

What do Presbyterians teach about sexuality?

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From the book

Frequently Asked Questions About Sexuality, The Bible, and The Church: Plain Talk about Tough Issues

A collection of essays considering the appropriate participation of gay and lesbian Presbyterians in church life and leadership.

Education happens everywhere, intentionally or unintentionally. It happens in church basements, in the pews, in Session meetings and in women's gatherings. Education happens in positive as well as in negative events. As educator Lawrence Cremin asserts, "What is taught is not always what is desired, and vice versa; what is learned is not always what is taught, and vice versa. Moreover, there are almost always unintended consequences in education; indeed, they are frequently more significant than the intended consequences. Hence, educational transactions are often marked by profound irony." It is because of this all-pervasive and surprising nature of education that it is important to pay special attention to the *process* of education. If we want to know what Presbyterians teach about sexuality, we will have to look at the whole process: curriculum, practices, and silences.

Curriculum. The word "curriculum" comes from the Latin word *currere* which means "to run." The work of the curriculum is the forming and re-forming of the course the church will run. There are three types of curricula operating in any educational situation: explicit, implicit and null. The explicit curriculum is what is explicitly being taught - the written and the spoken contents. It refers to things like sermons, the Book of Confessions, and written Sunday School materials. The implicit curriculum is less obvious. It refers to elements such as the location of the Sunday School class, organization of the room, what gets rewarded, and whose opinions are valued. The null curriculum is a paradox. It teaches by way of not teaching. It refers to what is absent, left out, and silenced. Whose stories are not heard? Who is not present in the leadership? What are "taboo" subjects never talked about in churches? The null curriculum teaches as powerfully and formatively as the explicit curriculum. What are some of the null curricula of your church?

Practices. Christian practices are an important part of the church's curriculum. In fact, Craig Dykstra would say that curriculum itself is "the practice of a people." Many communities through many generations have participated in Christian practices, not only as a way to embody faith, but also, and perhaps more fundamentally, as a way to come to faith. Why? Practices are activities that people do together over time. They form a way of life that is lived out in the world in response to God's reconciling love. Christian practices address fundamental human needs in ways that reflect God's purpose for humankind. These human needs – the need for healing, the need for community, and the need to be fed and cared for, for instance – are fundamental and universal for every living human being. At the same time, different historical, political, racial, economic, cultural and social contexts create different and particular ways in which the needs are met. And certain needs are more urgent and prominent in one community than others. What are the urgent practices necessary in your community?

Sexuality – Null Curriculum of the Church? For many Presbyterian churches, the topic of sexuality belongs in the category of null curriculum. That is, Presbyterian churches teach about sexuality by not teaching about it. What does that silence teach?

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First, it teaches that sexuality is not in the realm of the sacred – that it is not considered to be even potentially holy. In this way, the Church teaches that our spirituality does not include sexuality and sexual desires. But if we believe that the whole person is made in the image of God, we should embrace sexuality as an essential aspect of what it means to be human. In this null curriculum, the church gives up its opportunity and responsibility to form a member to be a whole embodied person. In the absence of explicit teaching and formation from the church about sexuality – except in the form of "don't do it before marriage" – people are forced to look outside of the church. The point here is that by not teaching about sexuality, except in limited and negative ways, the church loses its voice and therefore its authority in this central aspect of human life.

Second, the church's silence teaches that sexuality is shameful. Shame has a role in making a person aware that certain actions betray their personhood. But when it is used as a tool to make sexuality forbidden or dirty, it has a detrimental effect on a person's human development. When the church speaks about sexuality, it does so in the context of morality, usually in terms that define sexuality as

shameful, disgraceful and embarrassing. The church's null curriculum teaches that all sexual acts are shameful. This shroud of shame clouds our clarity about what is good and what is not good.

But here is the irony: While sexuality is usually a null curriculum of the church, it becomes an explicit curriculum in practices and teaching that condemn homosexuality and bisexuality. The broader background of a null curriculum of silence and shame does much to shape the ways the church talks about homosexuality. When the topic of sexuality is "taboo," practices and sexualities different from what is considered to be the norm challenge people to think about their own sexuality. This makes us uncomfortable. And this discomfort with sexuality breeds discomfort with homosexuality.

We should also think about the implicit curriculum of the church's teaching about same-sex relations. Dedicated and committed persons of homosexual and bisexual orientations are explicitly and implicitly prohibited from leadership positions, from ordination, and from creating a family through Holy Unions. What does this teach? What does this teach our young people? It teaches implicitly that

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there is a double standard operating in the church. While all are called in baptism to service to God, and some are called to serve the community in ordained capacity, these calls are not affirmed as valid for gay and lesbian Christians. While the labor of gay and lesbian people in the church is acceptable and even encouraged, public leadership affirming that labor is not acceptable. While joining together in love to form a committed relationship and a stable family is considered a virtue, when persons are of the same gender, that same desire is considered to be an abomination. The double standard

implicitly teaches that some Presbyterians are of more value in the eyes of God and the church community than others. And this becomes an explicit curriculum of discrimination.

What can the church do? The church must affirm sexuality as an important aspect of what it means to be human. One powerful way to affirm sexuality is to promote Christian practices for honoring the body. Providing an open space and hospitality where young people's bodies and their desires are welcomed, honored and discussed as a practice of honoring the body can be one way to affirm sexuality. As Stephanie Paulsell writes in *Honoring the Body*, "It is only through learning to honor the body in every aspect of our embodied life that we will be

able to honor our bodies' sexual feelings and desires." Sexual desires are part of other desires which need to be checked and harnessed. Just because we have desires does not mean that we should act on every desire that comes to mind. This balance of openness and boundaries is taught and learned so that it can become a moral compass for young people negotiating their own sexualities. This is especially important for young gay and lesbian people trying to come to terms with their sexualities in a world that is hostile to their being.

The church also needs practices and rituals that mark and affirm sexual development. The church ritualizes various markers in a person's life: birth, first communion, marriage and death. What would it mean for the church to recognize markers of sexual development such as the onset of menstruation, the changing of a boy's voice, and menopause? For many people these changes bring much shame and embarrassment. Ritualizing the celebration of sexual development could turn a sense of shame into a sense of what is holy, sacred. It would affirm that sexuality is indeed holy, a part of the realm of God.

In sum, teachings about sexuality cannot be left by default to be an unintended consequence of the church's education. The church needs to educate explicitly and implicitly that the body and its desires can be good and are a fundamental part of life as a human being. This message can then help to focus the church community to think more positively about gay and lesbian issues. If sexuality can be good and positive, then homosexual acts done within the same moral guidelines can be seen as good and positive.