

Necessary Conversations: The Church's Ministry in Adolescent Development

By Gina Yeager-Buckley, Associate for Ministries with Youth,
General Assembly Mission Council, Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)

I praise you, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made. Wonderful are your works; that I know very well.

—Psalm 139:14

I wish that education about human development and sexuality could happen at home. I wish that all families felt comfortable enough and had enough knowledge about human development, biology, anatomy, biblical history, and theological training to manage the transaction themselves. After all, the parent/caregiver sets the family's mission and practice, right? Well, partially so. The family structure may initially dictate the ethos for conversations about sexual values, but learning cannot be limited to one location. Education is far too viral and diverse. A young person may learn from a parent that it is wrong to have sex before marriage. However, the same young person may also learn, from say, ABC Family, that in some cases, if you have sex, your parents may not like it, but things will be OK because the soundtrack soars and the episode ends. Facebook pages run the gamut of opinion, expression, and leaning. The Internet provides immediate access to sexual instruction, pornographic images, and well-presented opinions that appear to be facts. At one point in our history, we worried that our kids got their education about sex from friends. Now, we know that their education can come from a whole host of sites, blogs, photographs, and status updates. The "education" about this issue is broader than the family—it comes from a number of sources. The church, as a Christian community uniquely qualified to offer a biblical and theological perspective, must be one of these sources.

A Necessary Conversation

We must talk about all aspects of human development, including sex, because it is a profound part of our daily lives. It is a part of our biological functioning, our moral compass, our creative force, and our ability to relate to other human beings. For teenagers, it's one of the deep foundations of their existence, connecting science, heart, and faith. Scientifically speaking, their organs, brain cells, and hormones are rapidly developing. This development affects love and relationships (heart) as teenagers awkwardly navigate the separation of friendship from romance. As young people mature, they begin to take tiny steps into understanding faith as more of a relationship to God than a simple oral history of a benevolent being.

We can't afford to ignore this combination of science, heart, and faith just because we can't agree on a singular resource that pleases both ends of the spectrum and everyone else in between. So, how about a resource that acknowledges the various schools of thought and offers resources that educators, youth workers, pastors, and parents can use to construct the foundations important to them? A friend reminded me of a great piece of liturgy that is often used to introduce the offering in worship: "All that we are and all that



we have is a gift from God." Perhaps more genuinely this statement can be used to reflect the depth of God's good creation: the detail, the complexity, the reality of what a human being does and is capable of doing. How about a resource that brings this statement alive for our young people?

Due to the controversial nature of this topic, it's a bit intimidating to commit my thoughts to paper. Both ends of the theological and political spectrum have weighed in about what human development education ought to include (or perhaps more importantly, not include). Over the years, I have found myself agreeing and disagreeing with both sides. Yet, here I am with young people. I am the one charged to accompany them on their walk with Jesus. What should I be teaching? Advising? How do I help their families? For what do I pray when I seek God's guidance?

Different Voices

I wanted to know what more people felt. I wanted to hear the voices of other folks who struggle each day to be faithful God-bearers to our young people. How do they understand the role of education and conversations about human sexuality in ministry with youth? Here are some of their longings and feelings:

"As children of God, we are all created in God's image! For me, everything else falls out of this. Today, it seems that there are so many parts of culture and messages that work against the wholesome goodness of this statement."

"Culture has really separated sexuality from the totality of our selves. So the church really has to reclaim the wholeness of our identity. Because God created us as sexual beings, anything that has to do with our sexuality is intimately connected with every other part of our self and our experience. This is awesome, but can also be devastating."

"Having a healthy understanding of our sexuality and who we are as God's children (created as sexual beings) helps us understand who we are and who God calls us to be. When we understand our sexuality negatively or have negative sexual experiences, our spirituality, faith, and whole being are affected. If we don't address the whole of who God has created us to be, we fail our young people and fail to fulfill our calling to nurture the faith of our young people."

"God created us as sexual beings. Teaching and guiding young people regarding this wonderful gift that God has given to us allows us not only to better understand who we are as people, but also to understand who God created us to be and God's intent for us. The more we understand this gift from God, the more capable we are to apply it towards God's intent."

Recently, author and renowned Christian leader Brian McLaren spoke to a group of college-age adults. In response to a question from a participant, he stated that he believed the most challenging task for young people in this generation was dealing with their own "sexual sanity." McLaren explained that emerging adults are expected to deal with a huge gap between the time they become sexually mature and the time they might choose to marry. This gap creates a struggle between what the church has held up as sexual purity

and the delay of sexual activity until marriage. Some in this age group, he said, are dealing with faith-damaging guilt, while others are abandoning any sense of sexual intimacy. McLaren's comments speak to the need for addressing a topic that has been avoided in the past—a past when most folks married before they turned twenty years old.

The thread that weaves its way through these different opinions is apparent. As children of God, we cannot separate the different parts of our humanity. We are singular creations with multiple purposes and functions. Sex, longing, desire, angst, anger, strength, care, joy, physical appearance—are all gifts from God and all are intended for life. However, the use of these gifts requires guidance, education, modeling, and Christian framing.

It is in the Christian framing that some of our struggles have landed. What if we acknowledge that we, as the church, have a divided and diverse way of understanding the intersection between adolescent development education resources and the Christian faith? What if we recognize that faithful followers of Jesus Christ can come to understand and believe differently about sex education? What if we truly embrace the fact that sex education comes from a variety of people and places?

The Touchstone

I love the African tradition of the touchstone. A touchstone is a small rock, kept hidden in a pocket, or a belonging that, when touched, serves as a reminder of a particular charge or tenet. It is my hope that whatever we decide to do about adolescent development as a church, we do it with the idea of being a touchstone.

The church must be a steadfast, loving, and theological reminder that guides our young people as they traverse the regions of romance, body image, health, wellness, relationships, and sexuality. The church must support the family touchstone that offers familial expectations about sex, relationships, and a reminder for young people about what is taught in their home and expected by their parents/caregivers. The church must be a vehicle for the touchstone of science in adolescent development, faithfully acknowledging the relationship between faith and science, and the reality of changing body parts, physical intimacy, sexually transmitted diseases, romantic desire, and emotional pain. Most significantly, the church must be the touchstone of Jesus Christ and the community of God's people. During roller-coaster years filled with physical, emotional, and spiritual changes, young people need easily accessible reminders of how to most faithfully follow Christ in challenging situations, and they must clearly remember the loving support of their church family. These touchstone reminders must be deep in their pockets.

A Personal Story

My brother, in all of his thirteen-year-old glory, attended a weekend-long sexuality retreat sponsored by our church. The purpose of the retreat was to help young people and their families understand and become more comfortable with adolescent human development. It included such wonderful pedagogy as The Question Box, Anatomical Pictionary, and Body Part Bingo. Get the picture? Been there yourself? Read on.

My parents, after participating in the parent/caregiver parts of the retreat on Friday night and Saturday morning, hosted a dinner party on Saturday night while my brother continued his weekend. Well into the party, my brother flew through the front door fresh from his “sex retreat” (as his big sister, future youth worker, but then sophomore in high school, liked to refer to the weekend). My parents, having been educated about how a wise parent should handle the whole sex retreat situation by discussing, without shame, what my brother was hearing and learning, inquired of my brother, “Youngest child, how was the retreat today?” My brother, now fully at ease talking about body parts and their placement, exclaimed (in front of the party guests), “Well, it was pretty good ‘cept, have you ever had to draw a hymen?”

Party guests gasped. Parents tried to be supportive. (“Why [sputter and recover], no, I can’t say that I have.”) Parents ushered teenage brother—dessert in hand—now a fount of knowledge about human anatomy—out of the living room and away from shocked party guests. True story.

As a professional youth worker, charged with writing about why the church should or should not involve itself in the private lives of our young people, I now examine my brother’s anecdote from a different perspective. If you are too busy laughing at the anatomical reference (which, come on, it’s funny), you may have missed the first part of his answer. “It was pretty good.” That’s what he said. A seventh-grade boy. A retreat. At church. Teaching about sex. “It was pretty good.” Now THAT is something to think about.

Something about the experience. The lessons. The leaders. The content. Something made a connection with this young person. A young person, I have to add, who couldn’t sit still, probably had to be dragged to the retreat, and who would have much rather been playing soccer than talking about sex with his fellow youth group members. Something clicked for him. I wanted to know what it was and—being the probing researcher that I am—called my brother. He said, “Well, it was just pretty cool that there, in the place where we learned about God, Jesus, and all kinds of other things, we were also allowed to laugh, talk about taboo things, and ask the questions we really wanted to ask. It was like the forbidden finally coming into the light.”

As young people, parents, churches, and schools all struggle to figure out what is forbidden and what is necessary, ultimately, young people have to make their own choices regarding embraces, replies, responses, and reactions. When the choice has to be made, the church can serve as a touchstone reminder that a first kiss is a deeply intimate offering to another person. It’s not simply a physical act; it has consequences and emotional ties. As a touchstone, when young people feel that they don’t look “right,” the church can remind them that they, in fact, look holy because they are made in God’s image. As a touchstone, the church can be present with young people as they formulate a response to a text message with an unfortunate photo.

Contrary to the historical picture of the church—a two-hour, once-a-week activity on a sacred day that carries us through the next week—it is critical to shrink the distance between the church and our daily lives. Following Christ extends to our Facebook pages, our friendships, our private thoughts, our actions, the hallways of our schools, and

yes, even to our physical, emotional, and spiritual development. Truly understanding that religious life is deeply rooted in daily life (in fact, let's just say, it's the same thing) is transformative for young people. For my brother, at least for that one weekend, he understood that the "taboo" subject of a woman's anatomy, could actually, possibly, be sacred and a part of his understanding of what it means to be created by God.

May it be so for all of our young people!