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SEXUALITY ISSUES IN FAMILY AND CONGREGATION

Delores Friesen

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This article will look at a variety of sexuality issues facing our families and congregations, with an emphasis on how the church might best respond to the concerns, hurts, needs and possibilities of individuals around us. Our thinking will be organized under three major topics: (1) the church as a discerning and nurturing community, (2) the church as a source of pastoral care, and (3) the church as an ethical community. The church and the family need to work together to increase awareness of what our experience as sexual beings means for the way in which we understand and attempt to live our faith.

The Church as a Discerning and Nurturing Community

The church has a unique ministry that spans an individual's life cycle from birth to death. It is one of the few institutions which serves children, youth, adults, and elderly persons. Furthermore, the church has an opportunity to work with entire families, sometimes spanning three or four generations. What better place to address the important issues of sexuality? High school health classes, by

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contrast, are composed only of teenagers, peers with a mixture of cultural and personal values. Lamaze classes work only with expectant parents and focus on one specific sexual experience. Counselors see one individual or one family who may be facing sexual difficulties, but in the counseling room there is little opportunity to affect the mores or values of the community. So individuals may work intensely on justice and healing at a personal level, but the society continues to perpetuate violence and exploitation, with the net result that more and more individuals and families are disturbed and destroyed.

In a study by Gurin, Veroff and Feld, nearly one in four adult Americans felt sufficiently troubled to need help at some time; one in seven sought help; and forty-two percent of those seeking professional help approached a clergyperson. Two of the reasons why pastors have this opportunity is that there is ready access to people's homes, and traditionally clergy play a role at critical points in the life cycle. Who else ministers to families at times of birth, baptism, marriage, crisis, and death? This accessibility to people in the community, at crucial change points, provides a unique opportunity for *both* a prophetic and pastoral ministry.

It is interesting to note that Dean Klierer indicates that sexual problems seem to occur nearly as frequently among Christians as they occur in the general population, and that sexual matters may be more troublesome for this group of persons.² However, while pastors are a popular source of help generally, not all pastors are approachable on these specific issues. People are not likely to contact someone unless they feel the caregiver is comfortable to be with and qualified to deal with the issue or problem at hand.

The first task, then, for the church and the family would be that of discernment and nurture. How can we assist one another in developing healthy, holy and happy experiences and attitudes in the sexual realm?

Sexuality and Personhood

One of the first priorities is to understand that we are all intensely, meaningfully sexual creatures from birth to death. We move forever into new dimensions and new understandings. Sexuality is much more inclusive than sex. Sex refers to the biological aspects of reproduction or gender. Sexuality

incorporates the psychological and cultural factors in our sexual behavior. Sexuality is wholistic — it reflects and integrates biological, psychological, ethical, spiritual, and cultural factors. It is integral to our personhood.

In Genesis 1-3, the creation of male and female in the image of God was “VERY GOOD.” Not just “good,” as the rest of creation, but “VERY GOOD.” Furthermore man and woman were given to each other, as gift: and were together entrusted with the joint work of reproduction and caring for God’s creation. In a society gone mad with individualism, power, hierarchy, and exploitation, the Biblical message of the goodness and “gift-ness” of sexuality stands as a shining light. Sexuality is a gift, something to be treasured, honored, and enjoyed. It is created by God as a good, wholesome way of being together in the world, male and female together “made in the image of God.”

The ways in which men and women choose to relate to one another are an opportunity to understand not only God’s will for humankind, but also the depth of human sin and fallenness. In Genesis 3 some of the results of the fall are clearly stated. There is hiding, blaming, and “ruling over” behavior. Instead of the idyllic “being naked and not ashamed” of chapter 2, there is now fear, distress, and pain in daily life, childbirth, and interpersonal relationships. The first task of the church and the family then would be to help one another recover the intentions of God in creation — to acknowledge and accept our differences and our sexual nature as a gift of God, intended to bring wholeness and healing to each other and to our world.

Sexuality and Education

This insight means teaching our children and young people to value and care for their human bodies, including those parts which are often talked of with dishonor (I Cor. 11). In addition, there should be respect for differences, whether these be gender, ability, or personality. The development of a good self-concept which cares for the self and which can relate wholesomely to others with joy and gladness is of crucial importance to experiencing wholeness in the area of sexuality.

Education about sexuality needs to be tightly interwoven with our beliefs, convictions, and values. There is much in the Bible that gives us direction and guidance. To love God and our

neighbor as ourselves brings together both spirituality and sexuality. In loving God and being loved by God, we sense and understand the great passion with which we are redeemed and held by God. We also learn about spirituality and sexuality as we become aware of the bond of longing and love implanted within us for those others who are children of God. All love is bound up in the love of God. As we come to know and experience more of God's love, and the way God loves, we will know better how we too can love God and each other. Body and soul sharing is what intercourse is all about — the Old Testament rightly calls it "knowing": "and Adam knew his wife, and they conceived a son..." Without that complete knowledge, or sharing of body, soul, and mind, the sexual act has little meaning. It becomes only a momentary joining of two bodies, or a means of physical sensation and release. Our task as Christians is not to subdue or deny our sexuality, as an enemy intent on ruin or a force to be corralled. It is instead an opportunity to offer this passion for life to God in a way that fulfills God's will for our lives.

Instead of hiding, blaming and making rules about sexual behaviors and issues, the church and the family need to create an open climate where questions, fears, and problems can be shared. Exposure to accurate information causes young people to go slower in sexual activity, not faster. Furthermore, the evidence from research studies shows that those who receive sex information from their parents or someone important to them behave more conservatively and responsibly.¹

Children and teens will get sexual information whether or not it is provided by their parents or their congregations. However parents are a child's earliest and most primary model of sexuality and authority. Research indicates that acceptance of sexuality is crucial to the emergence of responsible behavior. Just telling someone "not to do it" is not enough; in fact, this approach often has the opposite effect. Somehow, Christian parents, pastors, teachers, and youth leaders need to affirm the beauty, sanctity, and power of sexuality, and let the oncoming generation see it as "gift" and "grace," a mighty force to be reckoned with, but one that is central to the creation and intention of God himself.

Practically speaking, every parent and every congregation should have regular opportunities and readiness to speak about sexuality. Both formal and informal programs of sex

education and nurture are needed, starting at preschool and going on throughout the life span. In addition, touching, hugging, and relating to persons of both genders should be a natural part of our nurture and care of children. Men as well as women could helpfully participate in nursery, Sunday School, and Children's Church activities. It has been suggested by some sex educators and researchers that the double standard of more promiscuity by teenaged males may be directly related to the fact that male infants, toddlers, and preschoolers receive less touching, hugging, and caressing; and they are often also breastfed for shorter periods of time than female infants. Could it be that our Christian homes and churches are guilty of withholding touch and love to such an extent that our teens actually experience a "skin hunger" that makes them an easy mark for early sexual experience? We could ask one another, "When was the last time that you expressed physical affection for the children in your care?"

For Christians, sexuality is always to be seen in the context of relationships. Healthy sexuality develops out of healthy relationships. The church needs to preach and teach regularly about how men and women relate to each other. How do Christians deal with attraction? How does one develop emotional, spiritual, intellectual and social intimacy in addition to sexual intimacy? What are some acceptable ways to get to know persons of both sexes? Is singleness also held in honor, or is one less of a person if he or she is not married? How does one grow in the ability to trust and care for another?

The congregation is a safe context in which one can learn about sexuality. Its intergenerational nature is a real plus. As a community of discernment and nurture, the church should take seriously its responsibility to give accurate information, to develop attitudes of respect and honor, to build healthy marriages, to create a climate of openness, and to clarify the Biblical teachings regarding sexuality.

One particular opportunity is the premarital counseling sessions which are often required before the marriage ceremony is performed. Unfortunately too few pastors include frank discussion in these sessions of sexuality and the physical aspects of marriage. It would also be helpful if every congregation planned for some specific teaching and preaching on sexuality each year. This might be done in a retreat setting, a youth event, a unit in Sunday School, a young parents' session

on sex education in the home, or through special guest speakers from the community or wider church, films, book reviews, articles in the church newsletter, Bible studies and sermons on the more than 100 chapters in the Bible that speak directly to sexuality issues and questions. If over half of the books of the Bible address sexuality, then surely the church could do well to teach, preach, and nurture more often and more directly in this area.⁴

The Church As a Source of Pastoral Care

The second area of concern that is coming to the fore in many of our churches is that of pastoral care. In the 1990 School for Ministry at Mennonite Brethren Biblical Seminary, pastors and their spouses spoke of their own pain and questions in this area, and told of overwhelming needs of persons in their congregations for pastoral care and counseling. Increasingly, persons within the church are sharing personal experiences of incest, rape, divorce, abortion, AIDS, and homosexuality. *Many of our families and church leaders are simply not equipped to deal with problems of this magnitude, yet the gospel is reaching persons for whom warped sexuality has been a way of life.*

Furthermore, problems once hidden and unrecognized in our traditional Christian homes and communities are coming out into the open. In a congregation where I worked part-time as a Resource Minister, a sermon by the pastor on abortion brought four or five persons to talk with me about their personal experiences and needs, even though, for some, the abortion had taken place many years earlier. The pastoral teaching allowed some very real needs to be expressed, and fortunately there was a climate of openness and adequate and appropriate staffing that allowed persons to be honest enough to ask for care and healing. It was significant, however, that none of these women felt comfortable talking directly with the pastor initially. Here is an area where the gifts of the body of Christ need to be utilized. Christian doctors, nurses, teachers, and counselors are a much needed resource in our congregations. The gifts of women may be of particular value in some situations. The church needs to develop skills and wisdom in relating to persons who have experienced sexual hurt, disappointment, abuse and violence. Persons need to be trained to

work with these very painful situations. Peer counselors and professional counselors are both needed. Caregivers need to know when and how to refer persons to more skilled care when this is needed. Mennonite Central Committee has recently produced two very helpful packets of materials to stimulate acts of mercy and justice. These give helpful information, stories, and descriptions of how to utilize resources in the community, and how to relate to persons who have been victims of sexual or physical molestation.⁵

Listening With Love

One of the most important skills which Christians need to develop is the ability to listen with love. If our families and congregations can give a clear witness to the gospel, then redemption can take place for persons caught in difficult and devastating sexual experiences. Pastoral care includes prevention and modeling, as well as crisis response skills. Unless one actively models and affirms the good, it is hard for anyone, even those raised in Christian homes, to know how to achieve the wholeness and joy in human relationship which can prevent abuse.

Some years ago a person came to faith through the patient ministry and listening of a retired interim pastor. He accepted the pain of her impending divorce, and even understood why she was considering aborting the unborn child, which her husband was convinced was not his child (this, after all, was the stated reason why he was leaving, and she felt it might be her only chance to save the marriage). But it took more than the pastor to minister effectively to this person, her hyperactive first child, and eventually the second baby, who was born after the mother's baptism and reception into church. A whole host of young families and older women and men stood by this new Christian and her broken family, with support, home visits, phone calls, food, childcare, practical and spiritual counsel. It took years of patience and love, but that woman today is herself a lay caregiver in the congregation, who reaches out to others in need and pain.

Talking About Sexuality

To be a caregiver in situations of sexual need and concern, one must first of all be comfortable talking about sexuality. In other words, one must be an askable person. Some studies

show that people do not feel comfortable sharing sexual concerns with their pastor. There have also been an unfortunate number of instances where pastors or counselors have themselves been abusive or have taken advantage of clients. The intimate nature of the pastor/parishioner relationship means that one must guard it with special care. Wayne Oates stated years ago that it is not a choice as to whether or not a pastor desired to counsel but whether he or she would counsel in a skilled or unskilled manner.

Training for pastors, elders, deacons, and lay caregivers needs to include cognitive, affective and skills components. In addition to knowledge and mastery of accurate sexual information, there needs to be an increased awareness of one's own sexuality, and the development of appropriate modes of helping people with sexual problems. It would be appropriate for ministers to address themselves to sexual concerns as naturally as they respond to other aspects of human living, and therefore it is crucial that ministers and Christian caregivers be educated in sexuality so that they may constructively add their distinctive perspective to that of other helping professionals who are also providing care in this area.

Biblical Advice

Paul's first letter to the Corinthians contains much excellent pastoral advice regarding sexual matters. In fact, when one reads it carefully, the modern day problems do not seem too different from the ones faced by the first century church. Several chapters very frankly address immorality, sexual perversion, conjugal rights, temptation, singleness, passion, and desire (I Cor. 5, 6, 7). These instructions are followed by careful teachings on freedom, grace, law, order, communion, spiritual gifts, love, worship, resurrection and giving (I Cor. 8-16). It is important that the church and the family do not become shortsighted and invest all their time and energy in pastoral care concerns. The Gospel calls us also to challenge one another to the kind of body life where *all* the members have the same care for one another (I Cor. 12:25). The end goal of pastoral care is to help each part work properly so that the entire body can make bodily growth and upbuild itself in love" (Eph. 4:16). In other words, there needs to be a giving and receiving, not just a one-way street of the more fortunate helping those less fortunate.

The Church as an Ethical Community

One of the ways the church and the family could more fully use the gifts of those who have found healing through the church's ministry and teaching is to take more seriously our call to be an ethical community of witness and justice. In the area of sexuality, there are many places where a clear and forthright witness is needed. Persons who themselves have suffered sexual violence are wonderful crusaders for justice in regards to other oppressed and abused persons, pornography, and sexual exploitation through advertising and the media.

There are many ethical issues which need much broader discussion, and discernment. Biblical standards need to be studied, taught, and talked about. It is not always easy to make the applications to specific situations. Persons in the medical field face many ethical and moral dilemmas concerning genetic engineering, abortion, surrogate parenthood, etc. Couples face difficult questions about birth control, infertility, and sterilization. With the advent of AIDS there is an additional danger and new risk in promiscuous relationships. Even secular textbooks now include discussions on values and morality. Can the church and Christian family do less?

In this day of so-called sexual enlightenment, ambivalence about sex still abounds. Many people are asking the basic who, when, what, where, and why questions. Whom may we sexually interact with? What determines those sexual acts we feel comfortable in doing? Why do we engage in sexual interaction? What is right and what is wrong? Values reflect the priorities we assign to the use of our time and energy. Moral values are those related to our conduct with and treatment of others. Even a secular viewpoint holds that moral actions enhance a person's realizing his or her fullest potential; and immoral actions adversely affect a person's realizing that potential.

In addition, the Christian is clearly responsible also for the other person. "Am I my brother's keeper?" is to be answered in the affirmative. The Gospel clearly spells out the value of every human being. There is a clear respect for women in the Bible, and an ethic of love rather than power. Most sexual crimes and acts of violence are an expression of power or domination. The church must speak out forthrightly about these crimes of lust and power. Integrity, trust, faithfulness and

love are shown to us most clearly in the face of Jesus Christ, and in the covenant nature of God's acts towards humankind. Surely the church can do no less than clearly speak of the principles of faithfulness, trust, love and integrity in sexual matters.

As Christians, we have sexual ethics that include the need for discipline, covenant faithfulness, sexual unity, abstinence, celibacy, unconditional love, intimacy, and service. Sex needs to be kept in proper balance in the totality of life, rather than becoming either too important or threatening. Identity comes from knowing who one is in Christ, rather than from how one performs sexually. Instead of values that reflect social mores and fashions, or relationships of social convenience based on feelings of love and pleasure, the Christian community can give witness to a bond of covenant love which reflects the union between Christ and the church.

The world needs congregations and families who can give a clear and shining witness in a world where sexuality has become a travesty of power and/or pleasure. There needs to be support in our churches and homes for a lifestyle which is joyously sexual and which includes both freedom and responsibility in a sexuality that is biblical and Christlike. Let's make our homes and churches foyers where people can come in and go out and find healing and wholeness, instead of fortresses where we try to keep safe what we have and keep our offspring protected from the "world." Let us accept the challenge and opportunity that sexuality brings us for nurture, discernment, care, and witness.

ENDNOTES

1. Gurin, G., Veroff, J., and Feld, S. *Americans View Their Mental Health: A Nationwide Interview Survey*. New York: Wiley, 1960.
2. Kliever, Dean. "Managing Sexual Feeling in the Christian Community." *Journal of Psychology and Christianity* 5(4) (1986): 50-65.
3. Enns, Hilda, Goerzen, Sue, and Bergen, Lois P. *Teens and Sexuality*. Newton: Faith and Life Press, 1984.
4. A fairly comprehensive list of pertinent biblical references is given in *Human Sexuality in the Christian Life*. Newton, KS: General Conference Mennonite Church (Elkhart, Indiana) and Mennonite Church, 1985, 164-166.
5. *Broken Boundaries: Resources for Pastoring People: Child, Sex and Abuse* (1989) and *The Purple Packet: Domestic Resources for Pastoring Persons: Wife Abuse* (1987). Available from Mennonite Central Committee, 21 South 12th Street, Akron PA 17501 or 134 Plaza Dr., Winnipeg, Manitoba, CANADA R3T 5K9.