

**This essay is presented as a work in progress.**

**Please do not cite without the author's permission.**

## **ReVisioning Sexuality: Relational Joy and Embodied Flourishing**

**Kate Ott and Lorien Carter**

Sexuality and relationships are a major aspect of teen development. Youth Ministry programs that embrace relational joy and embodied flourishing promote healthy, holistic sexuality for the teens they serve. Sexuality is part of our created goodness that youth need help to understand and embrace. Research shows that young people desire information from supportive adults, including youth ministers.<sup>1</sup> Many youth ministry programs treat sexuality as a risk to be reduced or about which to remain completely silent. Our response can influence how teens understand their sexuality and relationships as a positive dimension of joy and flourishing or be an inhibitor to health and thriving.

Youth leaders and ministry groups routinely address sexuality issues even when they do not specifically integrate sexual theology or ethics into their lesson plans. From youth group sleeping arrangements to their use of gendered language, from dress codes to choice of scripture, we are communicating values and beliefs about sexuality that influence teens. Often times, what we communicate falls short of cultivating joy and flourishing related to teen sexuality and relationships.

Everyday issues arise in youth group as opportunities to curate healthy sexuality, self-affirmation, and mutual, respectful relationships. Consider these examples. Marcus and Dani have been seeing each other exclusively for about four months. They both attend the “Anywhere USA” youth group and are excited for the overnight retreat next weekend. Unexpectedly, their youth minister, who has been supportive of their relationship including praying for them and giving them advice about communication and negotiating their time, announces at the end of the meeting that during the retreat, “All couples will ‘break up’

during the retreat so that everyone focuses only on the events of the retreat and there are no temptations to misbehave.” Dani and Marcus exchange looks of dismay and disappointment, not because they were planning to sneak around or flaunt their relationship. On the contrary, they have worked to make their relationship with God a central part of their dating relationship and they wanted to deepen that on the retreat. Instead, the once supportive adult is saying their relationship is a distraction and they cannot be trusted.

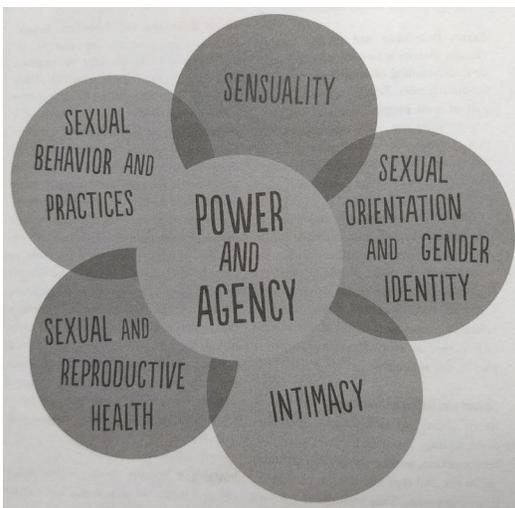
Or consider Kris, an 11<sup>th</sup> grader who has been active in the “Anywhere USA” youth group for several years, has begun to question their sexual orientation. They recently began hanging out with someone who openly identifies as gay and would like to invite them to youth group but are worried because their youth group leader has never said anything about how they would welcome a gay youth. For other reasons, Gabi is considering leaving youth group because she feels body shamed. Other youth group members make side comments about her size and her clothing choices. Recently, the youth minister pulled her aside to scold her for distracting the boys with her outfits.

Sexuality is part of who we are from birth to death, an integral aspect of how we understand ourselves and live in relationship to others including God. How is it that youth groups can be a place of affirmation, education, and support related to sexuality? We do not become sexual beings when we go through puberty or enter into a sexual relationship; we are already sexual beings and these experiences add to how we understand our changing sexuality. Sexuality education rooted in a theology of joy recognizes everyone’s sexuality regardless of relationship status, developmental stage, or sexual experience. Joy is embodied and relational, we know joy through sensory, sensual experiences. Thus, it is entangled in how we experience various aspects of sexuality. Joy is also deepened in and through relationships with others and with God. When churches focus specifically on preventing a behavior like sexual intercourse, teens lose out on all kinds of other theological and ethical conversations that connect a theology of joy to relationship formation, positive body image, how to identify and stop sexual harassment or abuse, and so on. Those of us committed to teen joy and flourishing can and must provide education that promotes healthy, holistic and joy filled sexuality.

## Sexuality: A Closer Look

Relational joy and embodied flourishing don't magically happen. They are cultivated. Age appropriate, intentional, and honest sexuality education for teens is part of that cultivation process. In order to provide such education, we need a more expansive understanding of sexuality. Sexuality is an intrinsic part of being human and "we cannot understand ourselves apart from it."<sup>ii</sup> Yet, sexuality is difficult to describe and no single definition will ever be complete or accurate to each person's experience of sexuality. Our sexuality shifts overtime in response to physical, relational, and emotional changes. Sexual behaviors impact our sexual self-concept, but they do not completely determine it or sexuality in a broader sense.

In repose to the complexity and richness of sexuality, health and educational experts focus on describing key aspects of sexuality. *Sexual behaviors and practices* is one among the other aspects. Even if a person is not engaging in sexual behaviors or practices, they are still a sexual person. Other aspects of sexuality include *sexual and reproductive health* which includes the biology and physiology of our bodies, particularly the sexual and reproductive systems, and how we care for our bodies. *Gender identity* is part of sexuality, which includes gender roles determined by cultural ideologies and practices and gender expression which is how an individual choose to express their gender. *Sexual orientation* is the attraction one feels to others and can be further broken down by attraction toward the opposite sex or gender or toward the same sex or gender or toward both, none or multiple. The final two aspects of are primarily affective meaning they have to do with emotions and senses. *Intimacy* is the experience of emotional closeness usually to another person and can include God. The



example of Dani and Marcus evidence how intimacy in relation to God can strengthen one's romantic relationship in a culture that often associates intimacy with sexual behaviors. *Sensuality* encompasses how through our senses our bodies respond to pleasure. Sexuality includes these aspects though they are not all experienced or expressed at the same time.

For decades, sexuality educators have used the "circles of sexuality" [see diagram 1<sup>iii</sup>] to

provide a visual and descriptive definition of sexuality. The original version was designed by Dr. Dennis M. Dailey. That version used five overlapping categories including sensuality, intimacy, sexual identity, sexual health and reproduction, and sexualization. Other more recent version separate sexual identity into sexual orientation and gender identity, add sexual behaviors and practices and remove the sexualization circle replacing it with a circle touching all five described as power and agency.

Understanding the role of power and agency is important because personal and social circumstances shape how we experience sexuality. Unfortunately, we often cannot control these social circumstances or the impact they have on personal interpretations. Especially as teens, “[m]essages from our culture, religion, and history construct for us many different, conflicting, and at times unhealthy ways to interpret our sexuality. . . . They may differ based on our racial/ethnic background, [age], gender identity, geographic location, or cultural and religious surroundings.”<sup>iv</sup> Gabi experiences this Many external factors affect the power and agency individuals have to experience aspects of their sexuality in a holistic and holy way. For example, “the positive message that we are created in the image of God is often lost, an affirmation drowned in a sea of enhanced images of ‘perfect bodies’ or comments that we are ugly, fat, too skinny, too hairy, too wimpy, the wrong color, and so on.”<sup>v</sup> In more direct instances, sexual harassment and abuse can severely damage a teen’s sexual self-concept and interfere in their ability to carry on daily activities.

Many teens experience dating violence, inclusive of verbal, emotional, physical and sexual abuse. Nationwide, nearly one in ten U.S. high school students has been hit, slapped or physically hurt on purpose by their boyfriend or girlfriend in the past twelve months. 26% of teenage girls in a relationship says they have been threatened with violence or experienced verbal abuse, and 13% say they were physically hurt or hit.<sup>vi</sup> In 2013, among high school students who dated, 21% of females and 10% of males experienced physical and/ or sexual dating violence in a current or past romantic relationship.<sup>vii</sup>

Many youth experience sexual harassment and abuse at school and in the home. In 2015, 66% of adolescents who identified as LGBT experienced LGBT-related discrimination at school. As a result of feeling unsafe, 32% of these students missed at least one day of school in the last month, and almost 40% avoided bathrooms and locker rooms.<sup>viii</sup>

Harassment and abuse related to teens sexual orientation and gender identity isn’t just experienced at school, families are also often responsible for rejecting their LGBT children;

with significant negative outcomes. Research by the Family Acceptance Project found that gay and transgender teens who were highly rejected by their parents and caregivers were at very high risk for health and mental health problems when they become young adults (ages 21-25)<sup>ix</sup>. Included in behaviors that are considered “high rejection”: telling your child that God will punish them because they are gay.

It is also well known that many religious institutions promote non-affirming views of gay and lesbian sexuality. Many Christian doctrines hold marriage as exclusively reserved for one man and one woman and actively reject equating gay rights with civil rights.”<sup>x</sup> These teachings have death-dealing consequences. Sexual minority youth are at significantly higher risk of suicide. In 2016, Centers for Disease Control (CDC) data indicated that 29% of LGB youth had attempted suicide at least once in the prior year compared to 6% of heterosexual youth.<sup>xi</sup> *A recent study of college aged students found that high levels of religiosity significantly increased the risk for recent suicidal ideation for lesbian and gay youth.*<sup>xii</sup> It is hypothesized that sexual minority youth feel abandoned by their religion, as many doctrines tell them that to express their authentic selves would be a sin.<sup>xiii</sup> These negative experiences with peers, at school, with family and with faith based institutions have life-threatening consequences for youth. Church, of all places, should be a place of safety and sanctuary for all youth.

On the other hand, acceptance leads to joy and flourishing in LGBT youth. When LGBT youth are accepted by their families and faith based institutions, “they were much more likely to believe they would have a good life and would be a happy, productive adult.”<sup>xiv</sup> The Naming Project, a Christian ministry which seeks to create safe spaces for LGBTQ youth, posits that “when religious communities are affirming and supportive of identity, including sexual orientation and gender identity, then the people within those communities are going to develop into much healthier and better-functioning individuals who understand themselves and how they relate to the rest of the world.”<sup>xv</sup>

A youth ministry where teens can “discover and define their sexuality in a way that is most consistent with whom they know themselves to be as God’s beloved” is critical to promoting embodied flourishing and relational joy.<sup>xvi</sup> This means creating opportunities to proactively accept all teens regardless of their sexual orientation or gender identity. It also means directly addressing how to respond to dating and intimate violence as well as bullying and sexual harassment. Empowered with knowledge and resources, sexuality experienced as a healthy and positive part of teen lives enhances joy.

The “Anywhere USA” youth group is at this crossroad. Will they accept Kris’s questioning of their sexuality and become a safe and affirming place for Kris and their friend who are openly gay? Will the youth group help them explore what it means to be a child of God? How can the youth group create an inclusive space for all youth, not in spite of one’s orientation, relationship status or embodiment, but because of it? A welcoming youth group benefits from the diversity of God’s creation and nurtures joy for all youth.

### **Theological Dimensions of Sexuality and Joy**

The expansive definition of sexuality offered is grounded in specific Christian theological understandings that further articulate a sexuality-positive Christian perspective and theological insights related to joy. Mary Clark Moschella writes, “joy often arises out of deep interpersonal connections and the experiences of loving and being loved.” Joy “is something that is deeper for being shared.”<sup>xvii</sup> Joy and sexuality collide with and infuse each other in our lived experiences. First, Christian theological implications of our createdness as embodied beings and Jesus as an incarnate Savior are key elements of this intersection. The theological conception of joy that we rely upon in this chapter locates joy as an embodied experience. Second, the centrality of the love commandment in the communal cultivation of healthy sexuality and relational expressions of sexuality enhances joy, as we understand the need for ethical discernment (and limits/direction) to reduce harms and exploitation related to sexuality.

#### *Bodies: Creation, Incarnation, and Joy*

We are embodied creations. Through bodies, especially our senses, we know and experience the world around us. Christians believe that God, as author of all creation, made us as embodied beings that bear the image and likeness of God (Gen. 1:26 and 31). Thus, “[a]s Christians, we are to respect and steward our bodies as we would any part of creation.”<sup>xviii</sup> We need the body and all its sensual sensory aspects to experience joy. Justin E. Crisp argues, “Joy awakens all of our senses, energizing mind and body.”<sup>xix</sup> Similarly, N.T. Wright reminds us that scriptural celebrations “reveal the robustly physical nature of ‘joy’.”<sup>xx</sup> Shame and alienation from one’s body, like what Gabi is experiencing, stifles the incarnational aspects of joy that she can experience. Joy as emotional attunement and embodied response to well-being requires a holistic understanding of sexuality that includes emotional, developmental, and spiritual aspects.<sup>xxi</sup> Joy is present in and experienced through

aspects of sexuality like intimacy, sensuality, orientation, and gender identity *not only, but including* in sexual behaviors (experiencing physical pleasure).

Christians believe in an incarnate God (John 1:14). Jesus came in a human form—born of Mary, went through puberty, and became an adult man. He experienced being held by his mother, hugged by his friends, anointed with oil, hungry in the desert, as well as severely beaten and tortured. Jesus knows the joys and sufferings of being an embodied adolescent. The incarnation “promotes the value and significance of the body, which is never to be disregarded or treated with contempt.”<sup>xxiii</sup> Living in a body, meant that Jesus opened Godself to great harm, but also to life-enhancing connection. Bodies allow us to relate and connect with others in a variety of ways, some harmful, but most life-enhancing. Joy is an emotion that is both felt and celebrated through our embodiment.

For some theological traditions, the flesh is seen as a distraction or lesser aspect of our creation. Often, this theological approach talks about sexual desire as a distorted and uncontrollable part of sinful human nature. The myth of sexual desire as beyond our control, has led many theologians and religious leaders to argue that sexual desire has the power to overtake us and thus we cannot stop a sexual behavior (or in some cases be held accountable for it). Sadly, we are all too familiar with claims that once a man is too sexually aroused a woman cannot expect him to stop. If a girl wears revealing clothing, a teenage boy cannot be held accountable for what he says or does to the girl wearing it. These claims are sexist and heterosexist implying all boys are attracted to girls and all girls want and are responsible for boys’ attention (negative or positive). Sexually healthy and ethical Christians know the difference between feelings (I want to continue – sexual desire) and behaviors (I will stop this behavior).

Embodied flourishing requires that teenagers are emotionally attuned, aware of their bodies, and respectful of others’ bodies and emotions. The “Anywhere USA” youth minister working with Marcus and Dani makes the assumption that having the teens “break-up” will both prevent them from engaging in sexual behaviors and help them to focus on the retreat. However, a theology of joy as it relates to the embodied nature of sexuality suggests we should celebrate, not restrict experiences of pleasure, deepen emotional connections, and attune ourselves to those around us. Teens need spaces where these experiences are celebrated and modeled rather than dismissed or shamed. Dani and Marcus could both be affirmed in the flourishing of their relationship.

With embodiment comes vulnerability experienced in and through relationship with self, others, and God. Joy is relational and a theology of joy requires mutuality. Joy is diminished when pleasure is selfishly or independently maximized. In other words, when joy perceives a good, it wants that good to continue. The good that we perceive—a beautiful person, a feeling we get when we interact with someone, various kinds of physical touch—these are not things to be consumed so much as appreciated and to be extended in relationship.<sup>xxiii</sup> As we have described in this section, this holistic, embodied, counter-cultural approach to understanding teen sexuality promotes relational joy and embodied flourishing. *Love Commandment: Moral Balance, Relationship, and Joy*

The great commandment (Luke 10:27) can serve as a guide for understanding sexuality as relational joy and embodied flourishing. The love commandment reinforces the goodness of creation through love of self and affirmation of one's uniqueness. The two components of the love commandment suggest that moral balance is needed in all relationships among love for God, ourselves, and others. Teenagers often struggle with finding this balance as they developmentally want to shut out parents or move away from a relationship with God as they fall deeply into a crush or their friends become the most significant influences in their lives. We see the opposite happening in Dani's and Marcus' relationship; they are keeping God central as they balance love of self, other and God. Making room for God in all our relationships and knowing we can make new relational bonds without destroying old ones are important practices for teens to learn. Lastly, love of neighbor as ourselves means we are committed to promoting our neighbors' sexual development and health as well as our own.

The Christian tradition has historically relied on a moral approach to sexuality by creating a list of behaviors that are wrong or sinful. These teachings alienate and shame LGBT youth, leaving Kris wondering if they have a place in the youth group. No sexual intercourse until marriage is still the dominant ethic that teenagers are taught in Christian communities. What are teens to think about all the other sexual behaviors when youth ministries focus on only one behavior? An abstinence-only-until-marriage approach does not prepare teens to deal with the everyday decisions they face in relationships, with regard to their changing bodies and often does not provide guidance for healthy marriages. Isaac Archuleta, the executive director of the Q Christian Fellowship and a psychotherapist, notes, "The most devastating effect for children in non-affirming religious environments . . . is an

identity distortion that teaches the child to feel valueless as a relational being. . . . When a child feels unwelcome, too damaged for relationships, we strip them of their very purpose and sense of worth.<sup>xxiv</sup>”

In the more recent history, some traditions have shifted the focus away from behaviors to ordaining certain relationships as the maker of moral correctness. When it comes to teenagers, these are still the dominant approaches. Throughout their lives, teens need opportunities to define their faith values in relationship to their developing sexuality and consider how their values influence their behaviors in relationship. In order to live the love commandment, we need to strive for mutuality, consent, equality, fruitfulness, respect, and integrity.<sup>xxv</sup> These values can guide sexual decision-making regardless of sexual orientation or gender identity, making these lessons as relevant for Dani and Marcus as Kris and Gabi, rather than focusing on a specific behavior or relationship goal.

A strong community commitment to and education about sexuality is integral to Jesus’ call to create a world where each person has the ability and chance to live the love commandment by seeking life-giving relationships as an act of justice for herself and her neighbors. Joy supports this ethical commitment to flourishing. “God's gift of joy, experienced as deep awareness and aliveness, as well as calling and compassion, illumines and creates pathways toward human flourishing,” remarks Clark Moschella.<sup>xxvi</sup> For this reason, joy is best experienced in community.<sup>xxvii</sup> The commitment to love of God, self and neighbor means no single individual decides in isolation what joy is or how sexuality is to be experienced. These are always relational experiences. The importance of a community commitment to reducing harm and promoting flourishing cannot be overstated. A theology of joy, as it relates to sexuality, affirms bodies as good and cultivates respect for ourselves and others in ways that bring our love of God into all relationships.

### **Joy Enhancing Sexuality Education**

Faith communities have a responsibility to integrate sexuality education throughout the faith formation experiences of teens.<sup>xxviii</sup> Sexuality, and thus sexuality education is about so much more than bodily changes or sexual behaviors. Utilizing the holistic definition of sexuality described earlier, we address how a theology of joy can serve as a guide for Christian faith-based sexuality education in youth ministry. We invite the reader to become more intentional about communicating equitable, healthy, and positive sexuality education

grounded in faith values. Such an approach can directly influence the joy and flourishing teens experience as they journey through the unfolding of their sexuality and relationships.

As an example, we return to “Anywhere USA”’s youth group. With all the other requirements that “Anywhere USA” youth ministers face, sexuality education is at the bottom of the list. There are many reasons for this. The most prominent, however, are often caused by myths in our cultural and theological ideas about sexuality and youth. The first is that if we talk about sexuality it will lead youth to engage in mature sexual behaviors. The second is that one “big talk” mostly concentrating on puberty covers everything youth need to know. And lastly, if sexuality is to be addressed, many Christian beliefs, including “Anywhere USA”’s, allow for only one narrow approach to avoiding sexual intercourse – virginity pledges. These are all myths!

The truth is communication by parents and trusted adults about sexuality and sexual behaviors is correlated with delayed sexual initiation and use of condoms and birth control when teens do become sexually active.<sup>xxxix</sup> Communication does have a causal effect; it delays sexual behaviors and promotes safer sex practices. Sexuality education is an ongoing conversation, beginning early and often. From children to teens, youth need different information at different developmental stages.<sup>xxx</sup> “Anywhere USA”’s church and youth group needs to shift the approach to “many talks” about a variety of sexuality issues rather than one single lesson or focus on a single topic. Finally, virginity pledges work *sometimes* to delay sexual initiation, primarily for younger teens, for a short amount of time. For teens who break their pledge, they are at increased risk for negative outcomes because they were not prepared with condoms and contraception.<sup>xxxi</sup>

Teens receive messages about sexuality from the surrounding culture as well as the practices, policies and direct teachings of congregations. Sexuality is an expansive topic that covers everything from sexual behaviors and gender identity to relationship formation and reproductive health. This means that we are addressing sexuality issues all the time even when we do not have a specific lesson naming the topic. For example, youth ministry practices related to the language we use to describe participants or policies regarding sleeping arrangements at retreats teach the youth lessons about gender and sexuality.

The following section summarizes strategies that can be used to integrate sexuality education into youth ministry, specific lessons plans are available online. Youth ministries can be more aware of the ways in which they are already “teaching” about sexuality and then

seek to enhance or change aspects of this education. There are also very specific educational opportunities for youth ministries to explicitly address sexuality issues like inclusion of all youth regardless of sexual orientation and gender identity and developing a sexual ethic grounded in faith values.

### *Sexuality Education Assessment*

Youth ministry settings teach using a variety of methods. Policies and practices often have as much of an influence on youth learning as do the worksheets or activities we plan. For that reason, we suggest that all youth ministry teams begin with a sexuality education assessment designed to help a team consider the sexuality education already happening in their youth ministry. The assessment focuses on three aspects of sexuality education: explicit—intentional lessons, implicit—policies and practices, and null—what’s not being talked about. The purpose of the assessment is to take stock of what is being taught, what messages are being communicated, and how to be more intentional about sexuality education so as to promote relational joy and embodied flourishing. This assists the youth ministry leaders, participants, and supporters to consider the ways that explicit, implicit, and null curriculum teach about aspects of sexuality so as to become more intentional about communicating equitable, healthy, and positive sexuality education grounded in faith values.

### *Being a Welcoming and Inclusive Youth Group*

Creating a welcoming environment for teens of all sexual orientations and gender identities combats the sexual violence and harassment often experienced by teens. As we are called to be one body in Christ, we seek to affirm the uniqueness of each member. Integrally important to promoting embodied flourishing and relational joy is a youth ministry where teens learn the collective purpose of being an example of Christ in the world. A welcoming and inclusive environment includes people with multiple backgrounds, mindsets, and ways of thinking who are able to work effectively together. In such an environment voices are respected and heard, diverse viewpoints, perspectives, and approaches are valued, and everyone is encouraged to make a unique and meaningful contribution. All youth ministries can work toward being more inclusive and welcoming.

Many external factors affect the power and agency individuals have to experience aspects of their sexuality in a holistic and holy way. While sexuality is much more than sexual orientation or gender identity, many LGBTQ teens face abuse and harassment. Sexual and

gender harassment and abuse can severely damage a teen’s sexual self-concept and interfere in their ability to carry on daily activities. This means we must create opportunities to proactively accept all teens regardless of their sexual orientation or gender identity. Empowered with knowledge and resources, sexuality experienced as a healthy and positive part of teen lives enhances joy.

Engaging youth to consider how their youth group is, or can be, Welcoming and Inclusive directly influences and mitigates the negative consequences of exclusion on teens’ lives. Constructively, this activity helps identify the ways in which a youth group is already welcoming and inclusive as well as how the group and individuals can do more. Creating an environment of welcome and inclusion is a step toward making youth group an incubator of joy. Specific to issues of sexuality, it also means that teens receive a message that leaders are trusted adults to whom they can bring sexuality issues and questions in their lives. It also reinforces that sexuality and faith are connected aspects throughout our lives.

If the “Anywhere USA” youth group adopts this approach, it is likely that Kris and their gay friend, and all the youth, would find positive opportunities to explore their authentic identities as children of God and draw closer to God as well as develop into well-functioning, healthy young adults.

### *Living According to my Values: Creating a Sexual Ethic*

Youth need a firm foundation on which to make a variety of sexuality decisions. In the introduction to *Thinking Theologically about Youth Ministry*, Kenda Creasy Dean reminds youth ministers to identify the theological convictions that serve as the grounding for their ministry.<sup>xxxiii</sup> Ministry that is not grounded in firm theological convictions leads to practices that chase the hottest trend or cave to financial or parental pressure. Ministries built on theological rocks, like the Matthew text suggests, reflect the wisdom of the one who builds a house on the rocks to weather all storms. Similarly, youth need a strong foundation in faith values to help them weather the changes of their bodies and their relationships. Values are the foundation for a sexual ethic that youth can rely upon their entire lives regardless whether they are in a relationship or not.

Often, as seen in the example of the “Anywhere USA” youth group, we approach sexual ethics as a list of behaviors that are not allowed or allowed only in a particular relationship. Yet, a sexual ethic is about more than when it is *right* to have “sex.” A sexual

ethic also includes guidelines for relationships including a relationship with our self. Sexual ethics requires a firm foundation in faith values to make healthy decisions throughout one's life. Incorporating a lesson on living according to our values assists youth in identifying the core values that can guide their sexuality decisions. Youth need opportunities to identify their faith values, the rocks upon which they can build healthy relationships. Connecting sexual decision-making and healthy sexuality to faith values helps youth understand what faith values look like in practice.

### **Conclusion**

Relational joy and embodied flourishing should be contagious in faith communities. For the teens and youth leaders in the “Anywhere USA” youth group scenarios provided in this chapter and for far too many congregants and teens like Gabi, Marcus, Kris, and Dani, sexuality has been experienced as, or continues to be, a joy inhibitor. Teens will begin to experience sexuality as a joy enhancer when sexuality education, from policies to practices, reinforces healthy, inclusive, and ethical relational flourishing. Holistic sexuality education attends to all the dimensions of sexuality. At its core, holistic sexuality education from a Christian theological perspective values the goodness of creation and celebrates an incarnational Savior which intersects with the embodied experience of joy. Teens must be equipped with age-appropriate information about all aspects of sexuality to care for their bodies and respect others' bodies. Holistic sexuality education is grounded in the love commandment, putting God at the center of relationships and seeking balance in individual and multiple relationships needs. The love commandment provides an ethical framework for the flourishing of joy related to sexual relationships. Joy includes the deep awareness of calling and commitment that is best supported and cultivated in community. The community supports the living out of the love commandment by recognizing all members as sexual beings from birth to death, providing on-going education, and implementing policies and practices to keep all members safe and support their relationships.

### **Questions for Reflection**

1. In youth ministry, how have you witnessed sexuality experienced as an inhibitor or enhancer of joy, when understood as a relational and embodied experience?

2. Our attitudes, values, and histories related to sexuality impact how we provide ministry. What aspects of sexuality do you need to address in your own life, so that you are prepared to educate teenagers in a holistic and healthy way about sexuality?
3. Teens often hear adults address sexuality from a negative point of view. What *good news* about sexuality can you bring to your youth ministry? What theological messages about sexuality can you share that contribute to joy and flourishing in teen relationships with self, other and God?

## Bibliography

Aspy, Cheryl, et. al, "Parental Communication and Youth Sexual Behaviour." *Journal of Adolescence* 30 (2007): 449-466.

Bearman, Peter S. and Hannah Brückner. "Promising the Future: Virginity Pledges and First Intercourse." *American Journal of Sociology* 106, no. 4 (2001): 859-912.

Brown Douglass, Kelly. *Sexuality and the Black Church: A Womanist Perspective*. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1999.

Copeland, M. Shawn. *Enfleshing Freedom: Body, Race, and Being*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2010.

Corinna, Heather. *S.E.X., the Second Edition: The All-You-Need-to-Know Progressive Sexuality Guide to Get You Through High School and College*. Boston, MA: De Capo Press, 2016.

Crisp, Justin E. "Introduction: A Bright Sorrow" In *Joy and Human Flourishing: Essays on Theology, Culture, and the Good Life*, edited by Miroslav Volf and Justin E. Crisp, viixviii. Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2015.

Dean, Kenda Creasy. "Theological Rocks—First Things First" In *Thinking Theologically about Youth Ministry*, by edited Kenda Creasy Dean, Chap Clark, and David Rahn, 15-23. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2001.

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

Futures without Violence. "Emerging Issues Facing Teens and Tweens." February 26, 2013. <http://www.futureswithoutviolence.org/userfiles/file/Teens/Emerging%20Issues%20Facing%20Tweens%20and%20Teens.pdf>.

Kann, Laura, et al. "Sexual Identity, Sex of Sexual Contacts, and Health-Related Behaviors Among Students in Grades 9-12 – United States and Selected Sites, 2015." *Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report, Surveillance Summaries* 65, no. 9 (2016): 1-202.

Kosciw, Joseph G., et al. *The 2015 National School Climate Survey: The Experiences of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, and Queer Youth in our Nation's Schools*. New York, NY: GLSEN, 2016.

Kuruvilla, Carol, "Chilling Study Sums Up Link Between Religion And Suicide For Queer Youth," *Huffington Post*, April 18, 2018, [https://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/queer-youth-religion-suicide-study\\_us\\_5ad4f7b3e4b077c89ceb9774](https://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/queer-youth-religion-suicide-study_us_5ad4f7b3e4b077c89ceb9774)

Lagina, Nicholas. (Updated by Alicia Whittaker, March 2010) *Parent-Child Communication: Promoting Sexually Healthy Youth*. Washington, DC: Advocate for Youth, 2010.

Lee, Boyung. "Teaching Sexual Ethics in Faith Communities" in *Professional Sexual Ethics: A Holistic Ministry Approach*, edited by Patricia Jung and Darryl Stephens, 125-136. Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 2013.

Mathewes, Charles. "Toward a Theology of Joy" In *Joy and Human Flourishing: Essays on Theology, Culture, and the Good Life*, edited by Miroslav Volf and Justin E. Crisp, 63-96. Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2015.

Miller, Kim S., et. al, "Patterns of Condom Use Among Adolescents: The Impact of Mother-adolescent Communication." *American Journal of Public Health* 88 (1998): 1542-44.

Moschella, Mary Clark. "Calling and Compassion: Elements of Joy in Lived Practices of Care." In *Joy and Human Flourishing: Essays on Theology, Culture, and the Good Life*, edited by Miroslav Volf and Justin E. Crisp, 97-126. Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2015.

Ott, Kate. "Sexual Health and Integrity." In *Professional Sexual Ethics: A Holistic Ministry Approach*, edited by Patricia Jung and Darryl Stephens, 11-22. Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 2013.

Santelli, John S., et al. "Abstinence-Only-Until-Marriage: An Updated Review of U.S. Policies and Programs and Their Impact." *Journal of Adolescent Health* 61, no. 3 (2017): 273–280.

Ryan, Caitlin, et al. "Family Acceptance in Adolescence and the Health of LGBT Young Adults." *Journal of Child and Adolescent Psychiatric Nursing* 23, no.4 (2010): 205-213.

Vagi, Kevin J., et al. "Teen Dating Violence (physical and sexual) Among US High School Students: Findings from the 2013 National Youth Risk Behavior Survey." *JAMA Pediatrics* 169, no. 5 (2015): 474-482.

Volf, Miroslav. "The Crown of the good Life: A Hypothesis" In *Joy and Human Flourishing: Essays on Theology, Culture, and the Good Life*, edited by Miroslav Volf and Justin E. Crisp, 127-136. Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2015.

Wright, N.T. "Joy: Some New Testament Perspectives and Questions" In *Joy and Human Flourishing: Essays on Theology, Culture, and the Good Life*, edited by Miroslav Volf and Justin E. Crisp, 39-62. Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2015.

---

<sup>i</sup> Nicholas Lagina, (Updated by Alicia Whittaker, March 2010), "Parent-Child Communication: Promoting Sexually Healthy Youth" (Washington, DC: Advocate for Youth), 2010.

<sup>ii</sup> Kate Ott, "Sexual Health and Integrity" in *Professional Sexual Ethics: A Holistic Ministry Approach* eds. Patricia Jung and Darryl Stephens (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress,

---

2013), 12. For further exploration see, Kelly Brown Douglas, *Sexuality and the Black Church: A Womanist Perspective* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1999), 6.

<sup>iii</sup> This version of the circles of sexuality is reproduced with permission from Heather Corinna, *S.E.X., the Second Edition: The All-You-Need-to-Know Progressive Sexuality Guide to Get You Through High School and College* (Boston, MA: DeCapo Press, 2016), 17.

<sup>iv</sup> Kate Ott, “Sexual Health and Integrity,” 13.

<sup>v</sup> Ott, “Sexual Health and Integrity,” 13.

<sup>vi</sup> Futures without Violence, “Emerging Issues Facing Teens and Tweens,” *February 26, 2013, at*

<http://www.futureswithoutviolence.org/userfiles/file/Teens/EmergingIssuesFacingTween sandTeens.pdf>.

<sup>vii</sup> Kevin J. Vagi, Emily O’Malley Olsen, Kathleen C. Basile, et al., “Teen Dating Violence (physical and sexual) Among US High School Students: Findings from the 2013 National Youth Risk Behavior Survey” in *JAMA Pediatrics* 169, no. 5 (2015): 474-482.

<sup>viii</sup> Joseph G. Kosciw, Emily A. Greytak, Noreen M. Giga, Christian Villenas, and David J. Danischewski, *The 2015 National School Climate Survey: The Experiences of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, and Queer Youth in our Nation’s Schools* (New York, NY: GLSEN), 2016.

---

<sup>ix</sup> Caitlin Ryan, Stephen T. Russell, David Huebner, Rafael Diaz, and Jorge Sanchez  
“Family Acceptance in Adolescence and the Health of LGBT Young Adults,” *Journal of  
Child and Adolescent Psychiatric Nursing* 23, no.4 (2010): 205-213.

<sup>x</sup> Carol Kuruvilla, “Chilling Study Sums Up Link Between Religion And Suicide  
For Queer Youth,” *Huffington Post*, April 18, 2018,  
[https://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/queer-youth-religion-suicide-  
study\\_us\\_5ad4f7b3e4b077c89ceb9774](https://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/queer-youth-religion-suicide-study_us_5ad4f7b3e4b077c89ceb9774)

<sup>xi</sup> Laura Kann, et al., “Sexual Identity, Sex of Sexual Contacts, and Health-Related  
Behaviors Among Students in Grades 9-12 – United States and Selected Sites, 2015” in  
*Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report, Surveillance Summaries* 65, no. 9 (2016): 1-202.

<sup>xii</sup> Lytle, M. C., et al, “Association of Religiosity With Sexual Minority Suicide Ideation  
and Attempt” in *American Journal of Preventive Medicine* Vol 54, 5, (2018): 644 – 651.

<sup>xiii</sup> Kuruvilla, “Chilling Study.”

<sup>xiv</sup> Caitlin Ryan, Stephen T. Russell, David Huebner, Rafael Diaz, and Jorge Sanchez  
“Family Acceptance in Adolescence and the Health of LGBT Young Adults,” *Journal of  
Child and Adolescent Psychiatric Nursing* 23, no.4 (2010): 205-213.

<sup>xv</sup> Kuruvilla, “Chilling Study.”

<sup>xvi</sup> Ott, “Sexual Health and Integrity”, 14.

<sup>xvii</sup> Mary Clark Moschella, “Calling and Compassion: Elements of Joy in Lived Practices  
of Care” in *Joy and Human Flourishing: Essays on Theology, Culture, and the Good Life*,  
eds. Miroslav Volf and Justin E. Crisp (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2015), 101.

<sup>xviii</sup> Ott, “Sexuality, Health, and Integrity,” 14.

---

<sup>xix</sup> Justin E. Crisp, “Introduction: A Bright Sorrow” in *Joy and Human Flourishing: Essays on Theology, Culture, and the Good Life*, eds. Miroslav Volf and Justin E. Crisp (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2015), 2.

<sup>xx</sup> N.T. Wright, “Joy: Some New Testament Perspectives and Questions” in *Joy and Human Flourishing: Essays on Theology, Culture, and the Good Life*, eds. Miroslav Volf and Justin E. Crisp (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2015), 42

<sup>xxi</sup> Rather than shunning the body, we need to seek embodied, emotional attunement with ourselves, others, and God, which means deepening the relationship between body and spirit as well as balancing our commitments in relationships. “We can define joy as *emotional attunement between the self and the world--usually a small portion of it--experienced as blessing*,” writes Miroslav Volf. See, Miroslav Volf, “The Crown of the good Life: A Hypothesis” in *Joy and Human Flourishing: Essays on Theology, Culture, and the Good Life*, eds. Miroslav Volf and Justin E. Crisp (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2015), 130.

<sup>xxii</sup> M. Shawn Copeland, *Enfleshing Freedom: Body, Race, and Being* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2010), 56. In Chapter Three, “Marking the Body of Jesus, the Body of Christ,” Copeland argues that we purposefully ignore the body in service of empire, marking particular bodies as less than human without acknowledging the systems we use to do so with regard to race, ethnicity, sexuality, gender, and so on.

<sup>xxiii</sup> Charles Mathewes, “Toward a Theology of Joy” in *Joy and Human Flourishing: Essays on Theology, Culture, and the Good Life*, eds. Miroslav Volf and Justin E. Crisp (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2015), 79-81.

<sup>xxiv</sup> Kuruvilla, “Chilling Study.”

---

<sup>xxv</sup> See chapter six “Just Sex” for a broader discussion and list of values related to sexual decision-making in Margaret Farley, *Just Love: A Framework for Christian Sexual Ethics* (New York, NY: Continuum, 2006).

<sup>xxvi</sup> Mary Clark Moschella, “Calling and Compassion,” 125.

<sup>xxvii</sup> See Miroslav Volf, “The Crown of the good Life,” 129.

<sup>xxviii</sup> See Boyung Lee, “Teaching Sexual Ethics in Faith Communities” in *Professional Sexual Ethics: A Holistic Ministry Approach* eds. Patricia Jung and Darryl Stephens (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 2013), 125-136.

<sup>xxix</sup> See, Kim S. Miller, Martin L. Levin, Daniel J. Whitaker, and Xiaohe Xu, “Patterns of Condom Use Among Adolescents: The Impact of Mother-adolescent Communication,” *American Journal of Public Health* 88 (1998): 1542-44. And, Cheryl B. Aspy, Sara K. Vesely, Roy F. Oman, Sharon Rodine, LaDonna Marshall, Janene Fluhr, Ken McLeroy, “Parental Communication and Youth Sexual Behaviour,” *Journal of Adolescence* 30 (2007): 449-466.

<sup>xxx</sup> Nicholas Lagina, (Updated by Alicia Whittaker, March 2010), “Parent-Child Communication: Promoting Sexually Healthy Youth” (Washington, DC: Advocate for Youth), 2010.

<sup>xxxi</sup> See, Peter S. Bearman, and Hannah Brückner, “Promising the Future: Virginity Pledges and First Intercourse” *American Journal of Sociology* 106, no. 4 (2001): 859-912 and John S. Santelli, Leslie M. Kantor, Stephanie A. Grilo, Ilene S. Speizer, Laura D. Lindberg, Jennifer Heitel, Amy T. Schalet, Maureen E. Lyon, Amanda J. Mason-Jones, Terry McGovern, Craig J. Heck, Jennifer Rogers, and Mary A. Ott, “Abstinence-Only-

---

Until-Marriage: An Updated Review of U.S. Policies and Programs and Their Impact,”  
*Journal of Adolescent Health* 61, no. 3 (2017): 273–280.

<sup>xxxii</sup> Kenda Creasy Dean, “Theological Rocks—First Things First” in *Thinking Theologically about Youth Ministry*, eds. Kenda Creasy Dean, Chap Clark, and David Rahn (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2001), 15-23.