

Let's talk about sex

What the church owes our youth

Cyneatha Millsaps

As a young girl, I saw two movies—*Nuts* (1987) and *My Mother's Secret Life* (1984)—that profoundly influenced my view of women and our sexuality. In both movies, the main character is a highly paid call girl. These women are portrayed as powerful, wealthy, and savvy. I recognized that their choice of profession exacted an emotional and social cost, but the benefits they reaped seemed worth the costs. The women drove nice cars, lived in

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penthouse apartments in the city, and controlled their own lives without or despite male domination. Watching these women on the screen, I believed theirs was the life I was meant to live. I wanted that control, power, and wealth for myself. The sexual transactions seemed like a minor sacrifice. I thought to myself, “All I’d have to do is pretend for an hour or two that the man is special. Then I’d be a couple thousand dollars richer and I’d move on.”

Naïve? Yes. But consider my situation and prospects. I was a young African American girl living in poverty. My father was absent, and my mother was mentally ill. I rarely knew

where my next meal would come from. Another can of green beans for dinner? I watched men control, abuse, and manipulate women with impunity. As far as I could see, the women around me accepted this abusive behavior with little protest beyond the occasional argument or physical fight. They remained in unhealthy, dysfunctional relationships. Why wouldn’t movies portraying high-class hookers as powerful, sexually desirable, and wealthy make that career choice seem appealing to a young, impressionable girl in my circumstances?

Looking back over that period of my life, I often wonder, where was the church? I have attended church off and on all my life, though my parents did not make me go, nor did other adults invite me. My interactions with the church were mostly driven by my need to make sense of my world. I was always seeking God in the midst of what often seemed like total darkness. Today, I am able to thank God for his protecting me and providing for me even when I did not feel or understand his presence.

But the mistakes I made in my youth might have been diverted had I known adults prepared to challenge and question my thinking, who would have shown me love without conditions. I think about young people today. What images shape their hopes and desires? Who is guiding their thoughts and actions? Where is the church for them? Are their parents making them go to church? Do they have caring adults taking an interest in their lives, paying attention to their search for God, inviting them to church?

I am convinced that the church is called to provide youth ministries that engage teens and young adults, addressing their thoughts about their sexuality and examining our culture's assumptions and practices around sexuality. The church must seek to guide youth and young adults in making informed choices about their sexuality and sexual expression. Youth and young adult ministries need to offer opportunity for age-appropriate dialogue with young people and their families. Congregations must examine our social environment and the scriptures in order to respond effectively to the needs of our youth and young adults.

In 1985 the Mennonite church published a working document on human sexuality and the church's response. It was designed for congregational study and conversation. It points to the Anabaptist conviction that "authority is found in the process of dialogue and discussion of all members of the church rather than in a few leaders legislating morality."¹ This reminder is vitally important for youth ministries. North American society is diverse. What is appropriate for one community, family, or individual will not necessarily fit the next. The neighborhoods we live in; the education available to us; our family systems, employment opportunities, and extracurricular activities all affect young people. The environment from which we come influences our thoughts and actions.

In the two case studies that follow, we will look at ways our environment affects our patterns of thought and our responses to our sexuality. Through these case studies we will consider what youth ministers might have to offer in talking with young people. How can we guide conversations about sexuality and help our youth reflect on the cultural and familial influences on their sexuality?

What lies below the surface?

One day I was leading a discussion with eight high school girls on the subject of sex. One of them seemed negative in the extreme. I began to direct questions to her, in an attempt to identify the source of her anger. Dawn (not her real name) was a fifteen-year-old African American young woman. She told the group that she had no respect for adults. The only exception was her maternal grandmother, who was raising her. Dawn's respect for her grandmother was rooted in her grandmother's respect for her. Dawn said that her mother, on the other hand, "is not worth my time and energy." This young lady disliked all her teachers and many of her peers. Her manner was aggressive and harsh.

My initial assessment was that Dawn was uncomfortable with the conversation about sex because she was struggling with her own sexuality. Although an attractive young woman, she wore clothes—an oversized shirt and pants that sagged below her waist—that masked her figure. Her hair was long, thick, and silky, but she kept it drawn into a ponytail at the nape of her neck. She wore no make-up. At first glance, I might have mistaken her for a young man.

Dawn had been kicked out of class for repeatedly making violent threats against her teacher and other students. She was going to a school for troubled kids. When I asked why she was attending the alternative high school, she said that it was "just something I have to do." She took no responsibility for her threatening behavior. When asked if she was participating in any after-school activities or sports, she replied, "No, those teams are racist and whack."²

Finding it hard to reach Dawn on any level, I turned the conversation back to the group. The others talked about relationships with their boyfriends, about boys they would like to be

friends with, and about relationships that had gone bad. Two participants (one fourteen and the other seventeen) talked about relationships with other girls. They had given up on guys. During the discussion, Dawn spoke against homosexual relationships and chastised these ladies for being “so silly” when it came to relationships. Caught off-guard by Dawn’s responses, I brought the meeting to an end but asked her to remain for a little while.

During my one-on-one conversation with Dawn, she disclosed that her lack of trust in adults stemmed from the fact that her mother had sold her to men for sex. Her mother had abused her daughter’s love and trust. In taking advantage of her, the men had also violated her. Now I understood why Dawn was hostile, why

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she dressed like a boy, and why she was upset about a conversation in which others were speaking of sex in ways she saw as superficial.

Dawn’s environment had fractured her understanding of and views on sexuality. Listening to her made me wonder, how does the church reach out to someone like her? A starting point is to begin to ask the right questions, to explore the lenses that filter our young people’s knowledge and understanding

of sex. We need to be aware, for example, that Dawn is not alone: according to a recent U.S. Department of Health and Human Services report, in 2002, 10 percent of women aged eighteen to twenty-four who had sex before age twenty reported that their first sex was not voluntary.³

Youth ministers must develop rapport with young people, cultivating relationships with them that are characterized by honesty and trustworthiness. Pastors of youth must be prepared to ask and answer hard questions. The key to establishing safe and healthy relationships and maintaining our integrity as leaders is to make sure boundaries are set before we engage in these conversations. When a youth minister has earned their trust, young people are more likely to open up. In situations where youth report abuse at home or elsewhere, we must act responsibly and create a safe environment for them.

The church is called to provide youth ministries that engage teens and young adults in their thoughts about sexuality in our

culture. Pastors need to maintain an awareness that parents of these youth are also influenced by North American culture. The images and ideologies around us shape all of us—not just the youth but also the parents. These forces affect parenting styles as well as understandings of sexuality. The realities are complex, and the church will need to address many different difficult issues.

Does anybody see me?

During another group discussion with high school girls, Jessica (again, not her real name) told the others that she was a virgin. Jessica is fourteen, Caucasian, and lives with her father and stepmother. Her mother is on drugs. Her brother is in jail, and her nineteen-year-old sister has two children. Jessica's family is among the working poor; although some members of the family have some income from employment, it is not enough to keep them out of poverty.

In several group sessions that followed, Jessica talked about all the boys who wanted her and all the girls who were jealous of the attention that boys give her because she is a virgin. As I listened to Jessica and watched the other girls, it became obvious that they didn't believe Jessica's colorful stories about her encounters, and they thought she was lying about being a virgin. Apparently she had created an idealized world in which she was the center of attention.

I asked how Jessica's father felt about her having so many different boyfriends. Her response was that he didn't like her boyfriends because she only dates Black or Hispanic guys and he is prejudiced. I asked why she thought her dad was prejudiced, and I suggested that maybe he just thought she was too young to be dating. She seemed thrown off by that idea and did not have an answer.

By her own admission, Jessica continues to end up in relationships with guys who cheat on her and mistreat her. She doesn't seem to have any idea about why she has an ongoing pattern of getting into unhealthy relationships. To me it is apparent that Jessica has a natural human need for attention and acceptance, but she seeks these things where she has learned to find them, in a series of dysfunctional relationships with boys who give her attention for the wrong reasons in the wrong ways.

Youth ministers must be able to challenge young people and guide them as they think through situations to make better choices. Left to themselves, young people do not have the capacity to make clear and rational choices, because they do not have enough life experience. As a girl in the mid-1980s, my horizons were too narrow to accurately assess the life of a high-class hooker. A fourteen-year-old girl's conception of rational behavior is limited to her lack of maturity and by the possibilities her environment presents.

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According to the 2002 results reported in the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services document cited above, by age fifteen only 13 percent of girls and 15 percent of boys have ever had sex. But by the time they reach age nineteen, nearly seven in ten teens have engaged in sexual intercourse.⁴ If Jessica is a virgin, she is unlikely to remain a virgin for long. The church must seek to guide youth and young adults in making wise,

informed choices about their sexuality. If this is to happen, youth leaders will need to be aware of the issues facing youth and their families. And youth leaders need to gain the respect and trust of parents as well as youth, because the support of parents is vital in addressing family issues and assisting youth in making good choices. Then sexual activity can “find its true meaning as part of life under God in the human community. Sex . . . is neither a god nor a demon. It is an opportunity and a challenge on the way to a more mature personhood.”⁵

The two stories recounted above suggest just a few of the complex issues of sexuality facing young adults today. Children are struggling to find their place and worth in an ever-changing society. The church must remain vigilant in addressing the images, ideologies, perceptions, and deceptions facing our children. Church leaders must find safe ways to allow youth to express concerns and talk about their lives, and we must provide counseling and support for families when issues surface. The church dare not ignore the problems of our community.

We are part of a diverse society. Each household has its own rules and beliefs. The church must stand on basic biblical

principles and not be co-opted by society's approach to sexuality. The church's first response is to encourage conversation about sexuality with youth starting at home. Parents who engage in open, honest, age-appropriate discussion with their youth allow the church community to function as support and not authority. But if parents fail their children, and children are left to seek answers for themselves, then the church is required to provide ministries that engage youth in clear Christian counseling and guidance.

Notes

¹Mennonite Church and General Conference Mennonite Church, *Human Sexuality in the Christian Life: A Working Document for Study and Dialogue* (Newton, KS: Faith and Life Press; Scottsdale, PA: Mennonite Publishing House, 1985), 11.

²*Whack* is slang for "silly" or "stupid."

³*Teenagers in the United States: Sexual Activity, Contraceptive Use, and Childbearing, 2002*, Vital and Health Statistics, series 23, no. 24 (Hyattsville, MD: U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2004), 7.

⁴*Ibid.*, 6.

⁵Mennonite Church and General Conference Mennonite Church, *Human Sexuality in the Christian Life*, 31.

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