

## Vision: A Journal for Church and Theology

# Sexuality

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**M**ost people think she was a prostitute. Luke calls her a woman of the city, a sinner. Her hair is disheveled, signaling her grief or her sexual availability or—most likely, as the story unfolds—both. Emotionally, she is a wreck. Today we might call her a stalker. She has learned where Jesus is, and she comes uninvited into the house where he is dining with Simon. She loves Jesus. Is she in love with him? What does she want or expect from him?

She behaves with perfect impropriety. Bawling without restraint, eyes and nose streaming, she bends over Jesus's feet and washes off the street dust with her tears. Even with a basin and clean water, this act is intimate, to be performed by one's personal servant, wife, or daughter. She attempts to mop up the mess with her unbound hair—one more display of immodesty. Finally, she kisses Jesus's feet and pours expensive perfume over them from a lovely alabaster jar she has brought. Where exactly would a woman of the city, a sinner, get such a thing?

As host, Simon is anxious. He is angry at the woman, and he blames Jesus for not taking umbrage. What kind of holy man would allow such inappropriate intimacies?

But Jesus, who loves both Simon and the woman extravagantly, takes a different view. He receives the woman's love as the love it is, however inappropriately expressed. To be sure, he reframes her lavish outpouring. He sees in it the hospitality in which his host is lacking—a lack rooted perhaps in the same hypercritical propriety evident in Simon's attitude toward the uninvited woman.

Jesus turns to Simon first. He engages Simon's interest and intellect with a parable and then gently assesses Simon's behavior. Finally, with consummate tenderness, he turns to the woman. To her, this woman who loves him abundantly, messily, he extends forgiveness, assurance, and peace.

If there is anything I have learned in working with this topic of sexuality and with editing this issue, it is that we are all the anointing woman, and we are all Simon, and often we are both in the same moment. Young or old, married or single, female or male, gay or straight, we all struggle with our messy, not-to-be-contained sexuality—and with a sense of propriety that can overrun its usefulness.

As always, you will find both joy and pain in the pages of this issue of *Vision*. Here you will find evidence that when it comes to

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our sexuality, the church shares the brokenness of the world. I take comfort that the purpose of this journal is not to provide answers but to contribute to a lively dialog on important aspects of church practice.

Sexuality has many dimensions, and it affects the practices of the church in multifaceted ways. You will find traditional morality and traditional sexual values well represented in these pages. Through the ages, the church

has imperfectly but persistently stood courageously against sex for sale, sex outside the sacrament of marriage, sexual violence, sex for personal gratification or power. That courage is alive and well and being reformulated and reinterpreted for a new generation.

Sexuality is also part of our search for greater integration of faith and experience. We, the body of Christ, struggle with our sexuality, sometimes in the same old ways and sometimes in new and unsettling ways. There are areas of ambiguity and ambivalence. There are areas of disagreement. There are controversies aplenty in this delicate arena of our human being. In no other area of our lives are we more vulnerable, more exposed, with fewer defenses. All who contributed articles for this issue took risks, and I am grateful for their willingness to serve the church by thinking and writing with such care and honesty.

We determined at the outset that the divisive topic of homosexual sexuality should not dominate the issue as it has dominated so many recent discussions in church and society. We also felt that our work would be incomplete without an article on the topic. Sarah MacDonald has written a gentle, heartfelt piece making the point that until by grace we can claim who we are and make

honest confession, we cannot own our vocation and move on in discipleship. It is a remarkable statement by someone who loves the church deeply and also happens to be lesbian.

As educational institutions, we struggled with whether we should print this article. Words on paper put us at greater risk than do other forms of communication. Of course, as is the case with every article we print in *Vision*, the views are those of the author and do not represent the position of either Associated Mennonite Biblical Seminary or Canadian Mennonite University, where our confessions of faith provide a vital anchor for our theology and practice even as we work with a range of convictions similar to that in the church at large.

We do worry. We have vivid memories of past trauma. We fear repercussions. We do not wish to polarize the church further. We do not want to compromise our commitment to provide safe space for voices on all sides to be heard and respected in our classrooms and assemblies. We do not want to alienate those who serve the church through either the spiritual disciplines of study or the spiritual disciplines of giving. We find stories powerful but are unsure about how to evaluate them in theological and ethical work.

We considered publishing blank pages as a confession of where we are: afraid to print anything on this topic. Try as we did to present those blank pages in the spirit of lament, they did not communicate well. To some previewers they communicated a level of conflict within the institutions that does not exist. To others they communicated a protest against censorship. In the end, *Vision* is not about protest. *Vision* is about learning how to talk to one another in the church, even when we find empathy elusive.

As you read this issue, I invite you to let the anointing woman and Simon be your companions on the journey. Jesus loved them both and also called both beyond where they were. Our obsessive emotion and our hypercritical accusation, our abundant love and our thoughtful decency—all are bound up somehow in our yearning to know and be known, by the other and by God. Every article in this issue finds us, in some way, in Simon's uncomfortable living room. It is a living room we find in our hearts, in our congregations, and in our educational institutions. It is a living room in which Jesus meets us and calls us into the loving embrace of the one who created us in the image of God, male and female.

# Renarrating the gospel of sex

## A sermon on 2 Corinthians 5:16–21

David W. Boshart

**M**onths ago, when I was invited to give this sermon, I responded with blithe enthusiasm: “Sure—that would be fun!” But as spring became summer, and summer became fall, and fall became winter, every time I sat down to think about this message I felt paralyzed. In the history of the church’s conversations on

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sexuality, our record of bringing hope is overshadowed by our record of contributing to confusion. I kept trying to focus on my intention to bring a word of hope for wholeness. But I kept wondering, did I want to risk adding more words to the church’s dubious record?

This question sent me to a deeper level of inquiry. If the church’s discourse on sexuality is perennially flawed, our failure must be rooted in a distorted ontology. That is, what we believe is real, or most fundamental,

about sexuality is something we have yet to grasp. So with this sermon I want to examine the basics about our sexuality and then pose some questions that might frame our further conversation, questions that we can carry with us as we consider how to embody sexual wholeness in a broken world.

### Stuck in the story of the fall

Harry Huebner has aptly said, “What we say to one another on the way is the medium through which the world becomes the world to us. . . . When we tell a story or describe an event or preach a sermon or confess a creed, we are not describing facts; we are participating in a rendition . . . , a way of envisioning the world.”<sup>1</sup> Here’s where I think we go wrong in working with sexuality: on our way from creation to redemption, we get stuck in a

story of sexuality that is rooted in the fall. Our descriptions of sexuality take their cues more from a fallen narrative than from a redeemed one.

For example, when we hear the word *sex*, we tend to think “sexual act” more than “sexual being.” We fail to understand sexuality as something inherently human and instead think of sex as something applied from outside the human condition. In 1965, on the cusp of the so-called sexual revolution, Robert Farrar Capon wondered what reaction he would get if he were to write a book called “The Sexual Life of a Nun.” “How many would be able to see that, on the real meaning of the word sexual, it is a perfectly proper title?” he wondered. “For a nun’s life is utterly sexual. She thinks as a woman, prays as a woman, reacts as a woman and commits herself as a woman. No monk . . . ever embraced his life for her kind of reasons. He couldn’t if he wanted to. Of course she omits, as an offering to God, one particular expression of her sexuality; but it is only one out of a hundred.

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No,” Capon concludes, “the sexual congress she does not attend is not life’s most important meeting, all the marriage manuals to the contrary notwithstanding.”<sup>2</sup>

Another sure sign of the power we ascribe to the fall story is the persistence with which we interpret Genesis 3 as prescriptive rather than indicative, as a story about what should be rather than about what is. Nowhere in the first two creation accounts is there a hint of gender hierarchy; they describe a complementary, hip-to-hip mutuality between woman and man. Yet in our temptation to be like God, we trust the voice of the snake, who in myriad tantalizing ways tells us that the fallen narrative of sexuality—of male domination and female subordination—might be a faster way to get where we think we want to be.

A third sign of getting stuck in the fall is that we are afraid to trust the normative story of incarnation. Perhaps we are afraid it won’t stand up in the world. Perhaps Western rationalism’s skepticism has made us afraid to tell our story, for fear that others will ridicule our naïveté. Scientific ways of knowing have godlike powers in our culture. Because in Jesus’s incarnation, death, and resurrection God has not made the case in scientifically verifiable

ways, we fear that we as God's diplomats have no case either. We let the story of fallen sexuality play out on the world's stage, until we see a flaw and then jump in with correction. But because our response is reactive, we tell only the parts of our story that fit the chink in the world's armor.

The fallen world insists on sexual liberty, and rather than offer our own version of sexual wholeness, the church has told a story of repression. To a world intrigued with provocative clothing that says, "I dare you to look," the church has told a story that repudiates the flesh.

To a world that tells its story of "friends with benefits," the church's story has been "Good girls don't." Good girls don't—until the wedding night, when all of a sudden those same good girls should.

To a world that tells a story of sexual frustration bursting at the fly to be set free, the church has settled for a flaccid story that each of us should deal with sexual frustration on our own. And we do—until it finally bursts forth in our victimization of the vulnerable one close at hand.

To a world that tells a story that men and women can only understand each other in competitive and adversarial terms, the church has gone back to the story of the fall, as though Genesis 3 is the best we can hope for in this life.

The bottom line is, we are afraid of the place in our story where spirituality intersects with sexuality. Let that be our first confession as we deal with this subject.

### **Risks of a reactionary posture**

When our posture toward the world's story of sexuality is reactionary, we are quick to conform to two ways of thinking. The first is reductionism.

In our sex-saturated society, we are intrigued by things done in secret, mesmerized by mystery. But in the West, fascination with mystery is resolved through a reductionism that dissects any whole into its component parts and then claims to understand its secrets. Consider the cover of the February issue of a popular magazine: it promises to give you the mechanics necessary for a mind-blowing sexual experience in time for Valentine's Day. This approach to sexuality is hostile to a biblical epistemology, to scriptural ways of



knowing. If the biblical creation story is about anything, it is about completeness, about a whole greater than the sum of its parts. Rather than reducing this unfathomable reality to mechanics, a sexual wholeness informed by the scriptures reaches all the way up in mystery to the image of God.

In contrast, the world shows us again and again that its story of reductionism is fatally flawed and leads to the madness of mutually assured destruction. Philip Yancey recalls a great scene from the movie *A Beautiful Mind*. The brilliant but socially inept mathematician approaches an attractive woman in a bar. "Listen," he tells her, "I don't have the words to say whatever it is that's necessary to get you into bed, so can we just pretend I said those

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things and skip to the part where we exchange bodily fluids?" The slap she administers to his face is an invitation to learn the limits of reductionism.<sup>3</sup>

The second substitute for our faith's story is a gnostic dualism that divides spirit and flesh, seeing spirit as good and matter as corrupt. In his brilliant article, "Berry's Vindication of the Flesh," Jason Peters describes how Wendell Berry skillfully speaks the normative story into a world that has accommodated this dualism. "Jayber Crow, the town barber, sees people who love 'good crops, good gardens, good livestock,' sitting through 'world-condemning sermons'; he hears 'the wickedness of the flesh . . . preached from the pulpit' while 'young husbands and wives and courting couples' sit 'thigh to thigh, full of yearning and joy'; he puzzles over a religion that scorns 'the beauty and goodness of this world.' He asks whether 'Jesus put on our flesh so that we might despise it.'"<sup>4</sup> Jesus's incarnation of the fullness of God—God in flesh—has as much to do with our sexual nature as with our spiritual nature. The embodied truth of the redeemed is that wholeness has come in all things as all is reconciled through Jesus.

### **A story of new creation**

Today the church faces an opportune moment. As postmodernity rejects the overreaching claims of science and positivist philosophy, a renewed hunger for the wisdom of story emerges. People display a growing readiness to hear a storied message that contrasts

with the emptiness, isolation, and fragmented sexual exchange of a consumerist society. We need only be prepared to tell the truth of our story—our whole story. But if we are to be heard, we must

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tell the honest-to-God truth, because postmodern people have hypersensitive crap detectors. And to tell a truthful and whole story, we will need to embody it.

We have been given words that express our understanding of the way the world really is. The apostle Paul tells us that God created a good world and that the kingdom of God is the fulfillment of that world: “From now on . . . , we regard no one from a human point of view; even though we once knew Christ from a human point of view, we know him no longer in that way. So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation [that is more basic and more real than the fallen creation]: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new! All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation” (2 Cor. 5:16–18).

We could interpret this passage to mean that because we no longer view Christ from a human point of view, his humanity is unimportant. Then we make Jesus androgynous, neither male nor female. We desexualize and dehumanize him; in effect, we disincarnate him. But “if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation.” This statement in the present tense suggests that the new creation is taking place in the flesh, that it is restoring God’s people, redeeming us from the fall that also took place in the flesh. This story of flesh-and-blood redemption is our normative story.

### **Questions for moving toward a redeemed sexuality**

The way the truth of that story is now seen is in those who embody it, make the case for it, and live as ambassadors communicating it as a message from a foreign land. As we enter this time of reflecting on sexuality, I want to pose some questions to move us beyond being stuck in the fall story, so that we can embrace a sexuality that is redeemed in the flesh.

First, how is it that we in the church say so much about sexuality and gender from the perspective of circumstantial rather than

foundational biblical material? How is it that where gender is concerned, the church has sometimes been satisfied to take every thought captive to Paul? Why have we allowed Paul's good theologizing to carry an authority unscreened by the incarnation? Or how is it that we read a fallen reality as prescriptive rather than as indicative of the fall—and then assume we can't do any better this side of heaven?

Second, how is it that we are so well versed in the politics and social science theories of sexuality but have so little to say about a

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view of gender and sexuality that emphasizes partnership, mutuality, and reconciliation? Almost every major popular movement that gets society-wide attention frames issues of gender in moralistic, adversarial, or competitive terms. The superior sensibility of women and the relational incompetence of males is the dominant fare on our television and movie screens. How is it that the church doesn't ask the media to stop portraying us that way?

Third, how is it that in practice Christians embody a story of sexual fidelity that looks more like the fallen world than like new

creation? According to current studies, 70 percent of evangelicals in the U.S. say they have had premarital sex. Divorce rates are similar among evangelicals and in the population at large; in fact, the rate among evangelicals is a bit higher. Consumption of pornography is purportedly no different among Christians than in the rest of the population, and 40 percent of clergy responding to a national survey report that they struggle with pornography. In the Christian world, plenty of evidence indicates that we have some distance to go toward embodying the new-creation story.

### **Renarrating a story of sexual wholeness**

So what does this reintegrated new-creation story sound like? The church needs to have much more conversation on this question. It will require courage and humility. If the fullness of God was pleased to dwell in Jesus, then Jesus is our way of knowing what is real. For sexuality to be Christian, all our understandings about

sexuality must be taken captive to Christ, God in flesh. Is it possible to renarrate a new-creation wholeness? That is *the* challenge the world's story poses to our story.

In closing I offer an example of what this normative story renarrated may sound like. In her 1937 novel, *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, Zora Neale Hurston wrote the following description using words that are at once earthy and otherworldly: "She couldn't make him look like just any other man to her. He looked like the love thoughts of women. He seemed to be crushing scent out of the world with his footsteps. Crushing aromatic herbs with every step he took. He was a glance from God."<sup>5</sup>

To imagine a sexuality that reflects the image of God, our eyes need to be watching God more than our ears listen to the snake. The mark of the faithful church is the defiant refusal to live by the terms the fall has set for humanity. The church is called to be a people whose words and message make a case for the possibility of redemption on the way to new creation. Then we will be people who look deep into the eyes of the other until we see there a glance from God.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Harry J. Huebner, *Echoes of the Word: Theological Ethics as Rhetorical Practice* (Kitchener, ON: Pandora Press, 2005), 1.

<sup>2</sup> Robert Farrar Capon, *Bed and Board: Plain Talk about Marriage* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1965), 49.

<sup>3</sup> Philip Yancey, *Rumors of Another World: What on Earth Are We Missing?* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2003), 76.

<sup>4</sup> Jason Peters, "Wendell Berry's Vindication of the Flesh," *Christianity and Literature* 56, no. 2 (2007): 317–32; quoting Wendell Berry, *Jayber Crow: A Novel* (Washington, DC: Counterpoint, 2000), 161.

<sup>5</sup> Zora Neale Hurston, *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (Philadelphia: J. P. Lippincott, 1937), 101.

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# Biblical perspectives on sexuality

Steven Schweitzer

**M**any readers of the Bible are surprised to discover that it contains more than one opinion on a variety of issues. The church has often tried to identify *the* biblical view of a particular topic, but rarely do our scriptures speak with a single voice. Instead, the Bible contains multiple voices—an ensemble or chorus—sometimes producing harmony and sometimes discordant reverberations. Sexuality in the Bible is no exception. It is not presented in a monolithic perspective but in several positions often in tension with one another. We will survey this variety by looking at a few representative and classic texts about sexuality in the Old and New Testaments. Then I will offer some conclusions to guide us as we approach these perspectives on sexuality.<sup>1</sup>

## Genesis

At the beginning of the biblical narrative, in Genesis 1, gender differentiation is understood as part of God's ordered cosmos: God creates *ha-adam* ("the human") in two forms, one male and one

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female. Both are created in the image of God without qualification. While theologians have long debated about the precise scope of the *imago Dei*, scholars now argue persuasively that the language of Genesis 1:26 echoes formulae found throughout the ancient Near East describing the kings as the "image" and "likeness" of the gods.<sup>2</sup> Thus, Genesis 1 uses royal language, democratizes it, and applies it to all humanity—of both genders. According to Genesis 1, the king is not the unique repre-

sentative of the gods; all humans reflect God's image. In a recent book, David Carr has argued that we should press this insight further: the human body itself—both male and female—should be

seen in this story as “a mark of our connection to God” rather than a “sign of human limitation” or “a mark of slavery.” Our bodies are the means by which God’s representatives on earth (all of humanity) can perform their royal functions, as the language in Genesis 1:28–30 makes clear.<sup>3</sup>

Genesis 2 contains a different version of the creation story, with the LORD God acting as one who sculpts the human from the earth—*adam* from the *adamah* (v. 7). Thus, the “earthling” is connected to the “earth.” The “image of God” language is absent; instead, God breathes into *ha-adam* the “breath of life,” causing *ha-adam* to become a *nephesh*. *Nephesh* is often understood as “soul,” but the Hebrew word does not designate a metaphysical component in a physical shell. The concept is more holistic, applying to the whole person.<sup>4</sup> In the Old Testament, “the human being does not have a body. He or she is body.”<sup>5</sup>

The two creation accounts agree that physicality is an essential part of being human, but Genesis 2 adds a concern for relationship. The LORD God observes that “it is not good” that *ha-adam* should be alone, so God intends to create a “helper” (*ezer*).<sup>6</sup> When animals prove inadequate in this role, God forms a woman (*ishah*) from the man (*ish*), and gender differentiation enters the picture. It seems that the “only way for God to create an equal of the first human was to begin with a bodily part of him.”<sup>7</sup>

Although other types of sexuality beyond gender are not mentioned up to this point, the explanation of subsequent cultural practice in Genesis 2:24 is explicit. Sexuality within marriage (“a man clings to his wife”) exists because men and women are created for relationship. We notice that the physical—sexual—body is seen in a positive light, and that consummation produces something new: the two become one flesh. The unashamed nakedness noted in the final verse has been understood both literally—they were unclothed—and metaphorically—they were entirely vulnerable and transparent with each other. The relevance of this double meaning is evident when these utopian conditions are undone in chapter 3. Our experience ever since demonstrates a struggle to recapture such unashamed nakedness between men and women.

In turning to Genesis 3, we note a striking absence in the text.<sup>8</sup> The word *sin* is not used until Genesis 4, in reference to Cain’s

anger (v. 7). Whatever happens in the “fall,” the text of Genesis does not label the humans’ disobedience (3:11) “original sin.”<sup>9</sup> Also missing is any explicit connection between the woman’s actions and sexual intercourse. Although many have seen allusions to sexuality in the language of Genesis 3, Carr correctly notes that the issue at stake is “the knowledge of good and evil,” that the fruit of that tree was desirable “to make one wise.”<sup>10</sup>

Relationships—between animals and humans, between the earth and humans, and between human beings—are the subject of the curses in Genesis 3:14–19. Deficient and strained gender relations, including those between husband and wife, are part of the new and shattered world, but sexuality itself is not “cursed” in Genesis 3:14–19. Many contemporary treatments of this text say that sexuality has been distorted or twisted as a result of God’s statements, or that the fall has perverted something God created to be good, that human sexuality is now part of this

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“fallen world.” I would suggest that the relationships between men and women—including sexuality—have been altered from the idyllic presentations in Genesis 1 and 2, but that sexuality itself is not vilified in Genesis 3.

This point bears repeating, given the long history of Christian condemnation of sexuality and the general embarrassment about it: sexuality is not sinful; sexuality is not condemned; sexuality is not the problem. The degradation of male-female relationships produces the corruption of sexuality, not the other way around. Somehow we have believed that marginalizing or even banishing sexuality will allow us to have ordered relationships between women and men, which in turn will help humans create an ordered society. But we have it backward. We need healthy relationships so that we can have healthy sexuality—one of many qualities of human relationships. In other words, sexuality is not a means to an end but has value on its own.

### **Songs of Songs**

Continuing this positive perspective on human sexuality in the Old Testament is the Song of Songs. While this collection of

erotic love poems stands out in the Bible, the ancient Near East produced a multitude of comparative compositions of a similar genre and content.<sup>11</sup> Given the popularity of the genre, the question is not, why is *this* in my Bible? but, why is there *only one of these* in my Bible?

The book was a favorite of Christians—especially monks and mystics—from the early church until the early modern period. The erotic nature of the text had been allegorized, read not as a love story between a man and a woman but as an expression of love between God and the church or between God and the individual believer. As biblical scholars moved away from an allegorical reading to a historical reading—as a love song between two humans—the book lost its appeal. Christians and Jews have had a long history of redirecting its sexual images; when asked to read this poetry as dealing with real people in sexual situations, they avoided the book.<sup>12</sup> This brief historical review reminds us that the issue with the sexual language in the Song of Songs is with us, not with the text. The text is sexual and celebrates sexuality—and we should, too.

The Song contains many exchanges between a woman and a man, with comments by other voices interspersed throughout the poetic narrative. While this book is often used as an example of the beauty of sexuality in marriage, little in the book suggests that the two individuals are married.<sup>13</sup> The woman and the man each celebrate the physicality of the other in endless metaphors describing body parts and appearance. He alludes to his sexual arousal (5:2), and to her genitals using the metaphor of a garden (4:11–15; 5:1), but she is the one who speaks most about orgasm and sexual penetration (3:1–4; 4:16; 5:3–8; 7:10–8:4), and she longs for their hidden love to become public (7:10–8:4).

She is sexual, she is passionate, and she enjoys her intimacy with her lover. The intimacy she desires is physical connection but also an emotional and interpersonal bond. She calls her lover a friend (5:16) and expresses her desire to be a seal upon his heart (8:6). This biblical text is a positive portrayal of a sexually confident woman, who shatters the categories provided by the ancient dichotomy, which asks us to classify all women as either virgins or whores. Sexually confident women may threaten males (and other women), but this poetry suggests that they should not relinquish



their sexuality in response to oppressive societal, cultural, and supposedly Christian norms.

The Song revels in passion, physicality, and sexuality in both men and women. It stands alone in the Bible in its lengthy, explicit affirmation of sexual intercourse. It does not mention procreation as a justification for the act. The woman does offer

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one caution three times: “Do not arouse or awaken love until it is ready” (2:7; 3:5; 8:4), but never provides more details or criteria by which to judge when it is appropriate to enliven love. The uncertainty in knowing how to evaluate the Song is not resolved by the enigma of its concluding chapter. As Carr notes, “the Song ends, without any clear resolution. An American movie would have

the lovers riding into sunset. A more tragic approach would have them separated forever. But the Song teases us with a relationship in limbo. The love is still clandestine, the lovers not yet together. . . . Mutual desire, risk, joining, separation—all of these mix in this ambiguous ending to an elusive song.”<sup>14</sup>

The Song remains a difficult text to handle well. While many prefer to ignore it, allegorize it, or relegate it to reading for engaged couples in premarital counseling, as an anticipation of what good sex can be like in marriage, I suggest that it affirms sexuality, period. Both in its obsession with the physical and in its quest for intimacy that stretches beyond intercourse, it promotes sexuality. In fact, as Carr again correctly observes, the text “describes yearning for and celebration of lovemaking without ever clearly describing the lovemaking itself.”<sup>15</sup> The Song is more about the *context* in which love can be “as strong as death” (8:6). It offers a view that intercourse is only one factor among many that contribute to authentic sexuality. While some may be tempted to think of the Song as suggesting foreplay, I prefer to think of its advice for a more holistic view to sexuality: this is not foreplay with the goal of intercourse (a means to an end) but passionate desire to be enjoyed on its own. The Song promotes sexuality for sexuality’s sake, and for the sake of both human partners, and not in service of some greater good, whether it be procreation or the proper restraint of desire within marriage.<sup>16</sup>

## Jesus

In the Gospels,<sup>17</sup> Jesus interacts with women and elevates them far above the status provided for them by the cultural norms of his time. But Jesus says little about sexuality, and the suggestion that the celibate, unmarried, childless Jesus of the New Testament is “not a model for active sexuality, marriage, or family” seems harsh, but nonetheless correct.<sup>18</sup> Indeed, Jesus’s words and actions regarding sexuality are ambiguous at best.

The Gospel of John (2:1–11) notes Jesus’s presence at a wedding, and his miracle there becomes his first “sign,” but does this narrative really “validate” weddings?<sup>19</sup> Jesus also affirms marriage and condemns divorce and adultery (Mark 10:2–12//Matt. 19:3–10//Luke 16:18; and Matt. 5:27–32, which includes the exception clause for *porneia*—sexual immorality—in agreement with Matt. 19:9). He forgives an adulteress, with encouragement to “go your way and from now on do not sin again” (John 7:53–8:11). While rejecting divorce—and likely without the qualifiers found only in Matthew—Jesus mentions the possibility of women divorcing their husbands (Mark 10:12 only), something clearly at odds with the tradition, if not unique within his context.<sup>20</sup> But this says more about his valuing of women than about his view of sexuality.

Jesus even goes so far as to redefine adultery. It is not only the act of intercourse but also lustful desire itself that is an issue (Matt. 5:27–28). His hyperbolic advice to remove the offending part of the body does little to assist us practically in controlling our passions, which have just been condemned.

Jesus redefines family obligations (Mark 3:31–35//Matt. 12:46–50//Luke 8:19–22; Luke 14:25–26) and suggests that remaining unmarried as a eunuch is a special gift but not a requirement for those desiring to be numbered among his followers (Matt. 19:10–12). In a rare statement on conditions and events after the future day of resurrection, he says that they “neither marry nor are given in marriage” (Mark 12:25//Matt. 22:30; the parallel of Luke 20:34–35 is even more negative on the contrast between the present deficient practice of marriage and its absence in the future).

Thus, in the Gospels, Jesus seems to affirm marriage and celibacy (though not without some ambiguity), while condemning divorce, adultery, and lust. But beyond this, we find no extensive treatment of sexuality in the teachings of Jesus.

## Paul

In contrast, Paul writes extensively about issues related to sexuality. One of Paul's earliest letters, 1 Thessalonians, desires holiness for believers and rejection of "fornication" or "sexual immorality" (*porneia*), without any examples or further description (4:3–8).

The apocalyptic worldview that undergirds this letter is also found in 1 Corinthians 5–7, in which several other concerns come together. First, the Corinthians seem to have a spiritual superiority complex. Among them are at least two main groups, both accepting the Hellenistic view that the spiritual is good and the physical is evil: the libertines who say, "The body is irrelevant, so I can do whatever I want," and the ascetics who say, "The body is irrelevant, so I must repress it."

To combat the libertines, Paul rebukes them in 5:1–13 for celebrating the incident of the man sleeping with his "father's wife" (probably his stepmother); provides a list of sins, including

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sexual ones, that exclude one from the kingdom of God (6:9–11); and claims that sexual intercourse with a prostitute causes the two parties to "become one flesh" (6:12–17). In 6:9, Paul describes two groups, *malakoi* and *arsenokoitai* [the NRSV translates these terms "male prostitutes" and "sodomites"], using terminology that is far from clear; in fact, Paul seems to have coined the second word.<sup>21</sup> Many scholars conclude that these terms do not refer to homosexual actions in general but to the practice of pederasty (older men and younger boys) common among the Hellenistic upper class.<sup>22</sup> Paul concludes with

an affirmation of the holistic person, akin to the view we saw in the Old Testament. Sexual sins affect the whole person, not just the body (6:18), a conviction that presupposes a Jewish view and not a dualistic Hellenistic understanding of anthropology. Thus, Paul rejects an "anything goes" sexuality.

To combat asceticism and in response to the ascetics' maxim "It is good not to touch a woman," Paul asserts that marriage is not a sin (7:28). He maintains that both husband and wife should honor conjugal rights and not deprive each other except by

mutual agreement for prayer (7:1–7). In contrast to typical Jewish and Hellenistic writings of the time, Paul thus not only elevates the status of women within the marriage but also affirms that sex is not a sin. However, throughout chapter 7, Paul expresses two additional views: being celibate is the preferred choice for both men and women, especially since the return of Jesus is imminent, and that marriage functions as a context for sexual release, especially for those who lack self-control. Both views contribute to the idea that sexuality is a hindrance to spirituality (7:32–35).

Paul further states that the Lord commands that women and men should not divorce their spouses (reflecting the tradition in Mark 10:2); additionally, Paul expresses his opinion—and not on the basis of the Lord’s sayings—that believers should remain married to unbelievers if the unbelievers are willing. Paul sees such marriage as an opportunity to “save” or “win” the spouse (7:10–16). Paul also states that the believer in such a marriage makes the unbelieving spouse and their children “holy” (7:14), but he does not explain the meaning of these enigmatic words or how this choice may affect the inclusion of spouse and children in the kingdom of God.

The sexuality issues raised by Paul in Romans 1 bring to a close our discussion of his views. The focus of the chapter is to demonstrate how the Gentiles are guilty before God (the Jews will be the focus of chapters 2–3). Paul claims Gentiles have access to God through creation, but they did not honor God (1:18–23). In response, God “gave them up” to three things: to degrading their bodies, degrading passions, and a debased mind. These three negatives have, in turn, produced sexual immorality, among other things. Thus, Gentiles exhibit sexual immorality, a sign that they are disobedient and will be judged (1:28–32). What is clear in Paul’s language here are references to homosexual and lesbian activities; what is not clear (just as in 1 Corinthians 6:9) is the type or scope of these activities. In his argument “from nature,” Paul strongly echoes other Hellenistic Jewish writers of the time, who claim that homosexuality—especially and explicitly pederasty—is a Greek practice in which Jews do not participate.<sup>23</sup> Thus, although much of Paul’s theology of sexuality—especially his preference for celibacy and ideas about suppressing the passions—is “consistent with advice offered by Hellenistic moral-

ists,”<sup>24</sup> in his rejection of homosexual behavior (of some type), Paul is thoroughly Jewish or (perhaps better) Hellenistic Jewish in his outlook.<sup>25</sup> This Jewish concern is almost certainly based on the Holiness Code in Leviticus 18 and 20, which also rejects homosexual behavior and incest. The Greek translation known as the Septuagint uses some of the terms Paul uses here. It is worth noting that just as Paul affirms the wife’s conjugal rights and a wife’s ability to divorce, Paul also mentions lesbian sexual activity (of some type)—although as a negative practice. Thus, Paul is consistent in affirming the equality of women with men in terms of sexuality, something rare in antiquity.

Paul seems to be expressing his views on sexuality within the cultural context of his day, sometimes agreeing with conventional

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wisdom and practices, and sometimes rejecting them; sometimes sounding like a Greek philosopher and sometimes like a Hellenistic Jew; sometimes upholding marriage and sometimes promoting celibacy as the ideal. Other influences on his views include the holistic view of the person and the rejection of some type of homosexual behavior in continuity with Old Testament provisions, his belief in the apocalyptic and imminent return

of Jesus, and his overwhelming concern to create ordered communities of believers (evident in all his letters, but especially those to the church at Corinth) so that the Roman Empire does not become interested in suppressing the Christian movement (Rom. 13:1–7). If we have any hope of understanding Paul’s controversial statements on sexuality (whether heterosexual or homosexual), we must understand him in his ancient cultural context.

The New Testament “does not offer a comprehensive and systematic sexual ethics”;<sup>26</sup> it is “also remarkable for its lack of interest in aesthetics, pleasure, or the erotic.”<sup>27</sup> Neither Jesus nor Paul approaches the overt affirmation of sexuality found in Genesis and in the Song of Songs.

## Conclusion

I conclude with some reflections that may help us discuss sexuality constructively in a way that takes the Bible seriously.

1. The Bible contains multiple perspectives on sexuality. To reduce them to a singular or dominant voice is to miss the complexity and honesty of the biblical texts. Recognizing the diversity of views makes us sensitive to theological development within the canon of scripture itself. Perhaps this model of preserving differing opinions should be a model for our own theological processes.

2. The biblical perspectives on sexuality must be understood in their ancient contexts—literary, historical, cultural, social, political, philosophical, and anthropological, to name a few.

3. The Bible associates sexuality with procreation and marriage, perhaps obviously so. However, there is an interpretive choice about whether sexuality is a good by itself, or if sexuality has value only in the service of other concerns such as preserving fidelity in marriage or allowing for appropriate sexual release or promoting procreation. I would argue that the Old Testament favors the former, while the New Testament encourages the latter.

4. The Bible assumes heterosexuality is normal. When they do appear in brief comments, homosexual actions (with some ambiguity as to their precise nature) are viewed negatively in both Old and New Testaments. The reasons for rejection of homosexual behavior appear to reflect common cultural understandings in the ancient Near East and especially Hellenistic Jewish worldviews, in opposition to Hellenistic practices. More must be done to understand the cultural contexts in which homosexual practices are being addressed in the Bible, if we are to make sense of the biblical material for our contemporary cultural contexts.

5. The Bible rejects sexual immorality, sometimes with examples (incest and adultery), but the precise scope of what constitutes *porneia* is often ambiguous.

6. The Bible affirms that humans—male and female—are sexual beings, with physical bodies that do matter. Humans are not eternal superior spirits trapped in inferior material forms; the body, physicality, and sexuality have value.

7. The Bible connects sexuality and spirituality. They are intertwined within each person and in humans' relationships with one another and with the divine.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> For an assessment of sexuality from an Anabaptist perspective, compare the essays in *Sexuality: God's Gift*, ed. Anne Krabill Hershberger (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1999).

<sup>2</sup> Bernard F. Batto, "The Divine Sovereign: The Image of God in the Priestly Creation Account," in *David and Zion: Biblical Studies in Honor of J. J. M. Roberts*, ed. Bernard F. Batto and Kathryn L. Roberts (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2004), 143–86.

<sup>3</sup> How this royal language associated with humanity relates to creation care and environmental ethics is another issue. Genesis 1 presents humans as divine representatives, empowered by the deity to act *appropriately*. This is the basis from which to discuss Christian ecology claiming to derive from the opening chapter of the Bible.

<sup>4</sup> In Hellenistic philosophy, especially in Stoicism and Platonism, the standard view of the human being was of a superior metaphysical "soul" trapped in an inferior physical prison.

<sup>5</sup> Raymond F. Collins, *Sexual Ethics and the New Testament: Behavior and Belief* (New York: Crossroad Publishing, 2000), 138.

<sup>6</sup> Phyllis Trible correctly notes that in almost all occurrences this word refers to God as the "helper" of humanity (*God and the Rhetoric of Sexuality* [Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1987], 90; 140, n. 13). Thus, arguments from this verse suggesting that the word implies subordination of women to men have no basis, given its strong association as a way of understanding the human-divine relationship.

<sup>7</sup> David M. Carr, *The Erotic Word: Sexuality, Spirituality, and the Bible* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), 31.

<sup>8</sup> The complete castigation of women as evil, temptresses, and the cause of all sin in the world is also something not found in the text of Genesis. This patriarchal, misogynistic, and oppressive misreading of the text has no justification in the text itself, despite the way it is interpreted with a greater emphasis on Eve's culpability in 1 Tim. 2:8–15.

<sup>9</sup> The fourth century theologian Augustine is usually credited (or blamed) for developing this doctrine, largely under the influence of Paul's comments in Romans 5 and his own struggles with sexuality (see, e.g., "Letter 6 to Atticus").

<sup>10</sup> Carr, *Erotic Word*, 40.

<sup>11</sup> Michael V. Fox, *The Song of Songs and the Ancient Egyptian Love Songs* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1985).

<sup>12</sup> More details are provided by Carr, *Erotic Word*, 139–51.

<sup>13</sup> The woman is called "my sister, my bride" (4:9–12; 5:1), but no one wishes to interpret the first label literally. These are common terms of endearment between lovers in ancient Near Eastern texts (see Carr, *Erotic Word*, 119). The wedding day of Solomon is mentioned in 3:6–11 and he is invoked again in 8:11–12, but most scholars reject the notion that the male lover is Solomon, who appears as a third party in the plot.

<sup>14</sup> Carr, *Erotic Word*, 137.

<sup>15</sup> Carr, *Erotic Word*, 115.

<sup>16</sup> In addition to sexual intercourse's function as a sacrament within marriage, these two concerns are two classic "goods of marriage" as defined by Augustine, who further defined sexual intercourse without an intention for procreation as stemming from lust ("The Good of Marriage"). John Chrysostom, patriarch of Constantinople and contemporary of Augustine, agreed that procreation and chastity were the primary goods of marriage, but in contrast to Augustine, he argued for the superiority of fidelity, since the commands in Genesis regarding procreation were shown to be inferior, given the existence of childless couples and the overpopulation of the world in his time ("Sermon on Marriage").

<sup>17</sup> In this discussion of Jesus and sexuality I am not concerned about the Historical Jesus but rather with Jesus as he is presented by the four Gospels.

<sup>18</sup> Luke Timothy Johnson and Mark D. Jordan, "Christianity," in *Sex, Marriage, and*

*Family in World Religions*, ed. Don S. Browning, M. Christian Green, and John Witte Jr. (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006), 79.

<sup>19</sup> Jesus performs many common cultural actions, such as attending synagogue and the Jewish festivals in Jerusalem. Could his presence at the wedding also reflect a cultural expectation, without somehow “blessing” the wedding ceremony (which is different from his direct affirmations of marriage)?

<sup>20</sup> Collins, *Sexual Ethics*, 23, 25; and John P. Meier, “The Historical Jesus and the Historical Law: Some Problems within the Problem,” *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 65, no. 1 (January 2003): 52–79.

<sup>21</sup> For more discussion of this verse and terminology, see Collins, *Sexual Ethics*, 86–92.

<sup>22</sup> Collins, *Sexual Ethics*, 90–92.

<sup>23</sup> Examples include the *Letter of Aristeeas* (151–52), Pseudo-Phocylides (175–206), *Sibylline Oracles* (3.185–87, 3.594–600), Philo (*On Abraham* 135–36; *Special Laws* 2.50, 3.37–40), Josephus (*Against Apion* 2.25). See Collins, *Sexual Ethics*, 134–42.

<sup>24</sup> Collins, *Sexual Ethics*, 127, n. 42.

<sup>25</sup> Johnson and Jordan, “Christianity,” 83.

<sup>26</sup> Collins, *Sexual Ethics*, 191.

<sup>27</sup> Johnson and Jordan, “Christianity,” 83.

## About the author

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## Cohabitation: What is at stake?

Sara Wenger Shenk

**I** like metaphors. They help us reach for the intangibles behind the numbers. Yesterday a colleague sent a message about the impact on his family of the recent flooding in Iowa. His sister-in-law had gone to her elderly mother's house at 11 p.m. as water was beginning to fill the basement. By 5 a.m., it was coming into the first floor of the house. My colleague's brother tried to drive to the house then, but it was too late. He parked on high ground and walked through the relentlessly deepening water. By the time he reached the house, the water was waist-deep. He and his wife and her mother were stranded there until 7 a.m., when they crawled out a second-story window onto the roof and into a waiting boat.

The 2005 U.S. census reported that 4.85 million couples were cohabiting, up more than 1,000 percent from 1960, when there

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were 439,000 such couples. More than two-thirds of married couples in the USA now say they lived together before marriage. And while the cohabiting population spans all ages, the average age of those who cohabit is between twenty-five and thirty-four.

When I was a young adult, my community regarded people who chose to "shack up" as morally deficient. They were the exception—hippies or rebellious types who thumbed their noses at church and family. Now a quick scan of people I know who are cohabiting, or have done so recently, includes a daughter of a seminary colleague, a daughter of a trustee, a male former colleague, a former student, a nephew, a daughter of a local pastor, and various young adult friends.

Comparing this dramatic increase in cohabitation to a flood has its limitations. For one thing, the flood image seems to pre-judge as negative the impact of this rapid increase in numbers of

unmarried couples living together. Floods are generally seen as destructive, but opinions vary about the long-term impact of men and women living together out of wedlock.

What intrigues me about the flood metaphor is the way the water rises almost imperceptibly, yet rapidly and pervasively, effecting massive change. The rising water is ignored at the community's peril. My sense is that we've managed to avoid looking at the dramatic rise in cohabitation, hardly stopping to fathom its impact on our communities. Is there peril? If so, who or what is at risk?

### **The broader context of cohabitation**

Carrie Miles, an organizational consultant for troubled workplaces, has found that clients are eager to rush to solutions when the most important task is to slow down enough to accurately define the problem and its causes. She observes that the past hundred years have brought massive change to the vital human institutions of love, sex, marriage, and family, particularly in the developed West. Some of these changes have been positive, but many are proving to be destructive of marriage, the well-being of children, and the happiness of individuals. Miles continues with the observation that in jumping too quickly to solutions, liberal Christians have usually prescribed more freedom, and conservative Christians have attempted to shore up the old sexual morality and gender norms. In the process, churches have lost credibility—either by too easily accommodating social change or by too reactively resisting it.<sup>1</sup>

What does this observation have to do with cohabitation? Cohabitation is sometimes used to refer to men and women who simply share the same living space but are not sexually intimate. It is also used to refer to the casual sex and “hook-up” culture of many university coed dorms. But for the purposes of this article, I'll work with the common understanding reflected in this Wikipedia definition: cohabitation is an emotionally and physically intimate relationship that includes a common living place and exists without legal or religious sanction. An article in *USA Today* (July 2005) suggested that cohabitation is replacing dating and has become a regularized way to test the marital waters. There's also evidence that “serial cohabitation,” living with one

and then another partner, is increasing. Researchers suggest that many singles see cohabitating as inevitable, matter of course.

Many authorities observe that unmarried cohabitation has become a major social phenomenon in recent decades, and that few changes in marriage and family patterns are more dramatic. Reasons for cohabiting vary widely, as do levels of commitment associated with it. Among the reasons cited are these: People are delaying marriage, waiting an average of fifteen years after puberty. The culture at large increasingly views living together as a

**Liberal Christians prescribe more freedom, and conservatives attempt to shore up the old sexual morality. The churches lose credibility—by too easily accommodating social change or by too reactively resisting it.**

normal transitional stage between singleness and marriage; the earlier stigma is largely gone. As noted above, young people want to test relationships before entering marriage, and the wide use of contraceptives effectively separates sex from reproduction.

Additionally, some people are fearful of commitment, because of the failed marriages they've observed; more and more people grow up in families that have experienced multiple divorces and remarriages, so they conclude that love is fleeting. Criticism of marriage abounds; many see it as imposing

unpleasant limitations. The media communicate an emphasis on the values of autonomy and freedom, often favoring self-gratification over responsibility to others in community.

Practical considerations may also factor among reasons to cohabit. Consolidating two households into one has financial benefits, while the costs associated with a wedding and establishing a household as a married couple may seem prohibitive. The merging of families, now often involving stepchildren and complex family dynamics, is a daunting undertaking. Economic and social marginalization of groups of people seems to increase the proportion of those opting for cohabitation rather than marriage.

In their *New York Times* bestseller *The Unexpected Legacy of Divorce*, Judith Wallerstein and her coauthors observe that our divorce culture has fundamentally changed the nature of courtship. Courtship's goals are not clear, because people tend to fear rather than expect commitment. They try to avoid facing their fear of commitment by moving in together and pretending it's not

for keeps. Cohabitation feels safer than legal marriage because escape is easier.<sup>2</sup>

Amid the complexity of the topic we can identify at least five patterns of cohabitation: (1) a temporary, casual arrangement of convenience for economic reasons or for protection; (2) an extension of an affectionate, steady relationship meant to continue as long as it's enjoyable; (3) a trial marriage for couples considering making their relationship permanent; (4) a temporary alternative to marriage for people who plan to marry when it is professionally or economically feasible; and (5) a permanent or semipermanent alternative to marriage.<sup>3</sup>

### **What have we learned about cohabitation's impact?**

Most studies show that cohabitation is associated with negative effects on marriage and the family. Researchers do not know whether the link between cohabitation and these other factors is causal, but they have observed correlations between cohabitation and other dynamics that keep people from entering into and maintaining stable marital relationships.<sup>4</sup> Scarcely half of couples

**No studies of cohabitation have turned up evidence that it contributes to a better marriage. Instead, studies conclude that it leads to "greater marital instability."**

in first-time cohabitations will ever marry; the overall percentage of those who marry is much lower when it includes those who cohabit more than once. People who cohabit and later marry are 50 percent more likely to get a divorce than are couples who don't live together prior to marriage. Cohabiting couples tend to find it more challenging to negotiate things such as finances, recreational choices, and household chores—hardly

surprising, given that autonomy and freedom are values contributing to the decision to cohabit. Cohabitors struggle with stability and happiness; these couples don't have the support structures, medical benefits, and tax breaks that married people enjoy.

Studies also show that "the practice of cohabitation reduced religious attendance among young adults, while marriage (without previous cohabitation) tended to increase religious involvement."<sup>5</sup> Cohabiting couples report higher levels of conflict, domestic violence, abuse, and infidelity than married partners do. More than a third of cohabiting couples share their homes with

children under fifteen, and compared to a parent, a live-in partner is far more likely to abuse children living in the household.

Cohabitors tend to have inappropriately high expectations of marriage, which can lead to disillusionment in the face of ordinary challenges. These couples report lower satisfaction after they do marry, perhaps because they think they've worked out everything and any further challenges are the fault of marriage. Cohabitors who marry tend to be less effective at conflict resolution, either out of fear of upsetting an uncommitted relationship or because they don't feel the need to protect a temporary relationship. The attitudes, issues, and patterns that predispose people to cohabit in the first place may also put them at high risk for divorce when they do choose to marry. And the cohabitation experience itself can create bad habits that may sabotage a marriage; premarital counseling of a cohabiting couple should address these.

What about Mennonites and cohabitation? According to *Road Signs for the Journey*, recent research indicates that compared with families of other faith traditions, Mennonite Church USA families are more intact.<sup>6</sup> When members were asked their opinions about 26 behaviors, Mennonites were most likely to agree that certain sexual behaviors are wrong; their responses indicate little consensus on the rightness or wrongness of the other listed issues.

While not addressing cohabitation specifically, the research shows that attitudes about premarital sex have changed dramatically, even more than attitudes about homosexuality. In 1972, 84 percent of Mennonites said that premarital sex is always wrong; only 74 percent today responded that premarital sex is always wrong. Meanwhile, opposition to adultery has increased since 1972, when 86 percent of members said it was always wrong, compared to 94 percent today. Kanagy notes that these statistics are similar to those reported by other U.S. Protestants.

Pastoral counselors Richard Olson and Joe Leonard observe that no studies of cohabitation have turned up evidence that it contributes to a better marriage. Instead, studies conclude that it leads to "greater marital instability." Olsen and Leonard do note that possible exceptions are "single-instance" cohabitants (those who cohabited only with the person they eventually married); they may be on a par with noncohabitants.<sup>7</sup> Some research suggests that if cohabitation is limited to a person's future spouse,

the couple is at no elevated risk of divorce, and that cohabiting couples who receive premarital education or counseling may significantly reduce their risk of divorce.

### **How do we respond theologically?**

The church has lacked a compelling vision of the sexual good life. We have said: “Bottle it up. Don’t talk about it. Be moral police for God.” A recent national study of sex and religion indicates that the sexual message most religious youth are getting is: “Don’t do it until you’re married,” which doesn’t go nearly far enough.<sup>8</sup> We have largely failed to tell our story in ways that describe what is good and beautiful about marital fidelity. From my reading I’ve distilled some compelling reasons to marry rather than cohabit:<sup>9</sup>

Marriage—a public celebration of love and commitment—is a community-building act; cohabitation is not. A biblical vision for marriage is a covenant of lifelong faithfulness modeled on God’s faithfulness. Such a covenant must be made in public, because a private or ambiguous arrangement is fragile. Covenantal fidelity assumes marriage is deeper and wiser than anyone who enters into it. It is a precious gift from the tradition, held within community.

The biblical message about marriage is romantic and poetic. In honoring God, we are freed to trust each other without fear. Love may fail at times, and then people just take a deep breath and stay married because they *are* married. And when they come through, their marriages are more firmly rooted in love.

The fire of sex is so powerful, precious, and godly that it either gives life or it takes away life. What is wrong with sex outside of marriage for a Christian is not so much that it breaks a commandment but that it is a “schizophrenic act”; by its nature, sex speaks of *total* giving, trust, and commitment. What do we dare reveal, if in a few weeks or a few years our partner may be intimate with another? Only within a relationship of complete trust can we make love and remain whole. Real sexual desire can’t be satisfied on the cheap, any more than real hunger can be satisfied with fast food. That is why sexually active relationships must be faithful ones. Without the confidence that promises will be kept, love must always be on guard.

A good marriage is a work of art, disciplined by practices sustained within communities. Casual sex is like careless tech-

nique in art and music. Listening to great musicians, one can hear the beauty that fidelity engenders.

### **How do we respond pastorally?**

How do we encourage couples to bring depth and stability to their relationships in the context of a covenanting community?

We need to be more honest with one another about cohabitation. We owe our children a clear word that no social scientific evidence shows that cohabitation improves marriage. But more than that, young people need to hear stories from married people who know what sexual goodness is and how we have worked with our sexual issues. Cohabitation must be on the table in premarital counseling, say Olson and Leonard. What have you learned about yourself and your partner? What do you hope will change as you marry? What have you been reluctant to talk about before the wedding? What new promises are you ready to make with each other?

For those who have been sexually active, the most important question, says Lauren Winner in *Real Sex*, is, what are you doing now? Not, have you sinned in the past? but, how are you dealing with it? How has Christ redeemed you? And perhaps most importantly, how can we together as a community of faith live into God's vision for shalom?<sup>10</sup>

### **Conclusion**

Today individual choice is given such pride of place that a couple is virtually free "to sleep with whom they please, and to marry and divorce when and whom they please. . . . The psychic costs of such behavior, and its self-defeating consequences, are becoming clear."<sup>11</sup> Most disturbing is that when we lose sight of the community's stake in marriage, those who can least cope with the harmful fallout are the weak, poor, uneducated, and young. They are those most at risk amid the flood of changes around sexual mores in our culture.

Lauren Winner, who reclaimed sexual chastity (as she calls it) after promiscuity, says frankly that in the New Testament, sex beyond the boundaries of marriage is "simply off limits." To have sex outside those bounds is to commit an offense against the body of Christ, which we who have been baptized are members of.<sup>12</sup>

Our calling as Christians is not to impose our practices on those who don't consider themselves part of the body of Christ but to live lives of sexual fidelity and tell stories of the redemption, joy, romance, poetry, and love that permeate God-honoring sex and marriage.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Carrie A. Miles, *The Redemption of Love: Rescuing Marriage and Sexuality from the Economics of a Fallen World* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2006), 10.

<sup>2</sup> Judith S. Wallerstein, Julia Lewis, and Sandra Blakeslee, *The Unexpected Legacy of Divorce: A 25 Year Landmark Study* (New York: Hyperion, 2000), 29, 150–51, 289.

<sup>3</sup> Eleanor D. Macklin and Roger Harvey Rubin, *Contemporary Families and Alternative Lifestyles: Handbook on Research and Theory* (Beverly Hills: Sage, 1983); cited in Herbert Anderson and Robert Cotton Fite, *Becoming Married* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1993), 105.

<sup>4</sup> Many of these observations are drawn from contributions in the reader edited by Kieran Scott and Michael Warren, *Perspectives on Marriage* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001); also, Lisa Graham McMinn, *Sexuality and Holy Longing* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2004); Mark Regnerus, *Forbidden Fruit: Sex and Religion in the Lives of American Teenagers* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007); Julie Hanlon Rubio, *A Christian Theology of Marriage and Family* (New York: Paulist Press, 2003); David Gushee, *Getting Marriage Right* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2004).

<sup>5</sup> Regnerus, *Forbidden Fruit*, 54.

<sup>6</sup> Conrad Kanagy, *Road Signs for the Journey: A Profile of Mennonite Church USA* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 2007).

<sup>7</sup> Richard P. Olson and Joe H. Leonard, *A New Day for Family Ministry* (Bethesda, MD: Alban Institute, 1996), 128.

<sup>8</sup> Regnerus, *Forbidden Fruit*, 207.

<sup>9</sup> The following observations are distilled from these authors: Jo McGowan, "Marriage Versus Living Together," in *Perspectives on Marriage*, ed. Scott and Warren, 85–86; Christopher Ash, *Marriage: Sex in the Service of God* (Vancouver, BC: Regent College Publishing, 2005), 368–69; Rodney Clapp, *Families at the Crossroads* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1993), 123–27; Catherine Wallace, *For Fidelity: How Intimacy and Commitment Enrich Our Lives* (New York: Random House, 1989), 17–19, 25, 56, 59; Miles, *The Redemption of Love*, 191–92; Ronald Rolheiser, *The Holy Longing* (New York: Doubleday, 1999), 199.

<sup>10</sup> Lauren Winner, *Real Sex: The Naked Truth about Chastity* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2005).

<sup>11</sup> Lawrence Stone, "Passionate Attachments in the West in Historical Perspective," in *Perspectives on Marriage*, ed. Scott and Warren, 133.

<sup>12</sup> Winner, *Real Sex*, 124.

## About the author

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# Sexuality in the wedding

Gary Harder and Lydia Neufeld Harder

**T**he rules of the sexual dance have been changing rapidly in our society. No longer do most couples look to the church for permission, via a marriage license, to dance together sexually. Pastors no longer oversee the dance floor. However, many couples still come to pastors to preside at their weddings. They still come to the church to marry—and perhaps to look for deeper meanings for their married and sexual lives. How will we respond? How do we negotiate the changing dance floor scene?

## Reflections from the dance floor (Gary)

**We find it difficult to be honest about sex in marriage preparation and in the wedding service. It hovers just beneath the surface, just out of reach of words, unnamed until someone tells a crude joke at the reception.**

I am all too aware of the overt sexuality she exudes. It frightens and disconcerts me a bit. It also excites me, enough at least to know that I need to keep my boundaries clearly in place. “Don’t start fantasizing,” I order myself. How then to begin the marriage preparation journey for this couple sitting before me? Especially when I know we will need to talk about their sexuality.

Jan and Eric (not their real names) have come to my office because they want me to officiate at their wedding. They come hesitantly. They bring guilt feelings. They have been living together for almost a year and cannot reconcile that fact with their upbringing and stated convictions that full sexual expression belongs only within marriage. They are Christians, and they feel they have betrayed their Christian commitment. They are tired of hiding their living arrangement from their families, and they want to commit their lives to each other in marriage.

I can see how Eric might have succumbed to Jan’s sexual appeal—and for that matter, how Jan could have been attracted

to Eric's strong aura of maleness. They start listing excuses for moving in together. There were economic realities. They already knew they wanted to get married, so they just started having sex a bit early. And then Jan is in tears. "Can we still get married in the church? Will you still marry us?"

In some ways the church has seen the marriage license as a license to have sex. The wedding service legitimates full sexual expression. Marriage is the boundary that regulates our sexuality. Before marriage, sex is bad. After marriage, sex is legitimized—almost regardless of how it is expressed. We have had a hard time naming sexual abuse within marriage.

But we find it difficult to be honest about sex both in marriage preparation and in the wedding service. It hovers just beneath the surface, bubbling away just out of reach of words, unnamed until someone tells a crude joke at the reception and leaves most of us embarrassed. In the way we do weddings, can we somehow deal honestly and compassionately with sexuality? Can we address sex

**Perhaps integrity around our sexuality is a gift the church can offer a couple getting married. But then we will have to get our act together. We have to be open about sex in the church.**

with integrity, aware of the highly sexualized nature of our society, aware of how our society commodifies sexuality? Can we be ready to offer a wholesome vision of sexual expression?

Perhaps integrity around our sexuality is a gift the church can offer a couple getting married. But then we will have to get our act together. We have to be open about sex in the church. We have to talk about it. We have to name the blessing and the curse, how

sex can wonderfully enrich our lives and how it can harm us and empty our relationships of meaning. We have to struggle as a church to understand and own our vision for a healthy sexuality. And we need to pass on our vision to our children.

But how do we make our sexuality sacred, a part of our journey with and toward God? How do we resist letting our secular society control our understanding of sexuality?

From colleagues in ministry I have heard about three possible ways of responding to a common law couple wanting to get married. Some pastors start with rules, insisting that the couple move apart and refrain from intercourse until after the wedding.

Others try to ignore the issue, believing that if they don't ask, they won't have to deal with it. Others try to engage the couple about their sexual expression as honestly as they can, and from there point to a fuller, covenanted vision.

The Bible is more forthright about human sexuality than we are often able to be. Let's consider Genesis 1 and 3.

*In pleasure and delight God breathes life and spirit into the human beings. "I have created relating beings," exults God, "loving beings, male and female beings. Companionship and intimacy can replace loneliness and alienation."*

*God delights in seeing Adam and Eve enjoy the garden, each other's companionship, and conversation with their Creator. The woman and man tend the garden, name the animals, run free and naked and unashamed, taking pleasure in each other's love and in each other's bodies. And God laughs with them in joy.*

*But alas, other powers also reside in the garden and in each psyche. Another spirit breathes an unwelcome discordant reality into Eden. These first mythical humans, like each of us, have a lust for power, perhaps the strongest urge of all. Power. Control. Avoidance of vulnerability. Wanting to be like God, knowing good and evil, they eat of the fruit of the forbidden tree.*

*Then comes the blaming. And denial. And defending the indefensible. And exploitation. And hiding from God and from each other. All hell breaks loose as they are chased out of the garden.*

*The intimacy is lost. These first humans are alienated from each other and from God. Their nakedness is now a source of shame, and they cover their sexual parts. In their brokenness, Eden slips out of their grasp. But is it lost forever?*

If we are honest with ourselves, we will acknowledge that many of the couples—maybe even the majority—that we marry in the church are not virgins on their wedding night. We are a long way from Eden. What do we do with that reality?

Integrity starts with candor in the office, with being honest with the couple wanting to get married. Far better to deal with the reality of the couple living together before marriage than to pretend, white wedding dress notwithstanding, that they are “pure.” I thank Eric and Jan for being so open and honest with me. “I think we can now talk candidly about what your living

**The Song of Songs revisits the wholesome sexuality of Eden. The song is a symphony of sensuality in five movements. Gone is the violence and cover-up of a distorted Eden, replaced with a restored and full mutuality.**

together has meant for your relationship. And my hope is that it can lead to a wedding service that has integrity.”

We are now free to explore a more full-orbed vision of intimacy. Jan and Eric acknowledge that their sex drives have taken over their relationship, that they are struggling to find other intimate ways to relate to each other. They are not able to keep in touch with each other emotionally as well as they want to. They have not explored how they could include spiritual intimacy in their relationship, even though both are Christians and regularly attend church. Their friendships and social networks are not well developed. Perhaps their guilt about their living arrangement is an inhibiting factor. They are dissatisfied with various aspects of their relationship. Even their sex life is less than satisfying. Will getting married magically heal their relationship?

Marriage can contribute to healing, but not without hard work. Jan and Eric drink in that bigger picture of intimacy. Over time they begin to address areas that they have neglected in their haste to move in together. They begin to be more vulnerable to each other emotionally. They even start praying together, one of the hardest kinds of closeness to embrace, because it is so intensely intimate. I realize, as we explore this terrain in preparation for their marriage, that I am no longer conscious of the overt sexuality that first drew my notice on meeting Jan. As my relationship with her and Eric has deepened, other aspects of her identity now engage my attention.

Their wedding is honest and joyful. I can name before their families and communities their journey from living together to a relationship that is ready for the multifaceted intimacy of a healthy marriage. We freely reinsert sexuality into the service.

The Song of Songs revisits the wholesome sexuality of Eden. The song is a symphony of sensuality in five movements. It is unashamedly erotic. Gone is the violence and cover-up of a distorted Eden, replaced with a restored and full mutuality. The woman is as free as the man to make advances. Neither dominates or exploits the other.

She begins the song, and he responds.

*Let him kiss me with the kisses of his mouth!  
For your love is better than wine,  
your anointing oils are fragrant,  
your name is perfume poured out. . . .*

*I compare you, my love,  
to a mare among Pharaoh's chariots. . . .*

*My beloved is to me a bag of myrrh  
that lies between my breasts.  
My beloved is to me a cluster of henna blossoms  
in the vineyards of Engedi. . . .*

*Ah, you are beautiful, my love;  
ah, you are beautiful;  
your eyes are doves.  
Ah, you are beautiful, my beloved,  
truly lovely. . . .*

*With great delight I sat in his shadow,  
and his fruit was sweet to my taste.  
He brought me to the banqueting house,  
and his intention toward me was love. . . .*

*How beautiful you are, my love,  
how very beautiful.  
Your eyes are doves  
behind your veil.  
Your hair is like a flock of goats,  
moving down the slopes of Gilead. . . .  
Your two breasts are like two fawns,  
twins of a gazelle,  
that feed among the lilies. . . .*

*My beloved is all radiant and ruddy,  
distinguished among ten thousand.  
His head is the finest gold;  
his locks are wavy,  
black as a raven.  
His eyes are like doves. . . .  
His body is ivory work,  
encrusted with sapphires. . . .*

And finally this symphony of sensuality ends, as it must. The curtain is drawn shut, and with it the circle of intimacy between the two closes as they become one:

*Make haste, my beloved,  
and be like a gazelle  
or a young stag  
upon the mountains of spices!*

Earthy, embodied, erotic, sensual, mutual—a powerful yet tender love song written in a patriarchal context, revisiting old Eden and sending waves into ever new Edens.

Jan and Eric's marriage is happy and honest, growing in the context of their congregation. They continue to learn that intimacy is God's gift to them and their gift to each other. One wonderful part of their many-faceted intimacy is enjoyment of each other's bodies in full sexual expression.

### **Musings from the balcony (Lydia)**

The balcony overlooks the dance floor, providing perspective on the unfolding sexual dance. The view from the balcony encourages us to reflect and ask, what is really happening here?

When I step back to reflect theologically on weddings and sexuality, I realize that most of the time I do not think about the wedding as "the liturgical ritualized celebration of the sexual union of two persons."<sup>1</sup> In fact, the words of the wedding service rarely speak about the mystery of sexual desire or the creative reproductive power of sexual union. Because the wedding is a worship service, we assume that the focus is on the spiritual and

sacred covenant that is deeper and broader than having sex. However, what strikes me about our wedding practices is that we often leave our sexuality at the church door. We have become so comfortable with separating the sacred and the secular as we enter worship that we don't even notice that no one is speaking about physical intimacy at an event in which it should be celebrated as a gift of God.

I wonder if this separation of the sacred and secular leaves us open to the seductive power of our technological culture. That culture wants to take over our most intimate relationships and

**The words of the wedding service rarely speak about the mystery of sexual desire or the creative reproductive power of sexual union. We often leave our sexuality at the church door.**

make them shallow, artificial, superficial. In our society the perfect sexual relationship is a commodity that can be acquired with the right technique or through using the right beauty product or by having so-called safe sex or by planning the most romantic wedding. The market encourages couples to enjoy sexual goods without responsibility, without outside interference, and without the burdens of a community ethic. Marriage is available to anyone who wishes for it, and if

one product does not suit, perhaps another will. The wedding is in danger of becoming a counterfeit, a spectacle produced for public consumption. Sexuality has been reduced to a possession rather than experienced as a gift of God which we tend and nourish through hard work.

In earlier times, we could not so easily ignore sexuality. If a couple lived together, a baby would likely appear before long. If a woman died in childbirth, her husband needed to find a new wife in order to provide a secure home for his children. If a young man bought a farm, he sought out a wife to share the work with him. Partnership was built into the marriage relationship for economic and social reasons. Therefore community rules could be effective in encouraging a deeper and more multifaceted relationship. Sexuality was a part of a larger whole, blessed and regulated by the community, because the community needed the family and the family needed the community.

Now couples may no longer look to the community to provide economic and social support and sanctions. What they may fail to

realize is that our most profound human capability to be intimate with others and to be fruitful within our community is being crippled by a culture that converts our sexual nature into a consumer product. Couples may long for a deeper understanding of sexuality but discover that their church is afraid to speak about sexuality's power. They may wish for community support but worry that their sexual desires are not understood. They may even wish they could counter the domination of the wedding industry but do not know where to start.

Can weddings become public events that engage the community and the couple in ways that reorient sexuality toward a full-orbed practice of marriage? Can our weddings become celebratory events that establish honest marriage relationships? Can weddings speak about sexual intimacy as a gift of God that nonetheless requires an investment of our attention and effort? Can we recognize sex as a gift we will not fully enjoy if community support and encouragement are absent?

The transition from singleness into marriage is not an easy one, despite our romantic notions. We need worship rituals that acknowledge the difficulties, admitting that sexual intimacy in its fullest sense does not come easily within our society of consumerism. But above all, couples need to know that God delights in marriages in which sexual intimacy mirrors the love that God has for the church and for all humankind. The church must focus its wedding preparation and wedding services on celebrating this kind of love. Then what we say and celebrate in weddings will be good news for the dancers and for the church.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> William Willimon, *Worship as Pastoral Care* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1979), 127.

## About the authors

Gary and Lydia Neufeld Harder have been married for forty-four years. They are semi-retired from their respective careers, Gary as a pastor and Lydia as a professor of theology. Now they work part-time as transitional pastors of Wideman Mennonite Church, Markham, Ontario, and they co-teach a course in church and ministry at Conrad Grebel University College, Waterloo, Ontario.



## Becoming adult, being sexual

### Sexuality on the long road to adulthood

Andy Brubacher Kaethler

**F**orming and maintaining healthy intimate relationships and faithful sexuality can be an all-consuming struggle for young people today.<sup>1</sup> Sexual discovery and sexual expression have always been a part of becoming adult, but over the past century the road to adulthood has become far more complex. Sexual maturity and adulthood, once closely linked in terms of identity, discovery, and achievement, are now on separate tracks: youth recklessly rush sexual maturity while postponing traditional markers of adulthood. Biological and cultural pressures have translated into higher rates of premarital sexual activity. Meanwhile the road to adulthood is arguably longer, wider, more winding, and more perilous than it has ever been. Meet Sarah, one young woman navigating the road to adulthood.

*I am a twenty-seven-year-old female from a small town who grew up in a supportive family that encouraged active participation in the Mennonite church. Toward the end of my time in high school, I felt adolescent pressures to get involved with sex, drugs, alcohol. I knew all were choices that my family and church would find disappointing, but I pushed those voices aside. Sex especially was part of growing up, part of being normal.*

*In college (a Mennonite one) my patterns continued. I found friends who were a lot like me, who used marijuana and drank. It usually wasn't hard to find someone to hook up with, either. I just wanted to get all there was out of life, and life was best at parties where I felt most alive.*

*After college this lifestyle continued. Sexual encounters were frequent, even though I seldom had a boyfriend. It all seemed so normal, who I was. However, I started to notice that my friends were starting to get established, tie*

*the knot, negotiate salaries, and buy houses. I wasn't ready to have a full-time career. I felt like I would have had to give up being young. The last thing I wanted was to be tied down. Yet at the same time there was something in me that wanted the house, the kid, the picket fence, and stability most of all.*

*And the odd thing is that even though my parents taught me all the Bible stories, made me attend all my youth group meetings, paid for me to travel to Mennonite conventions, and sent me to a Mennonite college, I have a deep void when it comes to my spiritual life. I feel like Jesus never fit into who I am, nor do I feel like I fit into who Jesus is. I keep wondering what's wrong with me.<sup>2</sup>*

For the sake of Sarah's physical, spiritual, and emotional well-being, and that of many other young adults, the church must talk about sexuality and intimacy. Young people in the church are longing for authentic conversations about sexuality and becoming adults. To walk alongside those approaching adulthood, however,

Christian adults need a greater understanding of how the road to adulthood is changing, how intimacy has been reduced to sexuality, and how sexuality has been reduced to genital sex.

**The road to adulthood has become far more complex. Sexual maturity and adulthood, once closely linked, are now on separate tracks: youth recklessly rush sexual maturity while postponing traditional markers of adulthood.**

The ideas presented here are necessarily oversimplified, given the brevity of this article and the complexity of the issues—of identity, culture, religion, politics, economics, and more—impinging on our sexuality. Some other aspects of sexuality and becoming adult are part of the larger picture the church needs to address, but I cannot address them here.

These include the connection between sexual activity and the use of drugs and alcohol, the connection between sexual activity and self-abusive behavior, the connection between sexuality and spirituality, and the hypersexualization of young people in the media, among others. The contribution of this essay is to bring attention to just one set of issues that typically have been overlooked.

## **The long, winding, and perilous road to adulthood**

“Adolescence begins in biology . . . and ends in culture.”<sup>3</sup> This pithy statement holds much truth but masks the complexities and difficulties of the journey to adulthood. When we dive into the particulars of physiology and culture, and compare the process of becoming adult today with what that process looked like during various decades in the previous century, we observe that the time span has greatly expanded, starting a few years earlier and ending many years later.

From the biological perspective, today both males and females are reaching puberty at an earlier age. In Canada, the USA, and most Western countries, the average age at menarche in females was about 16.5 in the mid-1800s, 14.5 in the 1920s, and has been at 12.5 from the 1980s to the present.<sup>4</sup> Males are also reaching puberty earlier but still lagging about two years behind females. These changes mean that young people are physiologically equipped for reproduction at least two years earlier than their great-grandparents were. Biological changes thus widen the gap between when they are physically ready to be sexually active and when society has traditionally seen it as acceptable to engage in sexual activity, that is, in marriage.

With regard to this gap, however, the significance of social and economic changes eclipses the importance of earlier onset of puberty. Many interrelated socioeconomic factors visible in postindustrial capitalist societies work together in a maze of causes and effects to significantly delay attainment of adulthood and to alter socially acceptable expressions of sexuality. Psychologist Jeffrey Jensen Arnett, author of *Emerging Adulthood: The Winding Road from the Late Teens through the Twenties*, has observed that the average American in his or her early twenties no longer commonly reaches the markers sociologists once held as indicators of adulthood: finishing school, beginning full-time employment, getting married, and becoming parents.<sup>5</sup>

The pressure is great for young people to get a good education and a job that pays well. Education and employment, however, were not always so closely linked. In the early 1900s, less than 5 percent of young people attended college in America; by 2000 more than 60 percent attended college or undergraduate university programs, and one third of college and undergraduates went

on to graduate programs.<sup>6</sup> This ideal, however, is increasingly difficult to attain. The dizzying array of possible areas of study does not always reflect present and future employment possibilities. Education costs continue to rise, and more students work their way through school, frequently lengthening the time it takes them to complete a degree and increasing their stress levels. Nevertheless, college students feel the pressure to complete their education as quickly as possible. Christina describes this pressure:

*Christina's parents taught that Christians should learn about the world, be involved in service, and work with those on the margins. However, when Christina decided to take a year off between her sophomore and junior years to work in the social work field, her parents' attitude changed. They were unhappy with her decision, fearing she would never return. Christina did return to school, her passion for social work ignited. She then took an opportunity to go to Mexico to learn about how some of the poorest people in the world live and how the wealthy are implicated in their poverty. Again her parents resisted. Again it was a life-changing experience. In both cases, her parents saw in hindsight the value of the time off. What is striking is the discrepancy between what Christina's parents taught her throughout the years and what they actually wanted for her. They said they wanted her to become a well-rounded person, but their fears suggest they sometimes just wanted her to settle down as a gainfully employed, productive citizen.<sup>7</sup>*

Christina's story does not address marriage, although we can assume that her parents also hope for a son-in-law and grandchildren. Common wisdom dictates that significant commitments such as marriage and parenthood should be put off in the name of education and employment. Statistics bear out this surmise: the median age of marriage in the U.S. has increased for males from twenty-three in 1950 to twenty-seven in 2000, and from twenty to twenty-five for females in the same period.<sup>8</sup>

But increased education and delayed employment are not the only reasons traditional markers for adulthood are harder to

attain. Changing attitudes and practices regarding sexuality have meant that sex and marriage are largely delinked. Widespread use of birth control and altered views on sexuality since the 1960s have meant that sexual relationships need not be restricted to marriage.<sup>9</sup> The media are saturated with sexually provocative images of young women and men. Colleges and universities are becoming places where young adults explore not only career paths but also sexual identity. This experimentation is captured in the refrain of a song by twenty-three-year-old Katy Perry, a Christian turned secular pop sensation: “I kissed a

**Young people in their twenties typically view marriage as the ultimate goal of their experimentation in relationships, but many take advantage of the latitude they have been offered.**

girl and I liked it / The taste of her cherry chap stick / I kissed a girl just to try it / I hope my boyfriend don’t mind it.”

While sexual freedom has increased, the vast majority of young people still subscribe to semitradectional values about monogamous sexual relationships and the ideal of emotional commitment, or love. Young people in their twenties typically view marriage as the ultimate goal of their experimentation in relationships, but many take advantage of the

latitude they have been offered for experimentation. However, new freedoms in sexual expression also bring new perils, such as emotional scarring from having sex before young people are “ready,” uncertainty and confusion related to the lack of boundaries, and the threat of catching and spreading sexually transmitted diseases.

These socioeconomic changes combine to create an overarching shift: what were once markers of adulthood, eagerly pursued, are now viewed increasingly as burdens and obligations to be postponed.

### **Emerging adulthood and elusive adulthood**

Jeffrey Arnett contends that even more significant than the fact that young adults are taking longer and longer to reach the traditional markers of adulthood is the fact that these markers are not even considered markers by those in their twenties. Graduation, employment, marriage, and parenting have been replaced by a new set of markers: taking responsibility for oneself, acting

independently, and being financially independent.<sup>10</sup> This new set is less concrete, less corporately definable, and not attached to specific events. The new markers have an air of exploration and discovery, of tentativeness, and of focus on the journey toward adulthood rather than the destination. Arnett concludes that a new developmental stage accounts for the extra distance on this journey; he calls this new stage “emerging adulthood.”<sup>11</sup>

According to Arnett, emerging adulthood fits between late adolescence and young adulthood. It is distinct from late adolescence in that adolescents typically live at home, are undergoing and completing puberty, attend secondary school, and have the legal status of minors. In contrast, emerging adults generally do not live with their parents, are physically mature, may attend university or college, and have the legal status of adults. Physically and socially, emerging adults are distinct from adolescents. But neither are they young adults. Many have not finished education, and most are not on a stable occupational track. Most are not yet married and far fewer have children. Arnett suggests the label *young adult* should be reserved for those in their thirties. A further important characteristic of emerging adults is diversity: within the categories of adolescence and young adulthood there is great commonality, but emerging adults are diverse in terms of

**Adulthood itself is changing dramatically. Many adults want the physical and legal perks of being adults, without the commitments, responsibility, accountability, and routines of settled life.**

educational achievement, living arrangements, and employment, among other factors.<sup>12</sup> Instability and exploration are key characteristics of emerging adulthood.

One problem with Arnett’s understanding of emerging adulthood is that it assumes a clear, stable, commonly agreed-on understanding of what emerging adults emerge into. But adulthood itself is changing dramatically, sociologist James Côté suggests. Adult life in late modern capitalistic societies is highly individualistic, hedonistic, and narcissistic. As

religious and social traditions wane, adulthood lacks structure and becomes self-defined. Adulthood itself can be characterized as “vague and prolonged” or “hazardous and elusive.”<sup>13</sup> In fact, many adults appear to see as ideal the lifestyle of emerging adults. They want the physical and legal perks of being adults, without the

commitments, responsibility, accountability, and routines of settled life. Why would emerging adults want to rush toward adulthood when they are already living the prized life?

Another way of putting it, according to Côté, is that modern adulthood is more a psychological than a social state. The problem with adulthood is not the “diversity of lifestyles” and “preference based living” per se; the main problem is with “new forms of adulthood that lack connection with a community through shared norms and common goals.”<sup>14</sup> It is hardly surprising that becoming adult is complicated, when the target—adulthood—is vague and moving, and when one does not see a community to move into.

### **How can the church respond?**

How has the Mennonite church responded to the tensions emerging adults in the church may feel? How have we addressed their circumstance as sexual beings in a church context that traditionally prohibits sexual activity outside marriage?

Three responses, all inadequate, have predominated. One response is silence. The church is woefully slow to speak to these issues so crucial to the formation of emerging adults. A second response is a tacit acceptance of social and cultural norms permitting sexual activity outside marriage and committed relationships. Third, some suggest the church has responded in *Confession of Faith in Mennonite Perspective*, article 19, “Family, Singleness, Marriage.”<sup>15</sup> But this article does not speak to sexuality per se, only to “right sexual union” (intercourse) or “sexual intimacy.” It does not address the processes of moral and spiritual formation or physical, emotional, and intellectual maturation.

All three responses point to the fact that the Mennonite church has one foot in a 1950s morality (reflected in our formal statements), which assumes that all sexual expression occurs in the context of heterosexual marriage, and another foot in 2000s socioeconomic realities, by virtue of our lifestyles and economic expectations for our young people. The latter exert pressure on young people to be successful by materialist and capitalist standards. Emerging adults must therefore adopt the standards either of faith or of culture, or feel the pull in both directions.

How can congregations and the church as a whole help emerging adults navigate the journey to adulthood?

First, adults in the church need to take a stance that is informed and compassionate, appropriate for our late modern Western context, yet not necessarily permissive. Emerging adults and adolescents did not create the world in which they are becoming adults. They are simply trying to find fulfillment in life with the tools they are given, as inadequate and unsuited for healthy maturation as these tools might be.

Second, the church needs to remember the incredible diversity within emerging adulthood. We dare not assume that all emerging adults are dealing with the same issues. A twenty-three-year-old

**The church has one foot in a 1950s sexual morality and another foot in 2000s socio-economic realities, by virtue of our lifestyles and economic expectations for our young people.**

male with a wife and child will face issues around intimacy and sexuality significantly different from those of a twenty-three-year-old single male in the midst of vocational discernment and applying to graduate schools.

Third, sexuality and intimacy need to be addressed much more openly and much more often in the church. The church needs to offer a cohesive set of words and concepts with which to frame sexuality in a way fundamentally different from popular culture's. We

need to reach deeper into tradition and the Bible, affirming sexuality as a gift best expressed, given, and received in the context of limits and boundaries.

A full understanding of sexuality and intimacy is possible only through theological accounts of God's creativity and intimacy as expressed in the Trinity; in creation; and in the story of Jesus's life, death, resurrection. As developmentally appropriate, parents need to address sexuality in the home with our children, and then also in church settings beginning with junior youth. Children, adolescents, and emerging adults need to hear adults of various ages and stages talking honestly about sexuality in safe settings, in the context of joys and challenges of Christian faith. The church needs to reclaim its role in shaping the morality and values of Christians.

Fourth, the church needs to confront the narrow and harmful notion that intimacy is reducible to genital sex. Both intimacy and sexuality are complex and multifaceted subjects. Equating the



two overlooks the rich and powerful nonphysical dimensions of sexuality and the nonsexual dimensions of intimacy. Intimacy and sexuality have deep emotional, intellectual, and spiritual dimensions that will be present in robust and life-giving relationships. In particular, the connections between intimacy, sexuality, and spirituality need to be explored. How is “knowing” another person similar to and different from knowing God? It is important to name the vast array of ways sexuality and intimacy are expressed, both inside romantic relationships and outside them.

Fifth, another societal notion we need to confront is the notion that financial security is a prerequisite for marriage. As economic conditions in Canada and the U.S. decline, the ideal of financial security before marriage will become increasingly untenable for the vast majority of young people. It is already untenable for those on the lower end of the socioeconomic scale. The kind of financial security once normally attainable by age twenty-five will not be possible until age forty or fifty, if at all. More importantly, however, the notion of financial security itself needs to be challenged for a whole host of reasons, including but not limited to issues pertaining to emerging adults and sexuality. Among these reasons are ethical concerns about global equity, environmental concerns about energy resources and waste, and theological concerns about trusting in ourselves instead of in God.

Sixth, the church needs to provide Christian community. Emerging adults need places where healthy intimacy can be fostered and where sexual beauty and virility are not paramount. A community for emerging adults should include time with peers and time to interact with adults of all ages to converse about relationships, sexuality, vocation, and faith, etc. The church community should be a place where the use of technology, especially communications technology, serves to bring people together rather than isolate them. The church community should be a place where young men and women are encouraged to test their gifts and explore their passions. It should be a community that values regular face-to-face engagement in focal practices such as eating together, worshiping together, and spending time in nature. These practices will allow the church’s members to address issues of sexuality and intimacy in the context of relationships between Creator, creatures, and creation.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> By *young people* I mean all stages between childhood and adulthood. *Adolescent* describes those generally in their teen years; *emerging adulthood*, those generally in their twenties; and *young adult*, those generally in their thirties. Especially with later stages, however, age is not the best indicator of a stage.

<sup>2</sup> Story collected by author. Names have been changed to protect privacy.

<sup>3</sup> Chap Clark, quoted in Duffy Robbins, *This Way to Youth Ministry: An Introduction to the Adventure* (Grand Rapids, MI: Youth Specialties, 2004), 165.

<sup>4</sup> Ingrid Swenson and Beverly Havens, "Menarche and Menstruation: A Review of the Literature," *Journal of Community Health Nursing* 4:4 (1987): 199–210.

<sup>5</sup> Jeffrey Arnett, *Emerging Adulthood: The Winding Road from the Late Teens through the Twenties* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2004), v.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 5, 121.

<sup>7</sup> Story collected by author.

<sup>8</sup> Arnett, *Emerging Adulthood*, 5.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 94.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, vi.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 7–25.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 18–20.

<sup>13</sup> James Côté, *Arrested Adulthood: The Changing Nature of Maturity and Identity* (New York, NY: New York University Press, 2000), 2, 5.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 43.

<sup>15</sup> *Confession of Faith in a Mennonite Perspective* (Waterloo, ON, and Scottdale, PA: Herald Press, 1995), 72.

## About the author

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## Let's talk about sex

### What the church owes our youth

Cyneatha Millsaps

**A**s 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

**Parents who engage in open, honest, age-appropriate discussion with their youth allow the church community to function supportively. But if parents fail their children, then the church has to engage youth in clear Christian counseling and guidance.**

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."<sup>1</sup> 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."<sup>2</sup>

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

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.

**Youth ministers must cultivate relationships of honesty and trustworthiness with young people. Pastors of youth must be prepared to ask and answer hard questions.**

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.<sup>3</sup>

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.

**Youth ministers must be able to guide young people as they think through situations to make good choices. Left to themselves young teens do not have enough life experience to make clear, rational choices.**

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.<sup>4</sup> 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.”<sup>5</sup>

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

<sup>1</sup>Mennonite 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; Scottdale, PA: Mennonite Publishing House, 1985), 11.

<sup>2</sup>*Whack* is slang for "silly" or "stupid."

<sup>3</sup>*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.

<sup>4</sup>*Ibid.*, 6.

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

## About the author

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## After sexual violence

### What happens next in the community of grace?

Carol Penner

**W**hat happens when a woman from your congregation goes to a shelter for abused women? What happens when a church member is asked to leave his home, because the Children's Aid is investigating allegations that he sexually abused his stepdaughter? What happens when a sixteen-year-old in your congregation is pregnant after she got drunk at a party?

Sexual violence is a reality in congregations. The details vary, but the violence is taking place. What happens next? How does the church respond?

Let's use three stories to help us understand how churches often do respond.

#### Amy and Brad

Amy and Brad joined the church soon after their marriage. Brad was a gregarious man and became one of the trustees of the

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church. Amy was quieter. After she had three children in three years, she didn't always come to church. Brad sometimes shared with the men's group that Amy was depressed and often got angry with the children. He brought them to church, and he always seemed loving and attentive to them. Amy was repeatedly invited to women's activities, but she usually had an excuse. She didn't talk much about

her situation at home, and she looked unhappy. When people inquired, she mostly talked about being tired. At one point she was hospitalized for a week, but no one quite knew why, and neither Brad nor Amy seemed to want to talk about it.

Then Brad came to the pastor and asked for support. Amy had gone to a women's shelter with the children. Brad broke down and cried, "I don't know what to do. I can't even see my children." He

talked about “mental health issues” that his wife was facing, and revealed that her hospitalization the previous year had been the result of a suicide attempt.

News of Amy’s move to the shelter, which one of the deacons shared with a few people as a “prayer request,” rumbled through the congregation like a thunderbolt. Everyone wanted to know what had happened. The pastor and a female deacon went to visit Amy at the shelter. They heard a different story: Brad had been violent with her for years, often forcing her to have sex against her will. She loved Brad but was afraid of him.

The pastor confronted Brad with Amy’s story. Brad denied the violence and maintained that his wife’s mental instability was the problem. He told a couple male friends from church that he had concerns about his wife’s fitness as a mother.

Amy’s story was not widely known in church. At her request and out of respect for her privacy, the pastor and deacon maintained confidentiality. Brad continued to attend church, so Amy never came with the children. The pastor referred the couple to a professional marriage counsellor, but after a few sessions the process broke down and Amy filed for divorce. A few people followed up with Amy, but she and her children gradually drifted out of the consciousness of the congregation. Then Brad started dating another woman in the church. The few who knew Amy’s story wondered, “What do we say? What can we say?”

### **Jessica, John, and Rachel**

When Jessica was nine, her mother—Rachel—married John. Everyone in church was happy for this newly formed family. Jessica was a happy girl who was busy and active in school and church activities.

When Jessica was twelve, her personality seemed to change. Her marks dropped, and she withdrew from activities. If they thought about it, people in the church chalked Jessica’s behaviour up to the beginning of the “troublesome teenage years.”

Then one day Jessica confided to a friend that her stepfather was being investigated by the Children’s Aid and that he was living in a hotel and wasn’t allowed to talk to her. “I’m glad,” she said. “I hate him. He’s never going to tell me what to do again.” The friend spread the information to others, and soon many

people in the church were speculating that John had been physically abusive toward Jessica.

The pastor also heard this story, and he contacted John, who did not return his calls. Rachel was initially evasive, but when the pastor told her what he had heard, she was angry. She said, "John has never been violent with Jessica." She explained that John had shown Jessica sexually explicit pictures he had on his computer. He had told Jessica he wanted her to know "the facts of life."

After blurting this out to the pastor, Rachel said, "Don't ever tell

**Sexual violence in intimate relationships is rarely simple. Where the story is complex and involves people we know, clear principles tend to become murkier.**

Jessica I told you. I promised her I wouldn't tell anyone. She is so embarrassed about it." Rachel also asked the pastor not to tell anyone in the church about John's problem with pornography.

In conversations with John, the pastor heard a different part of the story. John assumed the pastor knew that the investigation had started because Jessica had talked to a teacher. She was upset because she thought

her stepfather wanted to take pictures of her. John seemed defensive as he told the pastor that he had only asked, "What would you say if someone asked to take pictures of you? You're a very beautiful young woman." John said she made an assumption because she saw he had a camera on the desk. "It was all just a misunderstanding," he said, "My wife understands, and we're working on our marriage." John asked the pastor to hold everything he said in confidence, because they needed privacy to work on their marriage. John was hurt and confused that people in church didn't seem to want to talk to him or Rachel.

The pastor was in an awkward place. He wondered whether he should have agreed to maintain confidence on this matter. He knew misinformation was circulating in the church, but he had no one's permission to share the story. At first he was relieved to learn that John had not touched Jessica and that the situation was not as bad as he had feared. But the more he thought about it, the more disturbed he was that John had used his sinful pornography habit to sexualize his relationship with his stepdaughter. He wondered whether John might be a threat to other children in the church. How could he or the community support Jessica if they

weren't to know what had happened? He knew that the family was going for counselling through child protection services. Should he just leave it at that?

### **Breanne and Tyler**

Breanne and Tyler had been dating for a month. They were from neighbouring towns and both were active in local congregations. They attended a few youth events together, and then Tyler invited Breanne to a party at the home of one of his friends. A few days after the party, Breanne and Tyler split up.

Two months later, Breanne's parents were shocked when Breanne told them she thought she might be pregnant. In tears, she said that she had drunk quite a bit of punch at the party she'd gone to with Tyler. She hadn't realized how much alcohol was in it until she started to feel sick. She went to lie down in a bedroom, and when Tyler came to see how she was, he had started kissing her. She was a virgin and she hadn't wanted to have sex, but it all felt like it was happening to someone else.

Breanne's mother took her to the doctor, who confirmed the pregnancy. The parents went to talk to their pastor. They were considering calling the police, because they felt their daughter had been raped. Because she was drunk, she hadn't been able to give consent. The pastor volunteered to talk to Tyler and his parents. Tyler and his parents were upset by the use of the word *rape*. Tyler admitted that he had had sex with Breanne, but he said it was mutual. Then Tyler said, "I wasn't the only one who had sex with her." Apparently one of Tyler's friends had sex with Breanne that night as well.

Breanne's parents spoke with the police. They were hesitant to press charges, because they were worried about how a trial would affect Breanne's life. Breanne didn't want all her friends to know what had happened. She felt terribly guilty that she had gotten drunk, but she also felt terribly used.

Breanne and her parents were facing a big decision about pressing charges, and then the call came from the doctor. He was recommending an abortion. Breanne had confided to the doctor that at the party she had taken a pill that someone had given her. She didn't really know what it was. She was worried that it might have hurt the baby. In principle, Breanne's parents were against

abortion, but in these circumstances they were rethinking their position. Breanne and her parents faced this whole situation in isolation from their church. No one in the congregation knew what had happened, except that Breanne had gotten drunk at a party.

### **On further reflection**

In principle, most people would say that sexual violence in marriage is wrong, that child sexual abuse is wrong, that date rape is wrong. As congregations, we want to show our support to survivors of violence. We believe that congregations need to hold perpetrators of violence accountable.

Sexual violence in intimate relationships, whether between husband and wife, or parent and child, or boyfriend and girlfriend, is rarely simple. These stories have been related in enough detail to cast light on how complicated sexual violence in the congregation often is. In a complex situation, where the story involves people we know, clear principles tend to become murkier. Let's consider these stories.

The first story initially seems straightforward. A woman goes to a shelter with her children because of violence in her home. Shouldn't the congregation give unconditional support to the survivor of violence? Shouldn't the congregation hold accountable the man who has offended?

Brad and Amy's story is typical of many episodes of sexual violence, in that the church community is not privy to a full account of what has happened. Brad and Amy have their versions of the story, and they both have reasons for wanting to share or protect their side of the story. Brad is able to mobilize support quickly. The congregation is splintered as people take sides, offer support, and judge one another for how they give or withhold support.

Brad ends up staying in the church, while Amy and the children leave. The pastor would have needed to take leadership to ask whether she would like to attend her church with her children. If she wanted to attend, Brad could have been asked to find another church home. Under those circumstances, the pastor and other people could have tried to maintain contact with Brad, but the public worship space would have been safe for Amy.

In Brad and Amy's story, mental illness is a factor that skews the congregation's response. Mental illness carries a stigma, and Brad's story may seem more believable because Amy has been hospitalized after a suicide attempt. The people who hear Amy's story may wonder, "Is her story reliable, or is it the product of a troubled mind?" People may feel sorry for Brad because he has had to live with someone who is depressed. This is a story that includes mental illness, but in other stories other factors—such as skin colour, socioeconomic status, or cultural background—may affect a congregation's perceptions and actions.

Some in the congregation feel torn between Brad and Amy, so they focus instead on the children. What is best for them? In this situation, Amy is not bringing the children to church and has taken them to a place where their access to their father is limited. Church members observe this choice in light of Brad's suggestion that Amy is an unstable mother, and they remember the loving way they have seen Brad acting toward the children. This combination of elements may influence their support for Brad, who wants the marriage to continue, and their judgment of Amy as she files for divorce.

Personal dynamics also play into congregational response. People don't know Amy well, while Brad is gregarious and apparently open. And he continues to attend church. This bias toward Brad is furthered when Amy withdraws from church. Amy's decision to go to a women's shelter adds another barrier. None of the people in the church have been in a shelter, and they are unsure about how to contact Amy, or about whether they are allowed to call her. "Out of sight" soon slides into "out of mind."

Jessica's story also raises questions. Again the congregation's picture is incomplete. They have some information, but it isn't accurate information. The congregation judges John, because they think he has been physically abusive toward Jessica. They show that judgment by withdrawing from him.

The pastor enters the situation as a spiritual leader on behalf of the congregation. He is a pastor to John, to Rachel, and to Jessica. The pastor does not have the parents' permission to talk to Jessica, and in any case, the fact that he is a man may make it awkward for him to talk with her. The pastor has internal conflicts about confidentiality issues, and he also has concerns about safety.

In no time, he gets ensnared in the web of secrets around John's sinfulness and is relieved to hand the sticky situation over to professional counsellors.

In the final story, the congregation is totally in the dark about the violence that Breanne suffered. Again the family is protective about their painful story. If Breanne had been raped by strangers as she was walking down the street after school, her parents might still have chosen to protect her story. But the fact that she was raped by her boyfriend at a party, after she had been drinking and taking drugs, leaves her open to the judgment of the community.

**Our congregations want to be supportive communities. We don't want to blame and abandon survivors or those who offend, but in the hurly-burly of congregational life, with its whirlwind of personal and societal prejudices, we can quickly lose our way.**

The congregation might not view what happened as an assault. They might judge the parents for being too permissive. If Breanne has an abortion, she and her parents will have even more reason to hide her story from the church.

Most people would say categorically that date rape is wrong, but certain circumstantial factors may change the way the congregation feels about the situation. If they found out, for example, that Breanne was not a virgin, that she had slept with her boyfriend the previous week, would that change their view of what happened? What if Breanne's parents weren't church members? What if Breanne's mother was an exotic dancer? What if Tyler was the pastor's son? Alternatively, if Breanne is white and the congregation learned that Tyler and his friend are African American, how would that change the community's response? How would it affect her parents' decisions?

In principle our congregations want to be supportive communities and we don't want to blame and abandon survivors or those who offend, but in the hurly-burly of congregational life, with its whirlwind of personal and societal prejudices, we can quickly lose our way.

### **What happens next?**

How can churches be communities of grace for those suffering from sexual violence? Here are some guidelines:



***Love in the cloud of unknowing.*** A congregation never knows the whole story of sexual violence, and it does not have the right to know the whole story. Still it needs to be a community of grace to all involved. At times we need to withhold judgment, examining our prejudices in the bright light of God's love. We also need to be realistic about people's sinfulness. We cannot be naïve but must instead be both wise as serpents and innocent as doves. People need to be held accountable, and at times we need to prayerfully put safeguards in place to protect people who are vulnerable. We need to comfort the broken-hearted, whether they are on the giving or the receiving end of violence.

***Love as the medium we live in.*** People's stories about violence need to be treated with the utmost care. Before we pass along anything to anyone, we need to ask ourselves, "If this story were about me and my family, would I want someone else to be spreading it?" The congregation is like a Petri dish; stories can grow and multiply with remarkable speed. We need to be careful to nurture a medium of love and grace, or we may find ourselves growing something very nasty indeed. Some stories should be carefully safeguarded, but at other times we must be cautious in order to avoid being manipulated into keeping unhealthy secrets.

***Love beyond halos and pitchforks.*** It would be so much easier for congregations if survivors of abuse were perfect people with no flaws, and people who offend were mean and unlikeable. But that is rarely the case. Just like the disciples in the story of Jesus's healing of the man born blind (John 9), we need to get beyond our initial question—who sinned?—and figure out how to be a community of grace to flawed people. Unfortunately, even the community itself is flawed; we will make mistakes as we try to be supportive. We all have to rely on God's grace.

***Love for the lost lambs.*** Sexual violence leaves destruction in its wake, and people can fall through the cracks. It is the congregation's responsibility to reach out to everyone involved. We cannot require people to come to church, and at times it is best for all involved if they attend different churches. But congregations can continue to be supportive, showing concern and love to the survivor as well as to the person who has offended. A card or note, a willingness to talk, an invitation for lunch, practical support in the form of paying for counselling or dropping off

meals, are all ways that congregation members can show they care. Everyone needs prayers for healing.

***Pastoral love with professional help.*** In situations of sexual violence it is important to involve professionals. Few pastors are trained to deal with the manipulation that people who commit sexual offences are skilled at, or with the deep pain of those who have been violated. But professionals cannot provide a supportive community. The congregation should continue to acknowledge the long, painful journey, not just assume that professionals have taken over. For the congregation to say and do nothing communicates: “What is happening to you is not important to us. We don’t care what you’re going through.” And organized care is more effective than a vague hope that someone is staying in touch.

***Loving the broken community.*** As was the case in the stories above, sexual violence mostly stays below the radar of the congregation. It’s important to preach and to pray about this type of violence, because it is present in every community. In our churches we need to name the fact that we are tempted to commit violence in our intimate relationships. We need to name rape and abuse as realities from which we are recovering. We can use rather than ignore the difficult passages in the Bible that speak about sexual violence. We can celebrate the gift of sexuality and our commitment to treasuring each other’s sacredness.

When sexual violence comes to light in our congregations, the impact can feel like an earthquake. People we trusted no longer seem trustworthy. Families that have appeared intact for years are seen to be deeply fractured by sin. People start to disappear through the cracks. How can we be a light on a stand, or a city on a hill, if everything is falling apart? This is when we need a God who holds all things together. It is not by virtue of our spotless lives that we become a community of grace but by our reliance on a God who helps us as we patiently and lovingly gather up the pieces of our broken community, our broken world.

### **About the author**

Carol Penner has worked as a sessional lecturer, chaplain, and freelance writer. She is currently pastor of a small Mennonite church in Vineland, Ontario, where she lives with her husband Eugene and two teenage children. The stories in this article are fictional, but they resemble the stories of many women and men whose lives have been affected by sexual violence.

## Singleness and sexuality

Pauline Steinmann

**“W**e are fired into life by a madness that comes from our incompleteness. We awake to life tense, aching, erotic, full of sex and restlessness. This dis-ease is, singularly, the most important force within existence. It is the force for love and we are fundamentally shaped by our loves and deformed by their distortions.”<sup>1</sup> With these words Ronald Rolheiser affirms what Augustine wrote long ago: “You have made us for yourself, Lord, and our hearts are restless until they rest in you.” This desire for connection with God and other human beings is the foundation of our sexuality. Sexuality is the drive in us toward connection, community, family, friendship, affection, love, creativity, and generativity. Our sexual energy gives us life; it pushes and pulls us into the passions of our lives. Yet as both Augustine and Rolheiser attest, we will always remain incomplete until we find our complete rest in and with God. As human beings we have been created in love and for love. How we express this love conveys who we are as sexual beings, made in God’s image.

**Our love will never be fully consummated until we are one with God. The loneliness of an unconsummated love should drive us to deeper relationship with God, out of which we offer our affections, passions, and love to the world.**

The totality of our lives shapes our sexual expression, beginning with our childhood homes. I grew up in a household of daughters. On the farm we helped with all chores: in the house, the barn, and in the fields. Because we were all sisters, we shared the bathroom and the bed. I remember the security of lying

alongside my sisters, feeling the warmth of human bodies snuggled under heavy blankets. Growing up as the second oldest of five children gave me opportunities to develop my sexuality as a nurturer. When I was six years old, I loved to take my baby sister for walks in the stroller or baby buggy. That mothering instinct

came alive again in my teen years as I helped care for a little brother. I have enjoyed being part of the lives of my nieces and nephews, and I delight in the loving friendships we have developed over the years. All these events and memories have shaped me as a sexual person.

Strong intimate friendships have always been part of my life. As a child I cherished the good friendships of cousins; we were best friends. I treasured the youth group at my church because we were all friends—boys and girls. Early in my teen years I learned that intimate friendships can be forged with males and females apart from romantic or physical or genital relationships. I was a big girl, much taller than my older sister and towering over the guys in my high school class. Although my size sometimes made me uncomfortable, I found ways of channeling my body energy positively by using my height and size to play volleyball and basketball on the school teams. It has taken a conscious effort to understand and embrace my sexuality and body image in ways that are not limited to physicality.

I define sexuality broadly. It includes the body and body image; relationships with people of both genders; the need for connection; spirituality; the ways we express who we are whether male or female, athlete, artist, or nurturer. Sexuality involves how we respond to beauty in the world. Beauty gives me joy—whether it is the beauty of a visual display that represents a theological concept in worship, the sound of waves lapping against a shoreline, wheat sheaves waving in the wind, the ocean throwing up a storm that crashes against rock, a simple yellow gerbera daisy gracing my dining room table and bringing life into my home, or my cat lazily curled on her favourite chair and purring her contentment.

Sexuality includes the depth of friendships forged over months and years; it includes levels of intimacy explored, pursued, and sometimes denied or rejected. It includes emotional intimacy, the secrets shared with a few people who know us well and whom we know well, a sense of safety within that unconditional love. Our sexuality is expressed through our intellect, through discussions and debates inspired by common interests or disparate experiences. It is expressed through our choice of life work, and in the compassion and hospitality we offer others. It includes our bodies:

our need for touch, for skin against skin, for heartbeat against heartbeat, for hugs and kisses, for sitting side by side enjoying the warmth of another's body close to ours.

Although we know our sexuality includes all of who we are, even in the church we are guilty of confusing sexuality with genital sex. To some extent we have bought the idea that unless one has experiences of sexual intercourse, one is not a whole person. We say we don't believe the messages on billboards, in magazines, and on television, promising that we will find happiness and completeness when we give in to our sexual urges; yet

**The church has perpetuated the idea that the greatest and most meaningful expression of our sexuality is made via our genitals, and we equate being celibate with being asexual. Living as a sexual and celibate person in a world that glorifies sex is a challenge.**

these images seep into our consciousness. Sadly, the church too has sometimes perpetuated the idea that the greatest and most meaningful expression of our sexuality is made via our genitals. Too often we equate being single or celibate with being asexual. Living as a sexual and celibate person in a world that glorifies sex is a challenge.

Mennonite tradition offers us little concept of celibacy as a choice. We do not have religious vocations as do Catholics and some other Protestant denominations.<sup>2</sup> When a person decides to remain single and celibate, we do not mark that choice with vows publicly professed. Although the *Minister's*

*Manual* does provide a "Blessing of a Life of Celibacy," this blessing practice is little known or used in the Mennonite church.<sup>3</sup> We make assumptions in the church that adults who are single are single by circumstance. They are the "leftovers," unstable, shy, or gay or lesbian. While our *Confession of Faith in a Mennonite Perspective* notes that the single life is a fully acceptable way to serve God,<sup>4</sup> and our scriptures cast in a positive light the choice to remain single,<sup>5</sup> nevertheless the spoken and unspoken message to single adults is that to be single and celibate is neither acceptable nor good. Innocent questions—"Why aren't you married yet?"—can be hurtful and insensitive. People find it hard to understand that someone may actually choose to be single and celibate.

Why would one choose to be celibate for God? Are singleness and celibacy a choice or the product of circumstances? Without a

theology that articulates an understanding and embrace of celibacy, and without practices that embody such a theology, we will find it difficult to answer these questions. Is it always one or the other? Does a circumstance become a choice after a time? I believe the decision to be celibate is a deliberate choice. The decision to be single may not always be a choice. No doubt there are many people who would not have chosen to be single, but circumstances have determined it. Some may never have found a mate; others are single again through widowhood or separation or divorce. But to be celibate, one has to choose it. Many people in our society choose to be single yet choose not to be celibate. As a follower of Jesus Christ and single, I choose to live a celibate life. If sometime in the future I meet someone with whom I choose to share my life in marriage, my decision to be celibate would change.

The Mennonite church has not provided a structure or space for celibate people to reflect together on their sexuality. At times I have been envious of my Catholic brothers and sisters who live in intentional communities within which they are encouraged to explore their sexuality as celibate persons. In the past couple of years, several nuns and priests have become my good friends. These committed women and men of God have graciously listened as I inquired into their formation as single celibate persons within their Catholic tradition. The dearth of Mennonite writing in this area has led me to seek out other resources. Writers such as Henri Nouwen, Ronald Rolheiser, Barbara Fiand, Sandra Schneiders, Kathleen Norris, Keith Clark, and Donald Goergen articulate well the demands and joys of living a celibate life.

Living celibately does not preclude having intimacy in one's life. Our sexual drives are given to us as an impetus toward establishing and maintaining intimate relationships with others. Celibate people are as sexual as other people, because the need for intimacy is a universal human trait. Celibate people don't fulfill that need with genital sexual activity, but the intimacy we experience is no less complete and natural. As Keith Clark suggests, if we who are celibate don't attend to our need for intimacy and if we repress our biological urges and drives, we will become time bombs waiting to explode. If we ignore our need for intimacy, if we don't establish strong intimate friendships, then we

are more likely to act out our need genitally and romantically.<sup>6</sup> All people are sexual, and we must all find ways to meet our intimacy needs.

Martha was one of the people who met my need for intimacy. Over a period of twenty years, we nurtured our friendship and she shared her family with me. Two years ago, my dear friend passed away. Although we always lived in different parts of the country, we enjoyed weekly phone conversations and spent a few days together every couple of years. Those times were precious to us, deepening our trust in each other as we created safe places of vulnerability. We walked the beach deep in conversation, and we drank champagne and ate bread, our own eucharistic celebration, giving thanks for our deep friendship.

Martha would wrap me in a warm embrace when I needed to be held. We enjoyed the sun, the ocean, the conversation, the silence. We did not hide our concerns from each other, but neither did we intrude into each other's private thoughts and feelings. Without being genital, this friendship was deep and

intimate: it was affectionate, with hugs, kisses, and physical closeness. We revealed our deepest thoughts to each other, and laughed and had fun together.

**I yearn for the day when the church is the adoptive family God has called us to be. Without my biological family in the church I attend, I need my adopted faith community to be present to me.**

My friendship with Martha was a clear expression of the way God creates us to be in relationship. As churches we create communities of faith where we worship together, engage in mission together, challenge and support one another. We are good at caring for one another and responding to one

another's needs. Yet providing community for those who don't fit the norm—people with disabilities, single parents, single adults, gays or lesbians—is often more difficult. I yearn for the day when the Mennonite church is the adoptive family God has called us to be. Without my biological family in the church I attend, I need my adopted faith community to be present to me.

In spite of this adoptive faith family I am part of, I have found that a strong, supportive community is not a given. I must create it for myself. Each time I have moved from one province to another, developing this community has become an important

part of my relocation strategy. I have nurtured friendships with parents and children, single and married adults, men and women. As a single woman, I am grateful for the male friendships I have been blessed with. Respecting others' boundaries and maintaining my own boundaries helps me develop strong, intimate, platonic friendships with men. I have been blessed with many friends from the church I grew up in, colleagues I have worked with, friends from seminary days, and priest friends. I am grateful to God for all these friendships, because they have taught me how to hold friends close without being possessive. After the moment of connection, we will carry on with life independently.

Being celibate means I am free to love unpossessively. Because no one relationship demands most of my attention, I can invest my energies in developing a variety of intimate friendships. I have been gifted with a steadfast spiritual friendship with a dear friend for the past twelve years. No matter where I live, this friendship takes me through thick and thin. This woman is part of my community wherever I am. Relationships with men and women, with adults and children, with single people and married people, all enrich my life.

Being celibate gives me greater need and perhaps greater opportunity to nurture my relationship with God. I am free to use my time as I wish: to take a spiritual retreat, to spend an hour walking, meditating, or journaling. Because I have no one to come home to at the end of the day, my ongoing companion in life is God. It is this relationship that sustains me over the long haul. Henri Nouwen talked about being empty for God, open and free for God's presence and for God's service. The yearning I feel for intimacy can ultimately only be filled by God.

We are made in God's image, yet our maleness and our femaleness remain a mystery to us. How we are like God—how our bodies and our spirits, our emotions and our souls, our spirit and God's spirit are connected—remains a sacred mystery because we have been created and blessed by God. Likewise celibacy is a mystery. My choice to be celibate means that I use my sexual energies creatively in ways other than for genital intimacy and procreation. Rolheiser writes that "in its maturity, sexuality is about giving oneself over to community, friendship, family, service, creativity, humor, delight, and martyrdom so that, with



God, we can help bring life into the world.”<sup>7</sup> Our sexuality and hence our celibacy are lived out in practical ways that benefit the world. Kathleen Norris notes the radical quality of celibacy.

“Celibacy, simply put, is a form of ministry—not an achievement one can put on a resume but a subtle form of service to others.”

When one’s sexuality is dedicated to God through Jesus Christ, the goal becomes to make oneself available to others, body and soul.<sup>8</sup> As celibate people, we do not repress our feelings but rather offer all our affections to God through prayer. God transforms our affections into service for the world.

**Being celibate gives me greater need and perhaps greater opportunity to nurture my relationship with God.**

**Because I have no one to come home to at the end of the day, my ongoing companion in life is God.**

I enjoy sharing the gift of hospitality in my home. My second bedroom offers a resting place to sojourners in the city. As a celibate woman, I enjoy this ministry of compassion for and connection with others. The prophet Micah reminds us, “He has told you, O mortal, what is good; and what does the Lord

require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?” (Mic. 6:8). Hospitality is one way to fulfill the desire to connect with people with which God has blessed me. It is a way of channeling my affections for people and the world as I strive to live out the justice and kindness that God calls me to.

No matter whether we are single or married, our souls remain restless until we find our complete rest in God. Our love will never be fully consummated until we are one with God. Rolheiser says that life will always feel somewhat like an unfinished symphony. The loneliness we feel from an unconsummated love should drive us to deeper relationship with God, out of which we offer our affections, passions, and love to the world. “We must incarnate our sexuality into the world in such a way that it constantly shows that love and the heart are the central realities of life and the kingdom.”<sup>9</sup> When we realize that our energies for creativity, compassion, love, respect, and commitment all have their source in God, we can be instrumental in bringing contentment and happiness to ourselves and to the world.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Ronald Rolheiser, *Forgotten among the Lilies: Learning to Love beyond Our Fears* (New York: Doubleday, 2005), 3.

<sup>2</sup> Here I use the term *religious* to refer to those who take vows as members of religious orders.

<sup>3</sup> John Rempel, ed., *Minister's Manual* (Winnipeg, MB, and Newton, KS: Faith and Life Press, 1998), 129.

<sup>4</sup> *Confession of Faith in a Mennonite Perspective*, article 19 (Waterloo, ON, and Scottdale, PA: Herald Press, 1995), 72.

<sup>5</sup> Matt. 19:10–12; 1 Cor. 7:25–38.

<sup>6</sup> Keith Clark, *Being Sexual . . . and Celibate* (Notre Dame, IN: Ave Maria Press, 1986), 128.

<sup>7</sup> Ronald Rolheiser, *The Holy Longing: The Search for a Christian Spirituality* (New York: Doubleday, 1999), 198.

<sup>8</sup> Kathleen Norris, *The Cloister Walk* (New York: Riverhead Books, 1996), 121.

<sup>9</sup> Ronald Rolheiser, *Forgotten among the Lilies*, 77.

## About the author

Pauline Steinmann is entering her eighth year of pastoring at Wildwood Mennonite Church in Saskatoon, Saskatchewan. She chairs the Pastoral Leadership Commission of Mennonite Church Saskatchewan and serves on the Christian Formation Council of Mennonite Church Canada. She recently took up riding a motorcycle with friends from her church.

## Opening safe space

Sarah MacDonald

### **M**emory: December 2003

School is out for the Christmas holidays. I am home from my first semester of seminary, baffled and worn from a welter of emotion. My pastor, who has mentored me since I joined the Mennonite church four years earlier, invites me to lunch. As we move through the buffet and settle at our table, I tell her everything I love about seminary life. But she already knows this is not the whole story. Eventually she gently turns the conversation: “You said the semester had challenges, too?”

**For all of us, embracing our sexuality—like resisting injustice—entails risk. We may get hurt. We will likely break our hearts, and maybe lose our lives to gain our souls. But in the end, how else do we live with integrity?**

I nod, my eyes on the tablecloth between us. “Yes. Well.” Aware of my fluttering nerves, I consider my words. How do I explain what I’ve been learning about myself? How will my pastor react? I take a deep breath and opt for directness.

“I guess the most tumultuous part of my semester is that I fell in love—with a woman.”

A quick glance at my pastor’s face. She doesn’t look shocked, just interested, open, carefully listening. So I tell her a little more. “It was a surprise and it wasn’t. For as long as I can remember I’ve been attracted to women. Mostly I’ve run away from the question of my sexual orientation. But falling in love this autumn was so intense. So undeniable. I can’t dodge this reality anymore.” I pause, then admit, “It’s hard for me to talk about falling in love. I’m kind of embarrassed by it.”

“But why?” my pastor exclaims with genuine surprise. “There’s nothing wrong with falling in love!”

Our conversation continues, but my pastor’s response lingers in my mind. A few years and many coming-out conversations later, this remark is still my favorite: “There’s nothing wrong with falling in love.”

*My pastor's words not only opened safe space for me to share my experiences; they were also one of the earliest affirmations helping me make the long gradual turn from fearing my sexuality to embracing it.*

Invited to write this essay on pastoral issues related to homosexuality, I deliberated about what to say. Part of me wanted to lay out a neat theological paradigm or present wise pastoral suggestions—to write something that felt relevant, fruitful, not overly self-revealing. But before I am a theologian, I am a storyteller and a memoirist. The only place I know to begin is the ground where I'm standing. All I have to share are these reflections from my own still-unfolding journey. So I offer this handful of memories, snapshots from the path I—one contemplative activist lesbian Mennonite follower of Jesus—have been traveling from a fearful, divided self toward greater sexual wholeness and integrity.

My experiences are not unique. Even many heterosexual people, somewhere along the way in their development, wrestle with similar feelings of anxiety, ambivalence, confusion, or downright fear in the face of their sexuality. Nonetheless, those of us who are queer,<sup>1</sup> who find ourselves unable to live the script of heterosexual expectations, face distinct challenges in understanding and reconciling ourselves to our sexuality. Especially if we grow up in the church. Especially if we want to stay a part of it.

### ***Memory: Childhood, probably eight years old***

*A pastor from a sister church visits our reserved New England congregation. He describes his ministry in distant San Francisco, accompanying his talk with slides I can barely see, because I've forgotten to wear my glasses to church this evening. A few slides show a gay pride parade with drag queens in skimpy, colorful costumes, like odd and exotic exhibits. A murmur of shocked distaste ripples through the congregation. But all I can see on the screen overhead is a blur of color and form. I only feel curious, disappointed I left my glasses at home.*

So it was for me growing up: on this issue, I was always out of step with those around me. On the rare occasions it got talked about, homosexuality was presented as lurid and strange and, in resonant King James English, “an abomination unto the Lord.” To everyone else, as far as I could tell, the disgust came naturally and the

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picture was clear. But to me the image was blurred, unrecognizable. Try as I might, I couldn't bring it into focus. Thinking differently from what I'd been taught, I felt as if a piece were missing inside me, and because I didn't feel revulsion, I feared something was wrong with me.

Meanwhile, my own sexuality left me wary and uneasy. While classmates skidded from one giddy crush to another, I remained aloof and largely uninterested in boys. By the time I graduated from high school, most of my favorite friends were women ten or twenty years older than I. Occasionally I wondered about my sexual orientation. It's not that I believed I was gay, exactly. Still, I didn't seem straight, either. My orientation just felt blank, like a space on a form someone had forgotten to fill in. I hoped I was simply slow to wake up to erotic attraction. But when sexual desire did begin to stir in my body, it frightened me.

### **Memory: Young adulthood, early or mid-twenties**

*Alone in my room late at night, I lie on my bed, my body curled into fetal position. My mind dwells on a friend who attracts me so deeply I am scared. When I think of her, I feel a magnetic tug in my gut. Imagining how this attraction would disgust her if she knew of it—how it would disgust any of my Christian friends, as far as I can tell—I hate myself for feeling this way. If only this sexual attraction were some physical part of me, I think, I would cut it out of my body with a knife. I visualize the blade slicing into my abdomen, and I start to cry—not because I am picturing violence done to my own body but because I don't know how to get rid of the part of me that I fear.<sup>2</sup>*

I grew up in a Bible-teaching church, attended Christian schools, and became a leader in our graduate student campus ministry at the University of Iowa. All my life I've wanted to be a worthy disciple of Jesus. I didn't need to open the gospel of Matthew to recall the text that warns: "If your hand or foot causes you to stumble, cut it off. . . . If your eye causes you to stumble, tear it out."

During the first three decades of my life, every spiritual community I belonged to treated homosexuality as a deadly stumbling. For years I assumed I had to choose between being queer and being righteous—or at least, between being queer and remaining in the communities that were my spiritual home. I was sure I couldn't live without a spiritual home. So I told myself my sexual orientation didn't matter. If I happened to be lesbian, well, I'd have to slam the door on that part of myself.

**Memory: A few years later, at almost thirty**

*Now a campus pastor working with an ecumenical ministry, I'm at our annual gathering in Chicago with my colleagues from around the country. Over dinner one of them—I'll call him Jonathan—tells a few of us what has been happening this year in the campus fellowship he pastors. Last fall the fellowship invited as a guest speaker a lesbian woman recently converted to evangelical Christianity. Over the next weeks, Jonathan learned, various women from the fellowship contacted*

**I now see how the fear of my sexuality that I felt for so many years was really a fear of intimacy and vulnerability, a fear of being fully present to other people and allowing myself to be known.**

*the speaker to share questions and fears about their own sexual orientation. Jonathan has tried since then to follow up with pastoral sensitivity, but he's startled by the live nerve this talk apparently touched, amazed that the evangelical fellowship would have so many members questioning their sexuality. He turns to us around the table to ask what we think. Have we encountered anything like this on the campuses where we work?*

*I listen to my dinner companions expressing amazement like Jonathan's, and I feel a different bewilderment. Am I really the only one at the table unsurprised to hear of these young women's concerns? I think immediately of students I know with similar stories. I think of myself. How would my colleagues react, I wonder, if I admitted that I too have wrestled with the puzzle of my sexuality?*

*I don't say a word. The conversation rolls on around me as I clench my mouth shut, half longing to be invisible, half aching over how such invisibility hurts. After the meal Jonathan asks me again if I have any advice for him, and I consider trying to talk with him, or sending him an e-mail message later. But I never do. Too much seems at stake—my*

*relationships, my reputation, my position, perhaps even my call to ministry—for me to risk opening up.*

In retrospect, I sometimes wonder what would have happened if I had shared my truth with Jonathan or another colleague, or with my ministry supervisor. Likely their responses would have surprised me. Certainly, in the five years since I started coming out as lesbian, I've been surprised many times as friends and mentors have welcomed or affirmed me, whatever their own orientations and theological perspectives. Such acceptance, mirroring the tender grace of God, has been crucial in helping me learn to love myself. All of myself.

### **Memory: Summer 2004**

*Halfway through an intensive course for seminarians, as I'm chatting with my closest friend in the program, she suddenly begins to warn me against the "pro-homosexual agenda" in our classes. My friend is an older woman who calls me daughter. In her motherly way, she is worried for me.*

*Now I am worried about what she suspects. Only last fall I started coming out to myself as lesbian, then gradually to a few trusted friends. Still learning how to wear this identity, I'm extra sensitive to any mention of homosexuality, "Why are you saying this to me?" I ask my friend several times, my voice strained and urgent.*

*Alarmed at my distressed response, my friend says she doesn't know why she's brought up this topic. "You're not angry at me, are you?" she begs. "Please don't be angry."*

*I shake my head. "No, not angry," I answer, "just sad." For a long moment I'm quiet, wondering whether I should come out to her. The thought scares me. I've never yet come out to someone this opposed to homosexuality. But I don't know how else to stay in our conversation with integrity. Fumbling for words, I say, "What you said saddens me because this year I began coming out as lesbian. It's hard to tell you this—I don't know what you'll think of me now."*

*The gentleness of her response surprises me. We talk a little more, and then she prays over me for God to reveal my true identity. When she finishes, we're both crying. I don't try to second-guess what she hopes for through her prayer. I simply drink in her words. For so long I have wanted God to show me who I am. My friend's prayer—what-*

*ever her intent in praying this way—confirms for me that God is doing exactly that.*

Coming out conversations—like sexuality itself—are a meeting ground of vulnerability and risk, openness, and grace. Each time I share my story and someone responds by stepping toward me rather than away, I rediscover that I am indeed a beloved child of God. A long-shut door inside my heart eases open. Then I am more able to open my heart to the beauty and the brokenness in the world around me.

**Each time I share my story and someone responds by stepping toward me rather than away, a long-shut door inside my heart eases open. Then I am more able to open my heart to the beauty and the brokenness in the world around me.**

Having journeyed this far, I now see how the fear of my sexuality that I felt for so many years was really a fear of intimacy and vulnerability, a fear of being fully present to other people and allowing myself to be truly known. It is no wonder, then, that embracing my sexuality has deepened the quality of my relationships—not only those with erotic overtones, but all my relationships. I'm learning to live in this world with greater awareness, larger tenderness, stronger honesty and courage.

Shortly after I came out as lesbian, I started working with Christian Peacemaker Teams (CPT), a ministry of nonviolent activism and accompaniment. There's a practical reason for this: my denomination is unlikely to ever hire or ordain me, an out lesbian. To follow my call to ministry, I needed to join an organization that would value all of who I am.

But I believe the link between these two life choices is more profound. Coming out as lesbian required me to face reality and take risks. I had to stop protecting myself at the cost of personal integrity. I had to learn to love more boldly, to hold gently the fragile pieces of my own spirit as I care for endangered people everywhere. These same traits also motivate my work with CPT and carry me to conflict zones to get in the way of violence.

For all of us, embracing our sexuality—like resisting injustice—entails risk. We may get hurt. We will likely break our hearts, and maybe lose our lives to gain our souls. But in the end, how else do we live with integrity? How else do we live at all?



## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Many lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) people have reclaimed the once pejorative term *queer* for various reasons. Acronyms inclusive of all sexual minorities are cumbersome and sometimes mystifying. The term *gay* often refers specifically to men who love men and so lacks the inclusiveness of *queer*. Consequently, *queer* is the preferred self-identifier for some of us. But others in the LGBT community choose not to use this word because of negative connotations they hear in it. It is wise to be careful when talking with or about sexual minorities and to ask individuals how we prefer to self-identify.

<sup>2</sup> Internalized homophobia—disapproval of or severe discomfort with one's own homosexual orientation, often caused by absorbing the surrounding social or religious tenets that privilege heterosexuality—is a real danger. Teens with same-sex attraction or unsure of their sexual orientation are at least twice as likely to commit suicide as their heterosexual peers. The memory I recount here is a common experience, though my story is much less grave than some. I only lay on my bed and thought about self-inflicted violence. Far too many LGBT-identified persons do go get the knife or choose another way of doing themselves harm.

## About the author

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## Marriage is words—and affectionate practices

### Lessons from Congo on enhancing sex in marriage

Sidonie Swana Tangiza Tenda (Falanga)

**G**od created us to be married, to have sexual relations, and raise children. . . . Marriage is the most beautiful form of friendship. A marriage is not successful unless the spouses are faithful to one another.<sup>1</sup>

These convictions articulated by the women's theology group of Umtata (Eastern Cape, South Africa) would be shared by many men and women in our context in the Democratic Republic of Congo. Unfortunately, however, our conversations with married people in the settings where we live revealed dissension in many Congolese homes generally and among the Pende tribe in particular. We need to pay more attention to our marriages, if they are to become the beautiful friendships God intends that we enjoy.

The dissension that arises in many homes is the result of multiple factors, which contribute to changes in sexual relations

**We need to pay more attention to our marriages, if they are to become the beautiful friendships God intends that we enjoy. A couple's life is like a dry skin which must be oiled to make it more beautiful.**

between spouses. Among these many factors, we can point to neglect of certain practices for couples, especially exchanging gifts; receiving each other with warmth; and taking time to go out together, share conversation, and show affection. In a word, many marriages have cooled off. The spouses have lost their first love (Matt.24:12).

Masamba ma Mpolo was right to say that “a couple's life is comparable to the growth of a tree; it is also like a dry skin which must be oiled to make it more beautiful. As the tree

and the skin must be maintained in order to grow and have beauty, so a marriage must be, for its stability.”<sup>2</sup> The marriage relationship in general and the sex life of couples in particular is better when carefully cultivated.

In the face of this social concern about the state of marriage among Pende people, we felt led to undertake a brief study of the topic. However, given the vastness of the Democratic Republic of Congo, we limited the study to the Pende tribe to which we belong. In particular, the study focused on individuals of the Pende group living in or visiting Kinshasa, but who come originally from Lozo, in Gungu territory, Kwilu district, Bundundu province.

Our research used a study questionnaire. The report that follows relies especially on our interviews with older people. These focused on traditional practices that strengthened relationships between married people. In particular, we sought to know when and how Pende couples have experienced good sexual relations. On the basis of our interview findings, we make several recommendations, in an effort to remedy some of the difficulties married couples today face.

### **What daytime practices contributed to good marital relations?**

According to the late Madame Ndende a Mukelenge, “the husband of [an earlier] era often combed his wife’s hair and covered her body with red paint (*lukula*). The spouses shaved the hair of one another’s armpits (*khaya*). The husband from time to time offered gifts to his wife (cloth or beads, for example) and took pleasure in decorating her topknot (*mukombé*) with beads.” An old song says, “*Sangu dia bonga ditamega njila, gakhetu ga bonga gatamega yala, we iyaya, yay’awe.*”<sup>3</sup> (“Good millet attracts a bird; a beautiful woman attracts a man.”)

Another love song speaks about how a husband’s neglect endangers his relationship with his wife: “*Mona mukhetu njong’ à tendé, ûtema gumukuata, gula ndo ikologa mushina dia tende.*”<sup>4</sup> (“The young girl is a grasshopper among the plants. You’d better hold on to her; otherwise she slips through the grass and is lost.”) *Njonga* is the specific name of the grasshopper to which the young girl or woman is compared. The song’s message is that the husband must treat his wife well; otherwise, she might leave for good (divorce him).<sup>5</sup> Another song explains the daily practices through which affection is shown between husband and wife: “*Gayala gazumba mukanji enji e gadi gale gamulogela, we e mama iyaya, we e mama iyaya.*”<sup>6</sup> (“The husband who feels affection for his wife must chew his food to feed the other”—that is, his wife.)

In traditional Pende practice, at the death of her husband, a wife went into a long period of mourning to grieve her absent partner. In the case of the death of his wife, the husband grieved for his spouse with tender words: “*Mukaji’ami ngaguzudile ulenge.*”<sup>7</sup> (“My wife, I married you when you were young.”)

### **What nighttime practices aided good marital relations?**

In addition to these daytime attentions, Pende couples traditionally experienced affection and sex in bed. The husband of an earlier time embraced his wife while sleeping (*gumububigiza*).<sup>8</sup> The Song of Songs also refers to this position of spouses: “O that his left hand were under my head, / and that his right hand embraced me!” (8:3).

The conjugal act, being a union that is important and desired by God (Adam knew Eve his wife, according to Gen. 4:1), must be prepared for carefully in order to be successful and especially so that both partners find it satisfying. Therefore the Pende

**The conjugal act, a union that is important and desired by God (Gen. 4:1), must be prepared for carefully so that both partners find it satisfying.**

ancestors who also understood the function of this act prepared for it as well. “The woman applied certain medicines to enhance her pleasure and that of her husband. He might take initiative by eyeing his wife with an affectionate gaze or by winking at her to indicate that he wanted her that night. Or he might show his desire by going to bed early or by a romantic smile.” Foreplay contributed to

their pleasure.<sup>9</sup> As the sex act reached its climax—during this important moment—the spouses spoke tender words, such as “*Mukaji’ami*”; “*Mulumi’ami!*” (“My wife!”; “My husband!”).<sup>10</sup> “During the day the wife offered her husband a dish of peanuts and raw manioc so that he might renew his spent energy.”<sup>11</sup>

Thanks to the traditional schools, Pende husbands of the past were initiated into life in general and into particular practices in particular, which contributed to their ability to maintain a positive marital life. Lacking such schooling, men and women today have not learned these practices.

### **Recommendations**

Our brief study of these traditional practices in marriages of the

Pende people leads us to make the following recommendations in order to improve the quality of marital relationships:

We ask Pende society to reinstate the traditional schools or initiations that trained young boys and girls for life in general and particularly for marriage. We recommend making this education a group experience, in order to train all youth.

We recommend to parents that they help their children in choosing a spouse. We encourage addressing topics of sexuality in the education of children at home. We also recommend that

**We recommend that spouses adopt practices, such as exchanging gifts, composing love songs for each other, having ongoing dialogue, and using tender words with each other, to evoke affection.**

parents support their married children by discussing these subjects without complacency or embarrassment.

To the spouses themselves, we recommend adopting certain practices, such as exchanging gifts, going out together, composing love songs for each other, having ongoing dialogue, using tender words with each other (such as “my big baby” to designate the husband; “my wife”; “I love you”; and “sweet-heart”) to evoke affection. The Pende say, “*Ulo mbimbi*.” (“Marriage is words.”) The best

times for affection are at 4:00 or 5:00 in the morning and after the sex act.

Couples must also take into consideration the best climate for resolving conflict. When it is difficult to find the source of a conflict in the home, one technique for doing so consists of staring into each other’s eyes for five minutes. The partner who feels at fault will not be able to hold the gaze of the other for long. With a few questions, one can then discover the reason for the opposition between the spouses.

In a marriage, the spouses must apply what Théodor Bovet asks them to do to attain a new life: “See, I am making all things new, yes. All can be renewed truly. No matter how desperate the circumstances, no matter how few hopes we might have for the future, all can become new. All things must be renewed.”<sup>12</sup>

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Groupe de Théologie des Femmes d’Umtata, *Être deux et devenir un: Une étude biblique sur le mariage* (Afrique du Sud: Groupe de théologie des femmes d’Umtata, 1995), 3.

<sup>2</sup> Masamba ma Mpolo (seventy years old), professor at l'Université Protestante au Congo, Kinshasa; conversation August 5, 1994, on the importance of affection. Masamba ma Mpolo is the author of *Amour, sexualité et mariage: Interrogations des jeunes en Afrique Noire* (Kinshasa: Éditions Cepropaski, 1988).

<sup>3</sup> Ndende a Mukelenge (eighty years old); our interview of this rural woman on vacation in Kinshasa took place on May 24, 1995. The interview dealt with traditional Pende daytime maintenance practices of the sex life.

<sup>4</sup> Ghymalu Kianza (fifty-four years old), pastor of the Communauté Mennonite au Congo (CMCO), Kinshasa; interviewed March 30, 1995, about the types of affectionate Pende songs and about premarital counseling.

<sup>5</sup> Marthe Mishindo Lusegu (seventy years old), rural woman on vacation in Kinshasa; interviewed April 15, 1995, on Nyoga Tenda and preparation of children for marriage.

<sup>6</sup> Ghymalu Kianza interview.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid. Those interviewed told of specific preparatory practices and described techniques for reaching simultaneous orgasm.

<sup>10</sup> Kimbamba Lubalega (fifty-three years old), married student interviewed in Kinshasa on December 5, 1994, on maintenance and preparation of the sex life of Pende spouses in bed, before and after the sex act.

<sup>11</sup> Vie sexuelle après les relations sexuelle.

<sup>12</sup> Théodor Bovet, *Le mariage: Ce grand mystère* (Neuchâtel, Switzerland: Delachaux et Niestlé, 1961), 151.

## About the author

Married in 1976, Sidonie Swana Tangiza Tenda (Falanga) and Leonard Falanga have raised four daughters, now ages 18 to 28. Mama Swana is chaplain at the Christian University of Kinshasa (Democratic Republic of Congo) secondary school, president of the Congolese Association of Protestant Women Theologians, secretary of the Association of Mennonite Women Theologians of Congo, and chaplain to the Mennonite Women's Federation of Kinshasa. She is a member of the Congo Mennonite Church.

This article was translated from French by Sylvia Shirk Charles, pastor of Manhattan (NY) Mennonite Fellowship, who is Mama Swana's partner in a Sister Link program—coordinated by Mennonite Women USA and Mennonite World Conference—that connects African women theologians with counterparts in the U.S. The article is excerpted from an essay published in the book *La petite fille, la femme, la religion et le VIH-SIDA en Afrique: Théologiennes à l'Epreuve des Beautés Africaines*, by the Cercle des Théologiennes Africaines Engagées.

# The lamp of the body

## A sermon on Internet pornography

Andrew Kreider

**I**t is notoriously difficult to say exactly what pornography is. The American Heritage Dictionary defines it as sexually explicit pictures, writing, or other material whose primary purpose is to cause sexual arousal; it is also the presentation or production of this material. Back in 1964, U.S. Supreme Court Justice Potter Stewart gave up the attempt at precise definition and said of obscene material, “I know it when I see it.” Now we’re discovering that the Internet is giving a lot of people a lot of opportunities to recognize pornography when they see it.

### Pornography statistics

Some facts that I’ve gathered from reports or studies this week:

Pornography is a \$57-billion industry worldwide. The U.S. is the

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primary producer and consumer of pornog-raphy. There are 4.2 million pornographic Web sites. Forty million Americans regularly view Internet pornography at home or at work. At least three times as many men as women view pornography. Ninety percent of eight- to sixteen-year-olds in the U.S. have viewed pornography online, usually while doing research or homework on the computer.

According to surveys, trends among Christians parallel those in the rest of society. A couple of years ago, 50 percent of clergy

responding to a pastors.com survey admitted to having accessed porn in the past year. Forty-seven percent of Christians who responded to another survey said that pornography was a problem in their home. Within a week of a major Promise Keepers gathering, 50 percent of the men who had attended reported that they had gone to pornographic Web sites.

Now I hear these statistics and I immediately want to argue. I can't imagine that these numbers would apply to our churches. Can you? One Colorado pastor said he couldn't believe these statistics would be accurate for his congregation. The men in his church are successful; they are hard working; they have families; they help with the congregation's ministries. He said, "I wanted to prove this wrong, so I went to the leadership of my congregation. I said, 'Let me do a survey of the men in my church.'" Of those who responded, 25 percent had looked at porn within the previous few days, 44 percent within six months, and 61 percent within the last year. The real statistic is probably higher; some men admitted they didn't fill out the survey because they were afraid about how the results would be used.

### **What we gaze on fills us**

In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus teaches his disciples that "the eye is the lamp of the body. So, if your eye is healthy, your whole body will be full of light; but if your eye is unhealthy, your whole body will be full of darkness. If then the light in you is darkness, how great is the darkness!" (Matt. 6:22–23). Jesus is talking about the corrupting power of wealth here, but he could as easily be referring to anything in our life that wants to reach out and grab hold of us: that is the thing that we worship. Jesus is saying here that what we gaze on begins to fill us.

If you're looking at pornography, what's going in through your eyes is beginning to fill your being. "If the light in you is darkness, how great is the darkness!" A bit earlier in the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus tells his followers, "You have heard that it was said, 'You should not commit adultery.' But I say to you that everyone who looks at a woman with lust has already committed adultery with her in his heart" (Matt. 5:27–28).

What goes through your eyes fills your heart. Jesus is really radical on this. He goes on, "If your right eye causes you to sin . . ." He doesn't say you should stop looking. What does he say you are supposed to do with your eye? "Tear it out!" He says it is better for you to lose one of your members than for your whole body to be thrown into hell. As I read this, I don't think Jesus is just talking about what will happen after we die; I think Jesus is talking about the hell we can build for ourselves and our families today.



And you can't start making exceptions. You can't say, "Isn't a little pornography okay? It's not such a big deal. Especially if it means I'm not *really* cheating on my spouse—just looking at a few pictures." I think Jesus would say pornography is a big deal; your eye is the lamp of your body.

### **A positive framework for talking about sex in church**

Mennonites have said little about pornography. One exception is a new (2008) pamphlet from Faith and Life Resources: "Close to Home: Dealing with Pornography." In addition I have heard about two occasions when Mennonites have talked about the subject, at the last two big Mennonite conventions in the U.S., at Charlotte (2005) and San Jose (2007). In Charlotte, the organization called Mennonite Women called on the denomination to wake up and look at this issue. Two years later at San Jose, Mennonite Women met with Mennonite Men in a joint session in which they talked about pornography. Then they had breakout

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sessions. The men and the women went to separate spaces to gather things they wanted to say to each other about pornography.

Then they came back together. The women said to the men: "We are devastated by our partners' use of porn and its damaging effect on our relationships. Women portrayed in porn are our sisters and we care about them. We want to be in solidarity with them. They are someone's wife, daughter, mother, sister." The men said: "We want women to

know how powerful and important sex is for us and how strong the sex drive can be. Male sexuality has become muted in our society. Sexual energy, even the positive kind, has come to be seen as bad or wrong. We want women to know that we want to reclaim our sexuality as a gift from God."

I am especially grateful for two things that happened at the 2007 gathering. First, Mennonites were willing to talk to each other about sexuality. They were willing to look at the questions raised by pornography and name them. And second, the conversation didn't end with finger pointing and condemnation; it pushed ahead to a call for a positive framework for talking about

sex in the church. We need to have a way of naming what is reality for men and for women. Instead of just talking about what's bad and wrong, we need to find positive ways of celebrating each other as male and female, of rejoicing in the gift of sexuality we've been given. If naming the issue of pornography can be one of the ways we are drawn into a healthy conversation about sex in the church, then what is a scourge in our society could end up being a gift.

### **Three proposals**

Now, I have three suggestions to make.

**Fill your eyes with good things.** Men and women, listen to Jesus telling us that our eyes are the lamps of our bodies. If you want to be filled with light, then think—gaze on—these things: “whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasant, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence and if there is anything worthy of praise” (Phil. 4:8). Don't put yourself in the position of looking at pornography. If you know it is a temptation for you, and even if you don't know it is an issue, get some filtering software for your computer. Consider getting software that will simply say, “I am not able to go to sites that can put me in harm's way.”

**Be accountable.** Talk to each other about this issue. If all this sermon does is encourage you to talk to one other person about the problem of pornography, we are getting somewhere. Especially if you know pornography is a temptation for you, find someone you can tell who can help hold you accountable. This week Katie and I were talking about this sermon, and she looked at me and said, “Andrew, do you do Internet porn?” We've been married eighteen years, and that is the first time she has ever asked me about whether I use pornography. I was able to say, “No, I don't do it, and after the work I've done this week, I really don't want to start.” Accountability is critical because of the kind of pull pornography has, the addictive quality. Talk to your spouse, to your housemates. Choose to make yourself accountable.

**Don't just turn to other people; turn to God.** Using pornography is not an unforgivable sin. This activity is not something that leaves you beyond hope. Bring it to God and ask other people to pray for you. Remember the encouragement in the book of James.

“The prayer of faith will save the sick, and the Lord will raise them up; and anyone who has committed sins will be forgiven. Therefore confess your sins to one another, and pray for one another, so that you may be healed. The prayer of the righteous is powerful and effective” (Jas. 5:15–16). The power for a changed life comes ultimately from God and from the cross.

Internet pornography is a big problem, and it is growing larger. I think this is a more serious issue for the Mennonite Church than homosexuality, or divorce, or most other hot-button issues, because Internet pornography is going to affect a lot of people in our pews, including some of us sitting in this room today. It is important for us to name the issue, to talk about it, and to use that conversation as an entry into a positive discussion of sexuality.

Let’s commit ourselves to one another. Let’s commit ourselves to Jesus. Let’s commit ourselves to having pure eyes that give light to the whole body.

## Notes

These online resources were helpful in shaping this sermon:

Mike Genung, “How Your Church Can Help Those Who Struggle with Porn or Sex Addiction,” <http://www.urbanministry.org/bg/howtodeal>.

Mike Genung, “How Many Porn Addicts Are in Your Church?” <http://www.crosswalk.com/1336107/>.

Brenda Martin Hurst, “A Call for an Impassioned Response to Pornography,” <http://www.emu.edu/seminary/features/response.html>.

Laurie Oswald Robinson, “Pornography: Candor and Pain,” <http://www.sanjose2007.org/mpress/thursday/pornography.html>.

Amy Frykholm, “Addictive Behavior: Pastors and Pornography,” *Christian Century*, September 4, 2007; <http://www.christiancentury.org/article.lasso?id=3629>.

Triple X church: [www.xxxchurch.com](http://www.xxxchurch.com).

## About the author

Andrew Kreider is pastor of Prairie Street Mennonite Church, Elkhart, Indiana. This article is adapted from a sermon he preached there on June 15, 2008, as part of a series on healthy relationships. At the close of the service, he invited the men to gather at the front of the sanctuary. He handed out one-inch lengths of electrical wire, to remind them all of the power of sexuality, and of the need to stay grounded in God in order to avoid getting burned. Each man was to tell his family or friends about the wire and its significance, and tape it to his computer monitor as a reminder.

## Book review

Reece Retzlaff

*The Erotic Word: Sexuality, Spirituality, and the Bible*, by David M. Carr. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003.

**I**n *The Erotic Word*, David Carr explores the interconnections of sexuality, spirituality, scripture, and setting. He focuses on the Song of Songs and other biblical garden texts, especially Genesis 2 and 3 and Isaiah's song of the vineyard (Isa. 5:1–7). Carr argues that in the ancient Near East, vineyards were often associated with female deities, and he uses this context to interpret many images in the Song of Songs.

Carr's main arguments are (1) for reconnecting sexuality and spirituality, which Western society has divided; and (2) for read-

**Unlike many of its ancient counterparts, the creation story in Genesis 2 emphasizes the longing for intimacy itself, not the actual joining or the children begotten from the union.**

ing the Song of Songs as both sexual and spiritual. *Eros* is passion for what is good; it is not so much about genital intercourse as about desire and passion for connectivity and intimacy.

Interpreting Genesis, Carr argues for an understanding of *eros* that involves mutuality. The patriarchal rules about sexuality found in later biblical texts result from the fall and do not reflect God's original intentions for human sexuality. These rules show how

sexuality is used to maintain a patriarchal society, by promoting male-female matches for the purpose of reproduction. Carr stresses that reproduction is not the focal point of intimacy; unlike many of its ancient counterparts, the creation story in Genesis 2 emphasizes the longing for intimacy itself, not the actual joining or the children begotten from the union.

Continuing from this observation, Carr emphasizes the importance of social commentary on the patriarchal system, and he

points to the desire—evident in the Song of Songs—to return to mutuality in intimacy in relationships. He accentuates the Song of Songs’ significance for addressing systemic power differences between women and men.

This book speaks to issues important to today’s church. Carr encourages us to read the Song of Songs as spiritual allegory (about God and the individual and/or about Christ and the church) *and* as an expression of desire between human lovers. Both kinds of desire for intimacy are *eros*, and both are necessary in the church. Carr emphasizes that the Bible has not just one view of sexuality but many. These views arise in pre-fall and in post-fall ideologies, and the perspectives are in dialogue and in tension with each other.

Carr also looks at the portrayals of God as lover and husband arising from the Song of Songs in light of portrayals in other Old Testament books, including Hosea and Ezekiel. The latter provide readings of God as husband and lord that are sometimes destructive or abusive. Carr takes these difficult scriptures seriously as part of the intrabiblical discussion of God as lover and God as husband, and he considers how the Song of Songs may challenge aspects of those texts.

Overall, this book is interesting reading, in its treatment of cultural and canonical locations. It is dense but worth the effort. Of special note are the possible parallels Carr observes between the female and male voices in the Song of Songs and those of Mary and the risen Jesus at the garden tomb. Carr offers an interpretation of the Song of Songs as both spiritual and sexual and invites us to let this song interpret these aspects of our humanity.

### **About the reviewer**

Reece (Charissa) Retzlaff is an MDiv student at Associated Mennonite Biblical Seminary, Elkhart, Indiana. Her area of concentration is theological studies, with a major in Bible. Her home congregation is Foothills Mennonite Church, Calgary, Alberta.