

Re-Thinking Adolescent Sexual Ethics: A Social Justice Obligation to Adolescent Sexual Health

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[1] The dominant sexual ethic communicated to adolescents in the United States reflects an act-centered prescription: abstinence-only-until-marriage. Youth are being told "just don't do it" without being given the opportunity to discuss the positive meanings of sexuality, the characteristics of healthy relationships, or the pleasure derived from sexual behaviors. An inadequate sexual ethic for adolescents, and in some cases complete silence about sexuality in churches, marginalizes and stunts the developing moral agency of youth, at best and, at worst, may thwart abstinence efforts and increase risky sexual behaviors. In response, I propose a developmental sexual ethic which holds social justice as a normative criteria resulting in attentiveness to communal responsibility for adolescents' sexual health. As one way to fulfill the communal obligation to actively promote sexual health, I discuss insights from moral education for designing a more appropriate and accessible sexual ethic with accompanying sexuality education resources to promote adolescents' moral agency and healthy sexual development.

[2] By reinforcing a prescriptive sexual ethic "Just don't do it," many parents and leadership in Christian churches communicate to adolescents that they are uncomfortable with and intentionally avoiding addressing youth's developing sexuality in the context of their faith lives. Regularly, I hear adults say, "If we give them information about sex that will encourage them to have sex!" First, this assumes youth do not already know about sex. Second, it accepts an understanding of sexual desire as uncontrollable and adolescents as developmentally infantile until the magic of marriage changes them into mature (hetero) sexual adults. This could not be further from the truth. In fact, the contrary is true. Effective sexuality education programs encourage and assist youth in delaying sexual intercourse, reducing mature sexual behaviors, and using safer sexual practices; all things an effective sexual ethic should contribute to as well.[1] Using sexuality education to teach a development sexual ethic specific to Christian contexts allows adolescents to draw on their core faith values in developing healthy relationships.

[3] I want to be clear parents have primary responsibility to educate their children on matters of sexuality. Yet, Religious institutions serve more teens than any other agency in the community except the public schools, and they are specifically empowered to offer values-based education to children outside of the home.[2] At minimum, one step to healthy sexual development and postponing mature sexual behaviors is active participation in a faith community. Research shows that youth active in religious institutions engage in sexual intercourse less often than their secular counterparts.[3] Moreover, teens who report significant levels of involvement have the lowest reported rates of sexual intercourse.[4] A number of factors contribute to this. Abstinence was a message that these teens received, but not the only message. Active involvement and support

within the congregation are the primary criteria as well as a positive portrayal of sexuality. In addition, these youth reported receiving education on how to make a decision and resources for making that decision.

[4] Yet, many teens who are religiously committed expect more from their congregations when it comes to sexuality issues. Only four in ten religiously active youth agree that their congregation portrays sex in a healthy and positive manner.^[5] Eighty-nine percent of youth report they receive inadequate information on sexual decision-making.^[6] In response to many of these facts, an interfaith group of religious leaders crafted an Open Letter to Religious Leaders on Adolescent Sexuality writing, "We call for right communities to move beyond silence about sexuality or a fear and shame-based ethic that is only based on rules and prohibited acts. Young people pay too high a price when those in religious communities ignore their responsibility to help young people understand their sexuality."^[7] Youth do not perceive that their religious communities are preparing them with the information and tools they need to make moral decisions about sexuality issues.

[5] For example, in preparing to write this paper, I went to search ELCA materials on sexuality for youth. I was able to find one article included in the mLouie series of confirmation material and then one vignette about a teenager included in the newly released, part three of the *ELCA Studies on Sexuality: Journey Together Faithfully*. "Sex talk reflects who God is in our lives" is a two and half page article found in the Darius McCrary, mLouie materials.^[8] However, this article does not address how to make a moral decision about sexual behavior or even address a discussion of sexuality per se. It discusses how we talk about sex. At the very least, if used,^[9] it does raise the question of sexuality in a group discussion and hopefully opens the door for further study. The article does some good things when discussing sexuality and then also reinforces some stereotypes. Overall, the article assumes abstinence, lacks decision-making information, and hopes the reader will make the leap from how one talks about sex to how one behaves sexually.

[6] The second piece I found is from "Free in Christ to Serve the Neighbor: Lutherans Talk about Human Sexuality;" it is one of the vignettes located in Session 2 "Created as Sexual Beings."^[10] Abbey, a sophomore in High School, got the message that sexuality is good from one talk that her Pastor gave, even if this message is contradicted at times. Abbey's dilemma is whether to engage in oral sex and she decides to seek the advice of her youth director. This vignette represents much of the general adolescent wisdom I have heard when it comes to oral sex: (1) this isn't sex because "sex" requires a penis being inserted into a vagina (at least when the church is making the rules), (2) since this is not sexual intercourse, so there must not be a risk involved, and (3) there are stages to sexual behaviors. The study guide asks participants to answer as though they were the youth minister. I will answer this question at the end of the paper. First, we need a better understanding of what Abbey" is looking for, what she needs to know, and how it might best be communicated.

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[7] As I think about how best to respond to Abbey, I recommend we begin to formulate a developmental sexual ethic for youth. Why "developmental"? I emphasize *becoming*-the

process and development "that leads one to sexual health, to live into the fullness of their sexuality as a part of their createdness. As Joan Timmerman writes, "The virtue is not in repressing but in cultivating the human capacity to respond sexually. While extremely significant, this aspect of personal development is not altogether different from intellectual, physical, or spiritual development. One does not come into life fully developed; one has an obligation to grow toward full adulthood."[\[11\]](#) I will outline a developmental sexual ethic that considers incremental sexual behaviors as valuable and recognizes them as stages not absolute "next steps" to more intimate sexual behaviors; stresses the dynamic and qualitative character of relationships; and requires on-going sharing of information, resources and opportunity for praxis learning as a way of encouraging development of moral agency.

[8] I suggest a change in focus from how to teach adolescents to say "No," to how to teach adolescents to recognize when to say "Yes" to a variety of sexual expressions from friendship to kissing, from hugging to sexual intercourse, in a morally responsible fashion that is appropriate to developmental stages. The norms governing relationships for an adolescent sexual ethic reflect that of many *adult* sexual ethics-consent, non-exploitative and non-coercive, honest, mutually pleasurable and protected against unintended pregnancies and sexually transmitted diseases.[\[12\]](#) However, the basis for these relationship norms is often contradicted or neglected when it comes to adolescents. What is needed to enable adolescents to live out these normative requirements is also a social justice component of the ethic. Margaret Farley describes this as "the kind of justice that everyone in a community or society is obligated to affirm for its members as sexual beings." She goes on to explain that "Whatever the sexual status of persons, their needs for incorporation into the community, for psychic security and basic well-being, make the same claims for social cooperation among us as do those of us all."[\[13\]](#) The norm of social justice as it applies to adolescent sexual ethics is my primary focus. First, adolescents need to be shown and taught a well-rounded relational understanding of sexuality with a focus on relationship quality, not just whether marriage has happened or not. As a social justice component of a sexual ethic, Christian communities have a responsibility to also affirm the moral agency of youth and to provide educational opportunities to enhance decision-making skills.

Sexuality and Developing Sexual Health

[9] A well-rounded relational understanding of sexuality requires highlighting the positive aspects of sexuality and recognizing (even combating) the various socio-cultural factors that alienate us from a healthy expression of our sexuality. Indeed, most Christian denominations view sexuality as a "good" gift from God and agree that "Sexuality is a divinely bestowed blessing for expressing love and generating life, for mutual companionship, and pleasure."[\[14\]](#)

[10] However in some cases, when attempts are made to address sexuality, the overall message of sexuality as a good gift from God is negated by how informational and teaching materials present sexuality. For example, an adult youth advisor in a United Methodist Church reports:

We've used *True Love Waits* and Focus on the Family materials with our youth. I think the materials are very good in terms of cautioning youth about sex and helping them see the spiritual

dimensions to sexuality. But I'm uncomfortable with the role that fear plays in those materials. Are we really preparing youth for the healthy sexual relationships that we want them to have?[15]

While an explicit connection is made between sexuality and spirituality, the fear-based language prevents one from describing the connection as good and life-giving. For example, a female from the Presbyterian Church USA writes, "know that the adults who work with us care about our well-being. They don't want us getting pregnant or getting AIDS. But the way they talk about sex is always emphasizing the negative. They say it's ~God's good gift," but the way they talk about it doesn't make it sound good." Along the same lines, a male from the Southern Baptist Church writes, "Our pastor and our teachers make me feel like sex is an ugly, dangerous thing. But if that's what it is, why would anyone want to do it?[16] The hypocrisy of the message that sexuality is a good gift from God, but something to be feared or avoided, until that one beautiful day of marriage is not lost on youth. It further confuses them, and turns them away from the church as a valid source of moral judgment on issues of sexuality.

[11] It may be helpful at this point, to say what I consider to be a well-rounded definition of sexuality. Sexuality is *an embodied component of the human capacity to know and a way to communicate and form of expression of one's self-understanding*. In other words, I am suggesting that we share some part of who we understand ourselves to be *through our thoughts, our bodies, and our emotions as sexuality is more than the sum total of our sexual behaviors* and reciprocally gain understanding from others when expressing our sexuality. Our sexuality is *developed in personal (and systemic) relationships affected by social, biological, psychological, cultural and spiritual forces*. Thus, what our sexuality means to us at any given time is historically and culturally constructed. We are sexual beings from birth to death, and our sexuality is constantly unfolding and changing.

[12] Lastly, sexuality is rightly *oriented toward pleasure and appropriately under the control of personal moral agency*. A goal oriented (or teleological) component of the expression of our sexuality is for pleasure, this may incorporate offspring, but it may not. Certainly, experience of pleasure is complicated by the third part of the definition (historical and cultural constructions). Mediating factors can be teased out when pleasure is coupled with personal moral agency as the guiding factor in determining and defining "pleasure" especially in the case of gender dynamics within relationships.[17]

[13] Given a more robust understanding of sexuality what are the qualities of sexual health that follow from it? Here, I lean on the collaborative work done in the fields of public health, medicine, mental health, and sexual ethics. In the National Commission on Adolescent Sexual Health Report, "Facing Facts: Sexual Health for America's Adolescents," the characteristics of sexual health are identified in relation to self, parents and family, and peers, including romantic partners: "Sexually healthy adolescents (1) appreciate their bodies, (2) take responsibility for their own behaviors, (3) communicate effectively with both genders in appropriate and respectful ways, and (4) express love and intimacy in a developmentally appropriate manner." [18] Thus, sexual health is not solely defined by sexual behaviors, or lack thereof; it signals personal developmental needs, recognition of autonomy, attention to interpersonal behavior, and finally emotional and physical expressions of one's sexuality.

[14] As part of the definition of sexuality, I suggest it is *developed in personal (and systemic) relationships affected by social, biological, psychological, cultural and spiritual forces/*.

Research shows us that sexual health can be harmed or enhanced by an adolescent's socio-cultural status.[\[19\]](#) Aiding healthy sexual development requires attention within faith communities to the various factors intersecting with one's ability to attain sexual health. Four notable areas of importance in the research I conduct are race, disability, gender, and sexual identity. Research in the field of sexual ethics has clearly demonstrated the negative effect of ignoring the oppressive nature of many of those cultural constructions for a racialized or disabled person's self-image and future relationships.[\[20\]](#) And yet, only two sexuality curricula address race or disability in a way that acknowledges how the socio-cultural construction of race[\[21\]](#) and disability[\[22\]](#) bear on developing sexuality. In addition, damage to one's self-image and future relationships can be similarly caused by sexism or heterosexism.

[15] With regard to sexism, many female youth experience different expectations placed upon. These differences are not necessarily pejorative, though some are as they arise from sexist assumptions. When communication is not clear and one believes clarifying intent would mean "losing the guy," some young women believe sexual behaviors and intercourse are a means to "keeping the guy" which reinforces the stereotypes that boys just want sex and a female's worth is determined by her ability to provide sexual pleasure. For example, the following two vignettes illustrate this internalized double standard.

Feeling up is the big thing with my boyfriend. He's a real breast man. If he did it more gently, I'd like it. But it does more for him than for me. (*Female, Roman Catholic Church*)

Faith Matters quote: "I don't think I've had an orgasm. The earth never shakes. I don't quiver and moan like my boyfriend does. Sometimes I wonder why I keep doing it. Am I afraid of losing him? Is it a habit now that I can't break? It doesn't do that much for me, and I get filled with guilt. [More from her in response to a question about the church]: "You have to be kidding. Of course we never talk about sex at church. I would be in so much trouble if anyone there had any idea what I've done. I wish that I could talk to someone about it." (*Female Independent Baptist*) [\[23\]](#)

The first young woman acknowledges that "if he did it more gently, I'd like it"; however, her conclusion is not that her pleasure should have equal priority. She reasons that it is more for him than her. She has internalized a message that sexual pleasure of her male partner trumps her own needs. The same is true of the female commenting on orgasm. She does not openly seek equal pleasure for herself. She also suggests that this is in part because she is afraid of losing her boyfriend. This dynamic often plays into the sexism present in "friends with benefits" arrangements.[\[24\]](#) The implicit gendered stereotypes and sexism that young women exhibit in their behavior can be extremely detrimental to their sexual health. Sexism hinders open communication, expression of sexual needs, and permits a status quo that in essence is exploitative.

[16] In these cases, education about gender stereotypes and sexism can be helpful in sensitizing young men and empowering young women.[\[25\]](#) This requires Christian churches address sexism and their gendered assumptions. Gender stereotypes also play a role in how gay and lesbian youth are treated and how sexual orientation is understood. Attending to these issues creates an open environment for youth to explore their sexual identity in a responsible fashion.

Interestingly, a higher percentage of males and females self-report as homosexual or bisexual in religious institutions are higher than the average secular reports. Yet, forty-six percent said their parents weren't aware of their orientation. With that percentage in mind, it is not surprising that non-heterosexual teens were almost twice as likely to have seriously considered suicide, than heterosexual teens. The formation of one's sexual identity is a key developmental task taking place during adolescence. "Young people mature biologically and emotionally into adults, experience their first erotic feelings and romantic relationships, and confirm their gender identity and sexual orientation. Religious institutions must acknowledge this broader understanding of young people's sexuality," including the differing needs based on age, but also race, gender, and sexual orientation.[\[26\]](#)

[17] Discussion of pleasure and non-coital behaviors is another aspect of sexuality and sexually health expression often neglected when addressing youth.[\[27\]](#) Whereas, sexuality is often portrayed positively in the defining stages, sexual desires or feelings are portrayed as being in need of strict control. This reflects a historical Christian understanding of sexual desire as disordered and in need of a proper outlet. For example, youth are deterred from engaging in any sexual contact because of the "temptation" that contact may incite. And, the book warns that physical affection "naturally leads" from one stage to the next.[\[28\]](#) Many of the small, side comments in

caption bubbles read: "Be vigilant," "Be ready for battle," and "Don't play games with stuff that plays for keeps" surrounded by watermarks of men pressing barbells over their heads. The message is clear, sexual desire is overwhelmingly powerful and must be guarded against in order to maintain "moral excellence." The picture of sexuality as a good gift from God melts into a battle scene with awkward teen on one side and raging hormones, mass media, and sexual arousal on the other.

[18] On the other hand, an open discussion on pleasurable options outside of intercourse encourages positive limit setting and affirms sexuality as God's gift in its many expressions, rather than reducing it to sexual intercourse. Being open to our need to experience sexual pleasure in an age appropriate way, can draw youth to the conclusion that intercourse does not have to be an inevitable next step in relationships.

My boyfriend and I spent a long time deciding about intercourse. We'd been spending a lot of time naked in his bedroom, like in the afternoon when no one else was there. I have two younger sisters, so my home isn't safe. Well, when we were naked with each other, we touched each other and kissed each other, and it was all very cool. We learned how to give each other the big O. We kissed each other everywhere, and I do mean everywhere, but we didn't really do oral sex. It's more like we masturbated each other.

So then we started thinking about what's next. In a lot of ways it felt like intercourse was just what should follow. But we started asking some questions that were hard to answer. Do we want to do this for any reason except the pleasure? Will it be enough better than what we're already doing to make it worth the risk of my getting pregnant? I'm not worried about a disease or anything because neither of us has ever been with anyone else. But I know you can get pregnant from even one time. And from what my Mom told me, just a condom doesn't make you completely safe. I thought it would be a lot better if I was on the pill. But what a big step that is, to ask for a prescription for the pill.

And then there's the whole religious thing. I don't feel guilty about anything we've done so far. I think God made us like this and that we're supposed to enjoy each other. But God wouldn't approve of my getting pregnant. And a pregnancy would like totally, totally, absolutely screw up both of our lives. My Mom is pretty cool, but I don't think I can talk to her about this. I don't want her to know how far the two of us have already gone. And I sure can't talk about it at church. That's why I was so glad to take part in this study. You ought to be able to talk about this at church. Anyway, we decided that we just had too many questions without good answers. And it was better to be careful, so we're not having intercourse. (*Female, Roman Catholic Church*) [29]

This young woman articulates a new focus that many religious institutions do not address—sexual behaviors are pleasurable outside of penile-vaginal intercourse and intercourse does not always need to be the "end" purpose of sexual relationships.[30] An adolescent sexual ethic and subsequent educational materials need to stress a balanced view of sexual pleasure. Sexual passion is under one's personal agency and should be controlled, but it should also be mutually shared with consent.

Defining Healthy Sexual Relationships

[19] Given the above understanding of sexuality and expansion beyond a behavioral/act focus, a shift needs to be made to address relationship quality. The following vignettes, written by youth from the *Teenage Sexuality and Religious Research Project*, [31] highlight decision-making and negotiation of relationships. These examples show youth as moral "agents" negotiating relationships or commenting on the process. The positive contribution of the *Teenage Sexuality* study is how it reveals the reality of adolescent behavior and the thought process behind that behavior. Youth in religious institutions are engaging in sexual behaviors. The evidence shows that they are thinking through the decisions they make, however they need more information about sexuality, sexual relationships, and sexual behaviors.

[20] For example, a male in the Reformed Church discusses his thoughts on what questions are important to ask in the process of making a decision regarding sexual intercourse. He has come to these questions without, as he notes, help from adults.

[Faith Matters quote]: No one wants us to have any information about this. All we get told is the big NO. I'd like to talk more about this. Why shouldn't I have sex before marriage? Where do you draw the lines between kissing and touching and oral sex and intercourse? This is such an important part of life, and we do not get help from adults. [More from him]: I think there are questions you need to ask. Is it okay with you? Is it okay with the other person? Do you have birth control if you're going to have intercourse? Could you handle it if the birth control didn't work and you had a baby? Are you committed to the other person? Not marriage committed but do you love the other person? (*Male, Reformed Church*

)[\[32\]](#)

Obviously, he has learned to value moral commitments such as responsibility to others, mutuality, and self-respect which he applies to the questions he raises about the decision to have sexual intercourse. This young man's test questions reflect a set of moral standards akin to what is recommended by many sexual ethicists as well as in the Open Letter to Religious Leaders on Adolescent Sexuality, "Adolescent intimate relationships . . . should be based on shared personal values, and should be consensual, non-exploitative and non-coercive, honest, mutually pleasurable and protected against unintended pregnancies and sexually transmitted diseases."[\[33\]](#) A number of other youth in the survey reflected similar criteria for relationships as the basis for their decision-making. Clergy and youth advisors should be discussing ways to gauge readiness for sexual intercourse that are grounded in an understanding of mature relationships[\[34\]](#) by providing opportunities for youth to reflect upon and explore the dynamic and qualitative nature of relationships rather than relying on a static definition of marriage.

[21] Decisions to engage in sexual intercourse are affected by a variety of factors and some teens certainly reported feeling peer pressure.

What's everyone else doing? That's the way I make decisions about almost everything. I came really close to deciding to have sex with Howie because that's what my friends were doing with their guys. Then we had this youth group meeting talking about sex. Our advisor and the minister weren't all that helpful, but just their bringing it up made me think about it. So what everybody else does it? That isn't a reason to have sex. That really isn't a reason to do anything. The advisor and the minister wanted us to make these private commitments during prayer that we wouldn't have sex until we were married. I wasn't ready to do that. But I decided Howie and I should wait. You shouldn't go ahead with sex unless you feel very sure. And I don't know for sure that Howie will even take me

to the prom. So sex? No. (*Female Independent Christian Church*) [\[35\]](#)

The simple act of raising the issue in youth group made a difference for this young woman. In *God's Gift of Sexuality*, Steve Clapp gives two reasons why teenagers need access to information about sexual behavior. "First, without such information, it is too easy to assume that other teens are more sexually active than they in fact are." And second, "many teenagers, like adults, find it far easier to talk about sexual behavior and values in terms of survey results than in terms of their own experiences."[\[36\]](#) A different perspective gave this young woman the opportunity to "check" what she thought was an acceptable behavioral norm as well as an inevitable next step in her relationship. She demonstrates an active "coming to agency" in the moment she both says "no" to Howie and "no" to the pledge, because these decisions would equally push her into something to which she is not ready to commit.

[22] If we want "wait until marriage" to be the norm, churches need to better explore what marriage means, what examples youth see, and develop how marriage can be a realized possibility for all members of the Christian community. Otherwise, the norm is exclusionary, uninterrogated, and hypocritical. Assumptions about marriage, can lead to guilt and shame when youth engage in sexual relationships with unrealistic expectations.

Monica and I had sexual intercourse several times. It didn't go well the first couple of times, but we got better at it. We'd convinced ourselves it was okay to go ahead and do it because we thought for sure we'd get married. Then we broke up and didn't even want to talk to each other any more. How could we have been that wrong about each other?

Then I thought, my God, what did we do? The first few months after we broke up, I kept wondering, what if she's pregnant? And you can't change it. What's done is done. If she'd gotten pregnant, there we'd be. And nothing will ever change the fact that she's the first person I had sex with. She's the first person, and I don't even like her now.

And we never did have the right information. At least my older brother convinced me to use a rubber. Otherwise, I hate to think about what might have happened. I feel so stupid and so filled with guilt. I guess God will forgive us, but it's tough to feel this way.

[Response by him in another section on the church]: The church didn't do anything. We had this True Love program where we were to promise not to have sex. We did that when we were freshmen. You feel one way when you're in the first year of high school, but you don't feel that way two years later when you've been going with the same person all that time. Just being told not to do it isn't enough. (*Male, Southern Baptist Church*)

)[\[37\]](#)

This young man points out the need to have a broader understanding of relationships and how they change over time. The commitment to marry seems to be the primary criteria upon which he made his decision setting up an unknowable (or even unrealistic) prospect. What marriage is really like and what a long-term relationship entails should be explored within youth discussions around sexual decision-making. Many current marriages do not reflect the qualities that I am suggesting sexual relationships, long-term or short-term, should embody: shared personal values, and should be consensual, non-exploitative and non-coercive, honest, mutually pleasurable and protected against unintended pregnancies and sexually transmitted diseases.

[23] Specific to decision-making and sexual behaviors, there are common threads found in these vignettes and those in the previous section.[\[38\]](#) STI transmission. In addition to a risk assessment, a number of the vignettes suggest that youth think about pleasure and a variety of sexual behaviors. There is also recognition of both partners need for pleasure and initiative taken to explore sexual behaviors other than intercourse, though not always through open communication as these behaviors are often influenced in many cases by gender stereotypes. It is evident that churches need to integrate youth's own experience and knowledge as a valid source for ethical decision-making. Adolescents need to be recognized as moral agents, or churches (and parents) risk turning youth off and shutting down integral communication lines. The majority evaluate the quality of the relationship. Notably, the youth recognize how relationships change over time and question how what they have been taught about marriage fits with their experience. More examples than I can provide here cited by the youth comprise a type of risk assessment for pregnancy or

Developing moral agency and education

[24] Clearly, youth need more information and guidance on issues of sexuality. However, religious leaders and adults in the congregation often rate themselves as "Fair" or "Good" in their effort to provide sexuality information. Yet, youth rate their efforts as "Poor"[\[39\]](#) This disjuncture in viewpoint needs to be better understood. Perhaps the difference lies in the perception of adults who see themselves as "providing information" when youth really want to develop skills, question the information, and digest the issues so as to become active participants exercising their developing moral agency.

[25] I want to explore on possible solution to the disconnect described above. The discipline of moral education provides clues about how to encourage moral development and promote sexual health. Thus, this section serves to illuminate one way to support moral development in the context of education using materials already available to religious leaders. Of particular focus will be the emphasis placed on a praxis model of education. The content of sexuality education curricula is an especially appropriate place to integrate moral education since most discussions revolve around personal identity, relationship building, and moral dilemmas.[\[40\]](#) Religious institutions may dislike that moral education promotes questioning of established values. On the other hand, it also promotes integration and internalization of values that have been adequately understood and examined, rather than blind acceptance or forced reception. The areas of moral education I will highlight are pedagogical techniques often used in sexuality education curricula:

use of moral dilemmas and role-play which help to develop communication skills and positive limit setting.

Moral Dilemma

[26] Many youth are familiar with use of moral dilemmas in Christian settings. However, within the setting of a religious institution, the freedom to explore both sides of the dilemma without one being weighted (appropriately or not) is often a challenge.[\[41\]](#) Inevitably, when moral dilemmas are presented in a church setting, the youth may already know "what the church thinks." Youth need to be encouraged to ask why something has been given to them as the "right" answer. They need space to struggle with what might be the best answer to a moral dilemma as well as learn the history of the Christian traditions which exemplify a great deal of historical growth and change on moral issues.

[27] For example, in sexuality education materials moral dilemmas are open-ended situations that require the participants to "think out loud" about the process of making a decision and perhaps the models or patterns used in that process. Most Christian sexuality education curricula provide a decision making section and some form of a decision-making model. As an example *Let's Be Real* offers ten situations of dilemmas ranging in depth.

Steve has asked Marcia to the school dance. Marcia really wants to go to the dance. She is hoping Andy will ask her; but he hasn't and time is running out.

Sixteen-year-old Mary is pregnant. She is afraid to tell her parents because she knows they will be angry. She is thinking about having an abortion and not telling anyone.

Barb thinks that her boyfriend's interest in her is cooling. She's noticed him looking at other girls more and sometimes openly flirting with them. She has decided to tell him she's willing to go all the way.

Bill feels he may have gone too far on his last date with Tracy.

He feels guilty and uncomfortable but doesn't know what to do.[\[42\]](#)

In presenting the situations, the leader instructs the youth to look at the situations through the steps of each of the decision-making models provided. One example model is a list of questions:

ISSUE-What are you trying to decide?

DEFINE any word that is unclear

WHO IS INVOLVED?

WHAT ARE THE CONSEQUENCES-if yes?, if no?

WHAT ARE THE FEELINGS you will deal with if you say yes?, if you say no?

MY STANDARDS for decision-making

WHO OR WHAT INFLUENCES?

WHO FINALLY DECIDES?

The questions are listed on a long piece of paper with space below them for the youth to write answers. This model is comprehensive, and more importantly incorporates areas traditionally dismissed in decision-making that is considered "rational adult" behavior. It moves beyond a straight pros-cons list and asks what feelings (emotions) will need to be dealt with and what influences are affecting the decision positively or negatively. In addition, the section on MY STANDARDS remains blank, just as the rest of the paper. Youth are asked to articulate their personal values. Exercises such as this allow youth to practice making moral decisions before they are put into the situation. It not only gives them practice but communicates that their leader and their congregation view them as developing moral agents capable of making such decisions.

Role-taking

[28] Commonly in sexuality education, role plays are integrated into lessons to allow students to practice potential situations in which they may find themselves. Role play, drama, and group work promote young people's understanding of themselves as moral agents that need to develop their own abilities and articulate their own values.[43] For example, it may be simple to conclude that I should say "no" to sexual intercourse since I have only known the person I am dating for two weeks, but having to actually say "no" to another person who is pushing the issue is an entirely different experience. The moral dilemmas listed above could easily be turned into role-plays. Since they are open-ended situations, the youth would need to draw their own conclusions and do so in an active dialogue with others. While the relationships in the role-plays are contrived, the experience still requires practicing responses and articulating one's values out-loud.

[29] Role-plays are especially helpful in the development of limit setting.[44] The *Our Whole Lives* and *Good Sex* curricula deal with positive limit setting by asking teens to discuss when "sex is sex" and decide for themselves along a timeline of sexual behaviors when they would like to stop.[45] The lesson "Devil or Angel" from *Our Whole Lives* gives students role-plays based on a variety of sexual behaviors all with the same theme, one student has to communicate to another that they "want to stop" or they feel ready "to go further." This exercise gives youth the chance to practice and become more comfortable articulating their personal opinions, sticking to that decision, and exploring how to talk to one's partner about that decision.[46]

[30] The use of moral dilemmas and acting out role-plays promote a praxis model of sexuality education and offer the possibility for youth to practice decision-making, communication, and limit setting. Integrating these practices into youth programs fosters the development of moral

agency by asking youth to reflect on themselves as sexual beings. From relationship building to personal awareness, the pedagogical approach of moral education broadens the focuses beyond traditional areas of sexuality education such as information on reproduction and risk prevention. It can encourage youth to explore when and how to say "yes," as equally as it does when and how to say "no." Thus, moral education assists youth in defining personal values and beliefs in relation to self, others and God.

Communal Responsibility and Adolescent Sexual Ethics

[31] If I were Nicole, the youth director in the vignette from the ELCA studies materials, I might say the following. First, incremental sexual behaviors are good and part of healthy sexual development and, that thinking about this in her relationship is an "okay" thing, even "normal." I would first talk with Abbey about what values help guide her decision-making about sexual behaviors and relationships. This may help flesh-out the meaning of our createdness as sexual beings being good and how that relates to our relationships and specific sexual behaviors. I might suggest she think about some specific "values" such as: consent, honesty (with Billy and herself), making sure they aren't using each other, mutual pleasure and what type of protection is needed to keep them safe. As for consent, Abbey and Billy are different ages and may have different sexual experiences, this is something Abbey needs to be aware of and discuss with Billy. I would encourage Abbey to think about how /all/ sexual behaviors involve a level of risk and a level of pleasure, not just "sex." Here, a youth minister or pastor needs to be able to say, you can contract an STD from oral sex and you need to use protection. One question I would have for Abbey is how mutual she understands the pleasure to be in this relationship. The vignette says Abbey "would like to please him." So while, there is a "fun" part that makes sexual behavior pleasurable for adolescents, mutuality mitigates against just doing this for him! I hope after the discussion, Abbey would have enough information about her own values, the quality of the relationship, and accurate sexual health information to be able to make a good ethical decision about which she feels confident and morally responsible.

[32] Then if I were Nicole, the youth director, I would get on the internet and figure out what sexuality education program I was going to start teaching in my next round of youth group and Sunday school classes! Much work has been done on expanding our understanding of sexuality and the norms necessary for a relational ethic that allow for healthy expression and embodiment of our sexuality. However, we do not become moral agents in a vacuum; education as part of a social justice norm is essential for healthy adolescents' sexual development. Regardless of the stance a church takes on sexual behaviors, teaching youth to develop decision-making skills through moral education can help them grow into mature, sexual moral agents; not every adolescent is going to come to the youth director's office as Abbey did in the vignette. Confidence in the abilities of youth necessitates seeing them as moral agents and educating them with the skills to develop their capacity for moral decision-making within the context of the overall Christian education program. Accessible, practical, and user-friendly resources exist to help with this effort. They are not perfect, but many curricula already integrate the moral educational pedagogical techniques I have suggested.

[33] By focusing on relationships and their quality rather than act centered technicalities, youth are given permission to think deeply about how they relate to one another, to themselves, and

what role sexuality plays in those understandings. Promoting sexuality as part of our createdness, named good by God requires teaching youth about relationships and communication to foster environments where sexual health can be nurtured. Relationship building not only requires a defined sense of self, but the ability to assess types of relationship, thinking about the type of persons one might date, and how to communicate in those relationships.^ As well, when one is taught that her/his sexuality is good, it should not just be some people's sexuality. Christian communities need to recognize that about twelve percent of the youth in their congregations self-identify as lesbian, gay or bisexual, in addition to addressing issues of sexism, racism, and able-ism.[47]

[34] Thus, a developmental sexual ethic holds as its core the dynamic and qualitative nature of relationships and personal growth of individuals as sexual beings. Through the process of developing one's sexual health, the ethic calls for on-going information sharing and building of communication skills around issues of protection (STIs and pregnancy), pleasure, and commitment. As well, support for incremental intimacy provides an individual (and a couple) practical experiences upon which to reflect and further delineate ethical responses. As part of their moral obligation with regard to sexual ethics, Christian churches can and should offer substantive education and support to adolescents in the process of becoming healthy sexual moral agents.

Endnotes

[1]

M. Baldo, "Does Sex Education Lead to Earlier or Increased Sexual Activity in Youth?" (Geneva, Switzerland: World Health Organization, 1993.)

[2]

Religious Institute on Sexual Morality Justice and Healing,, "An Open Letter to Religious Leaders on Adolescent Sexuality" (Norwalk, Connecticut: 2007), forthcoming.

[3]

For figures on religiously active youth see Steve Clapp, Kristen Leverton Helbert, and Angela Zizak, *Faith Matters: Teenagers, Religion and Sexuality*, (Fort Wayne: LifeQuest, 2003) 37. For figures on secular youth see Jo Anne Grunbaum et al., "Youth Risk Behavior Surveillance" United States, 2003, Surveillance Summaries 53, no SS02 (May 21 2004) 21. In the following surveys, sexual intercourse only refers to penile-vaginal intercourse.

[4]

Clapp, *Faith Matters*, 37.

[5]

Clapp, *Faith Matters*, 118.

[6]

Clapp, *Faith Matters*, 117.

[7]

Religious Institute on Sexual Morality Justice and Healing, "An Open Letter to Religious Leaders on Adolescent Sexuality".

[8]

Ian C. Burch, "Sex talk reflects who God is in our lives," in *mLouie magazine* Old Testament, Darius McCrary, (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Fortress, 2002), 15-17.

[9]

Two things I have learned in the work that I have been doing with youth groups and researching adolescent sexuality are: if you want folks to teach about sexuality you need to give them resources and training; two, one conversation is better than none in most cases.

[10]

"Free in Christ to Serve the Neighbor: Lutherans Talk About Human Sexuality," Part Three of *ELCA Studies on Sexuality: Journey Together Faithfully*, Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2006), 17-18.

[11]

Joan Timmerman, "Sex, Sacred or Profane?" in *Dialogue About Catholic Sexual Teaching: Readings in Moral Theology* No. 8, ed. Charles E Curran and Richard A. McCormick (New York: Paulist Press, 1993), 53.

[12]

This ethic is put forward in the document: Religious Institute on Sexual Morality, Justice and Healing, "An Open Letter to Religious Leaders on Adolescent Sexuality," above, fn. 7.

[13]

Margaret Farley, *Just Love: A Framework for Christian Sexual Ethics*, (New York, NY: Continuum, 2006), 228.

[14]

Religious Institute on Sexual Morality Justice and Healing, "An Open Letter to Religious Leaders About Sex Education," (Norwalk: 2002). Clapp, *Faith Matters*, 118.

[15]

Steve Clapp, Kristen Leverton Helbert, and Angela Zizak, *Faith Matters: Teenagers, Religion and Sexuality*, (Fort Wayne: LifeQuest, 2003), 119.

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Clapp, *Faith Matters*, 118.

[17]

For a thorough discussion of the final point see Christine E. Gudorf, *Body, Sex, and Pleasure: Reconstructing Christian Sexual Ethics* (Cleveland, Ohio: Pilgrim Press, 1994).

[18]

National Commission on Adolescent Sexual Health, "Facing Facts: Sexual Health for America's Adolescents," ed. Debra Wynne Haffner (New York: Sexuality Information and Education Council of the United States, 1995), 14.

[19]

See A.C. Peterson and N. Leffert, "What is Special About Adolescence," in *Psychosocial Disturbances in Young People: Challenges for Prevention*, ed. Michael Rutter (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995) and Janice M. Irvine, ed., *Sexual Cultures and the Construction of Adolescent Identities* (1994).

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For more on cultural constructions of sexuality see Marvin Ellison *Erotic Justice: A Liberating Ethic of Sexuality*, (Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 1996), Kelly Brown Douglas, *Sexuality and the Black Church: A Womanist Perspective* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1999), and *Sexuality in America: Understanding our Sexual Values and Behavior*, eds. Patricia Barthalow Koch and David Weis (New York, NY: Continuum, 1999).

[21]

Kieran Sawyer, *Sex and the Teenager: Choices and Decisions* (Notre Dame: Ave Maria Press, 1999), 47.

[22]

Pamela M. Wilson, *Our Whole Lives: Sexuality Education for Grades 7-9* (Boston: Unitarian Universalist Association, 2000), 76-77.

[23]

Permission to use unpublished data provided by Christian Community, 2005. When a quote is also published in *Faith Matters*, I note that within the quotation in the body of the text.

[24]

Research shows that adolescent girls often end up giving oral sex to boys to "keep" them because the boys do not want to be "stuck" in a relationship if they don't have to be. In fact, "There's a firm belief among many experts on teenage sex that girls, however much they protest to the contrary, are not getting as much pleasure out of hookups as they claim." See Benoit Denizet-Lewis, "Friends with Benefits and the Benefits of the Local Mall," *New York Times*, May 30 2004, Section G, 54. For more information on Friends with Benefits, see Go Ask Alice! A health question and answer internet service produced by Columbia University's Health Promotion Program, <http://www.goaskalice.columbia.edu/3004.html>.

[25]

Sharon Lamb, "Sex Education as Moral Education: Teaching for Pleasure, About Fantasy, and against Abuse," *Journal of Moral Education* 26, no. 3 (September 1997).

[26]

Religious Institute on Sexual Morality Justice and Healing, 'An Open Letter to Religious Leaders on Adolescent Sexuality,' (above, n. 2.)

[27]

See Christine E. Gudorf, *Body, Sex, and Pleasure: Reconstructing Christian Sexual Ethics* for a fuller discussion of this topic.

[28]

Jay Strack and Diane Strack, *Until You Say I Do, True Love Waits* (Nashville: LifeWay Press, 2003), 36-37.

[29]

Permission to use unpublished data provided by Christian Community, 2005.

[30]

Robert Kegan, *In Over Our Heads: The Mental Demands of Modern Life* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1994), 16.

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Permission to use unpublished data provided by Christian Community, 2005. When a quote is also published in /Faith Matters/, I note that within the quotation in the body of the text.

[32]

Permission to use unpublished data provided by Christian Community, 2005. When a quote is also published in *Faith Matters*, I note that within the quotation in the body of the text.

[33]

Religious Institute on Sexual Morality Justice and Healing, "An Open Letter to Religious Leaders on Adolescent Sexuality" (Norwalk, CO: 2007) forthcoming.

[34]

The National Commission on Adolescent Sexuality published a helpful list of personal characteristics for assessing when one is ready for sexual intercourse: physically mature, patient and understanding, knowledgeable about sexuality and sexual response, empathetic and able to be vulnerable, committed to preventing unintended pregnancies and STDs, able to handle responsibility for positive consequences, able to handle responsibility for potential negative consequences, and honestly approving the behavior. Relationship characteristics are: The relationship is committed, mutually kind, and understanding, Partners trust and admire each other, partners have experienced and found pleasure in non-penetrative behaviors, partners have talked about sexual behaviors before they occur, motivation for sexual relationship is pleasure and intimacy, the setting for sexual relationship is safe and comfortable. See also E. Winship, *Reaching Your Teenager* (New York: Houghton Press, 1983).

[35]

Permission to use unpublished data provided by Christian Community, 2005. When a quote is also published in /Faith Matters/, I note that within the quotation in the body of the text.

[36]

Steve Clapp, *God's Gift of Sexuality: Empowerment for Religious Teens* (Fort Wayne, IN: Life Quest, 2006), 14-15.

[37]

Permission to use unpublished data provided by Christian Community, 2005. When a quote is also published in *Faith Matters*, I note that within the quotation in the body of the text.

[38]

This paper reflects only a small sample of the vignettes studied in chapter two of my dissertation: "The Education of Deciding Morals: Youth, Sexuality Education, and the U.S. Religious Economy," Ph.D dissertation, Union Theological Seminary, New York, 200?.

[39]

Clapp, *Faith Matters*, 115.

[40]

Sharon Lamb, "Sex Education as Moral Education: Teaching for Pleasure, About Fantasy, and against Abuse," *Journal of Moral Education* 26, no. 3 (September 1997), 302.

[41]

Bernard Rosen gives a "step by step approach to moral disagreement and dilemmas" which would be helpful in curriculum design. See Bernard Rosen, "Moral Dilemmas and Their Treatment," in *Moral Development, Moral Education, and Kohlberg: Basic Issues in Philosophy, Psychology, Religion and Education*, ed. Brenda Munsey (Birmingham, AL: Religious Education Press, 1980), 245-253.

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Duane A. Ewers and M. Steven Games, *Let's Be Real: Honest Discussions About Faith and Sexuality* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1998), 59-60.

[43]

Rachel Thomson, "Diversity, Values and Social Change: Renegotiating a Consensus on Sex Education," *Journal of Moral Education* 26, no. 3 (September 1997), 267.

[44]

Debra Haffner and Kate M. Ott, *A Time to Speak: Faith Communities and Sexuality Education*, (Fort Wayne: LifeQuest, 2005), 25-26.

[45]

Jim Hancock and Kara Eckmann Powell, *Good Sex: A Whole Person Approach to Teenage Sexuality and God, Leader's Guide* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2001), 131.

[46]

Pamela M. Wilson, *Our Whole Lives: Sexuality Education for Grades 7-9* (Boston: Unitarian Universalist Association, 2000), 202-205.

[\[47\]](#)

Clapp, *Faith Matters*, 96.

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