 2001, Rosenbaum found, 82 percent of those who had taken a pledge had retracted their promise, and there was no significant difference in the proportion of students in both groups who had engaged in any type of sexual activity, including giving or receiving oral sex, vaginal intercourse, the age at which they first had sex, or their number of sexual partners. More than half of both groups had engaged in various types of sexual activity, had an average of about three sexual partners and had sex for the first time by age 21 even if they were unmarried.

“It seems that pledgers aren’t really internalizing the pledge,” Rosenbaum said. “Participating in a program doesn’t appear to be motivating them to change their behavior. It seems like abstinence has to come from an individual conviction rather than participating in a program.”

While there was no difference in the rate of sexually transmitted diseases in the two groups, the percentage of students who reported condom use was about 10 points lower for those who had taken the pledge, and they were about 6 percentage points less likely to use any form of contraception. About 24 percent of those who had taken a pledge said they always used a condom, compared with about 34 percent of those who had not.

Rosenbaum attributed the difference to what youths learn about condoms in abstinence-only programs.

“There’s been a lot of work that has found that teenagers who take part in abstinence-only education have more negative views about condoms,” she said. “They tend not to give accurate information about condoms and birth control.”

[Condensed from a December 29 *Washington Post* article by Rob Stein.]

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See the “Top Ten Signs of Evolution in Modern Man” at <http://listverse.com/science/top-10-signs-of-evolution-in-modern-man/>.

See the Focus on the Family Action website at <http://www.focusaction.com/>.

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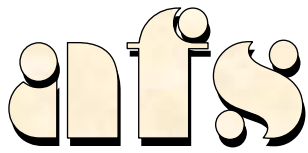
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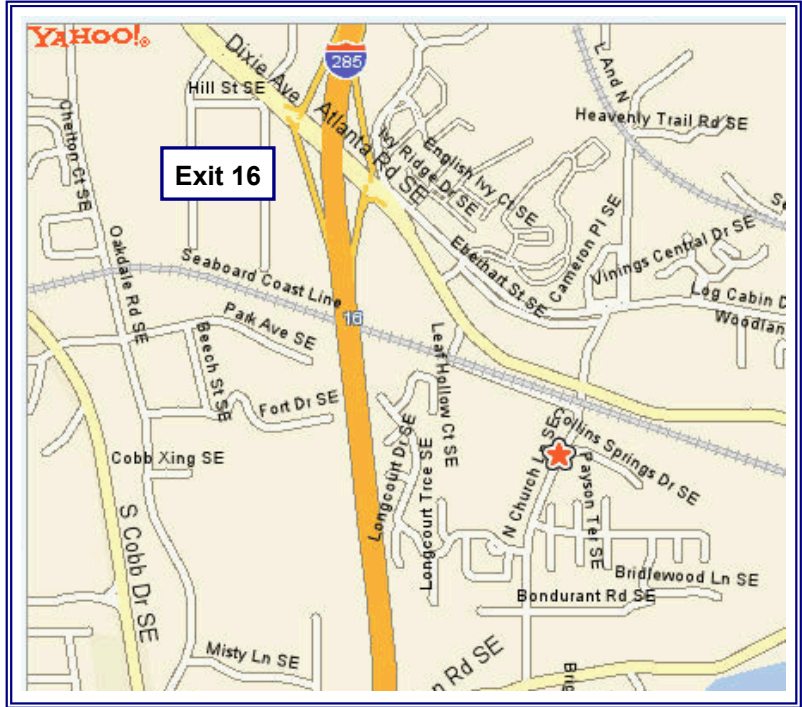
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**This Month's Speaker:**

**Steve Yothment**



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