

Human Sexuality and Ministry

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Human sexuality and Ministry

- *The objective of this webinar is to help participants gain a greater awareness of personal, societal, religious/spiritual and historical sexuality issues that impact congregational leadership.*
- In today's session we will discuss
- sexuality as a reality of creation
- sexuality education issues across generations
- Possibilities for education that is age appropriate





Review Definition of Sexuality from last week



- *Sexuality is a composite term referring to the totality of being a person; sexuality suggests our human character and is the total meaning of being a man or woman. Sexuality is therefore, a function of the total personality and is concerned with the biological, psychological, sociological and spiritual variables of life, which affect personality development and interpersonal relations.*
- *How does it feel to be a woman? How does it feel to be a man? What are the implications of these feelings on the way we feel about ourselves and the way we relate personally and professionally? This concept of human sexuality suggests its authentic parameters and is a reality for all people—young, adolescent, middle-aged, the aged and the handicapped.*
- *—excerpt from a paper given by Dr. Michael Carerra in the lecture series *In Mental Health in Teaching*, 1977*
- *from SIECUS (2003)*
- *Human sexuality encompasses the sexual knowledge, beliefs, attitudes, values and behaviors of individuals. Sexuality is influenced by ethical, spiritual, cultural and moral concerns*



Sexuality, a reality of creation



- The Judeo Christian bible, does not give clear instruction as to when to teach young people about sex, mating, marriage. Sexuality, then, was impacted by how one understood his/her role in keeping right relationship with God through an order that was understood from the teachings about the creation of human beings
- However, in the Judeo Christian bible, we find two accounts of creation. In the first, the human beings (male and female) are made in the image of God, created at the same time, are told to be fruitful and multiply and are equally given stewardship over the earth and all things made by God. And God saw that it was good (Genesis 1: 26 – 31)
- The second account of creation is quite different from the first. It sets the man as created first by God, given the privilege of naming all things God made and then God makes the woman from a rib from the man. The man sees the woman as the creature that completes him (bone of my bone and flesh of my flesh) and then scripture tells us
- The man is formed from the dust of the earth
- The man is placed in the garden and given instructions about the tree of life also in the midst of the garden, and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil.
- After creation of the woman, the writer tells us
- *Therefore a man leaves his father and his mother and clings to his wife, and they become one flesh*
- Now, much happens in the Garden of Eden that spells for disastrous consequences for the man and the woman that also troubles their relationship with God. This trouble sets us domination, lust, divisions of labor and sin. Hence, the concept of original sin, the need for atonement and for those of us who are Christian, the ultimate sacrifice for our sins seen in the person of Jesus the Christ,
- For Muslims, in the Qur'an, there is an account of the story of Adam and Eve after their transgression, they begged for forgiveness. God forgave them but punished them with mortality. Muslims believe one is born in a state of submission to God and must seek true repentance from sin which turns them to their original sinless state



Sexuality, a reality of creation, con't



- Implications from the second account of creation have impacted our understanding of male/female sexuality and spirituality down through the ages. It has led some to interpret sex relations as a loathsome even sinful burden for procreation and has limited loving relationships as right only for men and women and declaring all other relationships as degusting before God. Some sexual acts as natural and others unnatural.
- We were created as sexual beings for pleasure, for procreation, for community, and to live in harmony with all that God created. In our most perfect state, we co-exist and co-create with the indwelling spirit of God
- We were created for love and to be in relationship with other human beings
- The wonder of the human body speaks to the magnificent miracles that we all are those with similar and different physical abilities.



Sexuality, a reality of creation, con't



- No matter how we look at the various creation stories, no human being can verify an eye witness account of the struggles and challenges of the first human beings. We believe the account of our traditions and beliefs
- The creation story is etiological in that it helps us to understand why things occur or what caused things to happen. It is, most importantly, a matter of faith.
- The bible tells us how the earth was populated from the original two but it also suggests that there were other beings on the earth as well as super-human beings on the earth(Genesis 6.4) The problem for humanity is that as it is fruitful and multiplies it also becomes more wicked and troublesome to God.
- There is no simple or concise way to explain away the evil or hateful things people learn to do to each other but the record of the bible is a constant reminder that people need guidance for peaceful living with each other and with God..



Male/female roles in the bible



- Though we do know that in antiquity, young women were expected to marry at an early age, it was usually soon after she entered her childbearing years. So one can guess that young women were taught what it meant to be a good wife and that her ability to give birth to many children (especially sons) was highly valued. All of her life was tied to the males who were to protect and provide for her. She was to be a virgin (never “knowing” a man at the time of marriage).
- In a patriarchal world view that prized men and gave privilege to male leadership, male thought, male relationship to God.
- The woman and her children were the property of her husband; if she had no children when her husband died, her husband’s brother was to “know” her and make her pregnant
- Unmarried men were not expected to be virgins (this term is only used for unmarried women). Men were allowed to have multiple wives, concubines, and visitation to a prostitute, though frowned upon was not against the law.
- Today, these customs and laws are not quite the same, so then how do we develop teachings about roles, sexuality education and rights in the context of today’s mores and ethics



Our lives are different



- Our lives are different and the average person, with the aide of computers, can gain access to a wealth of information that heretofore was not available.
- This does not mean that we are smarter but it means we must use significant wisdom in making choices. For this reason sexuality education is imperative in helping people to weigh their choices **before**
- They submerge in the emotional rollercoaster of sexual attraction and love.
- Comprehensive sexuality and spirituality education, in the final analysis is about helping people better understand their bodies, their relationship to others, their own sexual feelings either different sex oriented or same sex oriented, and their relationship to God in light of their feelings.
- Some years ago, I saw a poster from the Children's Defense Fund that read: Ignorance costs more than knowledge
- Problems associated with poor or little sexuality and spirituality education
- Sex addiction
- Pre-mature sex activity
- Sexual abuse
- Sexual violence
- Sexually transmitted diseases
- Dangerous/risky behavior
- Poor sex esteem
- Poor sense of God's presence in sexual relations
- Guilt/shame
- Confusion about sex and love or sex for love
- Body negative
- Sex negative
- Feeling that God does not rejoice in our sexual pleasure



Impediments to Sexuality and Spirituality Education



- A major impediment to conducting effective sexuality and spirituality education has to do with fears of judgment and unresolved personal issues
- There is almost no other subject that one can study other than sexuality in which eyebrows are raised, questions are murmured and insinuations made about those who wish to participate.
- Many people fear that secrets about their not so spotless past will be revealed
- Or maybe they have some pain from abuse that they are not yet ready to confront
- Or they are currently engaging in behavior for which they feel they might be scorned.
- The church has contributed to fears and judgment through its silences about injustices and abuse or its articulation of only sex negative messages from the pulpit, and in its practice with people. It has also in many cases been hypocritical in allowing sexual indiscretions and sexual crimes of its leadership to go unpunished.
- The only way to get past these obstacles is to launch out in earnest to deeper waters, well equipped to help all of us live more wholesome and faithful lives on this great ship earth, under heaven.



Sexuality education issues across generations



- Earlier this week, I heard a startling and troubling statistics on the Oprah Winfrey show
- Daily in America:
- 15,000 daily viewers of child pornography and instructions for abusing children (infancy to teens)
- Among those site visitors, 30% of them were abusers
- And there were over 500,000 computers in US are active with child pornography
- This horrible practice is a reality for our children and we must safeguard them from sexual predators.
- But we must not only teach them about “good touch” and “bad touch” situations; we must also teach them about the glory and beauty of their bodies before God. A conversation has to begin early, the parent has to be vigilant and the community must be alerted to the signs of potential abuse. They must be empowered to take action
- The religious community can help parents to be better in their communication with their children about sex and the potential dangers that exist within the community, the home and the church—there is no setting that is closed to people who sexually prey upon children.
- Many studies show that adolescents are engaging in sexual activity at earlier ages than in past decades. In many instances, young people are “following the crowd” and doing what they think is the norm for social behavior.
- In these instances the question is how do they learn the values for relationships from their parents or religious settings?



Sexuality education issues across generations



- For teens and adolescents, their hormones turn on producing feelings of attraction and love well before they gain emotional intelligence. Our role must be to help them gain wisdom in these matters
- Contrary to some beliefs, sexuality education does not increase sexual activity and in fact sometimes helps teens to delay it (Howard, 2004)
- Abstinence only sexuality education, or waiting till one is married is one approach but it is one that is proving to be not as effective as was first believed (H. Bearman and P. Bruckner, 2004)
- Teens who have identified as same-gender attracted also need comprehensive sexuality and spirituality education that helps them to navigate the sometimes perilous behavior to which they may be exposed. They need also positive and affirming inclusion in the faith community to encourage their spiritual development



Sexuality education issues across generations



- In many religious settings, young adults ministry and sexuality education is focused on appropriate dating, finding a mate, or practices for a happy celibate life until marriage.
- This discussion alone may have been valid twenty or thirty years ago but today's single young adult in a faith based setting needs more exchanges that help them to explore their honest feelings and grapple with the conflicts they experience as well as ways to wade through contradictions they observe in faith talk and faith walk.
- They exist in a world of information that is constantly at their fingertips, opportunities for meeting people in a variety of settings enhances their life experiences.
- In many ways it is unrealistic to expect that today's single young adult will put off sexual relations until marriage. So reasons to do so, if that is the ultimate goal, must be compelling.
- Truth be told, waiting until marriage does not guarantee a healthy and enjoyable sex life. Sexuality education should begin at an early age and continue throughout life.



Sexuality education issues across generations



- When developing sexuality and spirituality education with young adults heterosexual or same gender loving, exploration of values through examination of sacred texts (i.e. Song Of Solomon,) discussion, data research, movies, literature, drama, creative writing can be helpful
- As themes are developed values about sexuality and spirituality can be examined as they are:
 - Chosen freely
 - Chosen from a number of alternatives
 - Thinking about consequences of actions related to values
 - Highly regarded and praised
 - Publicly affirm
 - Acted upon
 - High degree of consistency in acting upon them



Sexuality education issues across generations



- Many believe that the marriage bed or the bed of committed couples is extremely busy and satisfying and yet the bookshelves are filled with studies and stories about couples who suffer from lack of sexual interest, infidelity and disappointment about vital physical, emotional and spiritual exchanges with their partners and spouses
- The church can help couples explore issues as individuals and as a unit to bring new vision and vitality into their lives.
- In addition to the bible study,
- Invite medical professionals---especially gynecologists, or urologists, develop small support groups that cover a range of topics including sex and sexuality
- Conduct retreat or extended intensive
- Organize a spa day that includes personal care
- Keep materials that are available for couples and individuals
- Encourage an atmosphere of inquiry.
- In all of this, recognize that everyone has a right to privacy but they should also be encouraged to know that there are resources to help work out deeply troubling private issues



Sexuality education issues across generations



- In working with older adults about sexuality and spirituality issues, the greatest obstacle is related to misconceptions about aging and elders' needs for intimacy.
- Often many of our senior congregants are widows, or widowers in need of companionship and many of them may have companions but keep it secret because of the stereotypes about elders and intimacy
- Also, often elder men and women are separated socially in the church, especially if they are not a couple.
- This process seems to ignore the total humanity of elders, this is especially odd since many biblical figures in the Old Testament enjoyed and were blessed with sexual activity at very late stages in their lives
- Certainly the huge industry for improving sexual performance demonstrates that certainly men are interested in erectile functioning for the middle aged, the young and the old. This is also causing a problem with increased incidents of HIV/AIDS and other STI's but it also speaks to the need for more than male enhancement drugs.
- The church and other faith-based communities can make use of resources like *New Expectations*, a curriculum for seniors that can be downloaded at siecus.org



age appropriate sexuality education



- Last week I was asked about age appropriate sexuality education and I think one always needs to be sensitive about the audience they are trying to reach.
- As I mentioned earlier, education for toddlers and small children should be geared towards helping them to know about their bodies, responding to questions they may raise about body parts and functions
- For children ages 6 – 8, parents may share in reading books about the body, where babies come from, what to expect as they grow older. There should also be frank discussion about stranger danger as well as inappropriate behavior with any adults or other children in their family or community. Concerns and values about relationships should also be shared
- Adolescents' bodies experience transitions (especially girls) clarity about reproductive and sexual response systems should be shared. Exploration and clarity of values about dating, behavior and precautions should be discussed along with visits with medical doctors (as needed).
- Discussions about masturbation, nocturnal dreams, and inappropriate sexual behavior should be an on-going process.
- Single young adults also need to have opportunity for discussion and information about values, lifestyles and choices regarding sexuality and spirituality they make decisions about careers and living arrangements. Many young adults who enter the work go off to college or the military need understanding of social graces that impact how they are perceived outside their immediate surroundings.
- Adults, married couples and committed couples continue to need to gain skills in sexual and spiritual communication with their mates.
- Senior citizens need acceptance and understanding of their needs, which includes accurate information and support



No matter the age group all information and learning settings should:



- Be factual—biological information for all age groups should be accurate and available on film or in book form for participants to examine and central to discussion
- Engage people in a manner that honors their curiosity, fears and yearning for knowledge—allow them to reason out their ideas and concerns
- Acknowledge that sometimes the subject of sexuality and spirituality is difficult and even sometimes embarrassing
- Not be fear based and understand that talking about sex does not mean that your participants are going to act out everything they say it is a means to help them reason, hear themselves



Join us next week



- For discussions on sexuality church, society
- Sexuality, spirituality and community
- Sexual health
- Promoting Peace and sexual health
- Becoming an advocate
- Church policy and practice
- Educating leaders about the need for sexuality education

References

- Just Saying No: Study Shows Virginity Pledgers Have Same STD Rates as Non-Pledgers , available at Columbia University Institute for Social and Economic Research and Policy www.iserp.columbia.edu
- M. Howard, PhD, "Young Males' Sexual Education and Health Services," *American Journal of Public Health*, August 2004, Vol. 94, No. 8.