

# Editorial: When sex tops the list of denominational issues, it's past time to talk

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Catholics, Baptists and Methodists currently are talking about sex, but not in a proactive way. Each is reacting to sex in some way, whether it be sexual abuse or sexual orientation.

Before going any further, we need to be clear that sexual abuse and sexual orientation are not the same thing. Conflating the two does not enable productive conversation about either one. Even so, both currently are front and center in religious news, which suggests a longstanding need for religious groups to talk about sex more productively.

## Sex is front and center in denominational discussions

Catholics have been facing a sexual abuse scandal for years. All eyes are on Pope Francis, wondering what he means by an “[all-out battle](#)” against child sexual abuse.

Southern Baptists—Texas Baptists among them—are dealing with their own sexual abuse scandal. The recent *Houston Chronicle* [report](#) has prompted [serious deliberations](#) about how to address past sexual abuse and prevent future incidents in these Baptist churches.

The [United Methodist Church](#) currently is addressing a different issue, voting this week to maintain its ban on LGBTQ clergy and same-sex marriage, while a vocal minority continues to call for affirmation and full

inclusion of LGBTQ persons, including clergy.

When sexual abuse and sexuality are top priorities in denominational discussions, it may suggest it's past time to talk about sex more productively.

## **Sex is hard to talk about in public**

Many of us still consider sex as something private. It's hard to talk about in public. But the misunderstandings and misuses of sex can have such devastating public effects that we must talk about sex publicly.

Having just made that statement, I also must state that as a pastor, I didn't preach about sex much. I could have and perhaps should have preached more sermons on sex. We did create policies and screened and trained volunteers to prevent child sexual abuse. But preaching and teaching about sex was not my strength. So, I understand the hesitation of many in talking about sex publicly.

For many, sex is a source of pain and shame. We know we need to address sex, but we don't want to retraumatize those already hurting.

For many, sex has always been something you just didn't talk about, anywhere, ever. After much debate and trepidation, parents might tell their teenage children about sex. Many times, those teenage children were left to sort out the euphemisms in the conversation. We know our teenagers need to know something about sex, but we don't want them to know too much—not yet.

In public settings, children often are in the room. If we're going to talk about sex with children in the room, we have to be mindful of what is age appropriate. We have to give some advance notice to parents and guardians that we will be talking about sex. We know children need to

know something about sex, but not too much too soon.

If we could just figure out what constitutes “too much” and “too soon.” Given the appalling [statistics](#)—like approximately 10 percent of children being sexually abused before age 18, as far as we know—“too much too soon” has an altogether different meaning than we have been willing to face.

It seems the place for many of us to start talking about sex is to have public conversations in our churches to determine where and when we will talk about sex and what will be discussed with whom—agreeing we need to say more out loud about sex. An intentional conversation like this may be a new experience for many churches.

## **Some sex-related things we need to talk about now**

We need to work now in two directions at once.

With an eye to the past: We need to address the problems of sexual abuse and misconduct that already have taken place. Such efforts are underway. We need to make sure they are thorough and reach their just conclusions.

To address the pain and shame associated with sex: We need to talk about sex in ways that heal the pain, remove the shame, and re-sanctify sex.

With an eye to the future: We must teach our children now about the right place of sex.

To prepare our teens for what their bodies already are gearing up for: We need to talk confidently to our teens about sex. They need to see we are not squeamish about sex but know its proper place within God’s creation.

To prepare our children for life ahead: We need to talk about our bodies, about touch and about righteous behavior. Not only do we need to teach our children what must not be done to them, we need to teach our children what they must not do to others. Resources like [\*There is No Sex Fairy to Protect Our Children From Becoming Sexual Abusers\*](#) are helpful for such conversations.

While the things mentioned above aren't all the things we need to talk about, they are a start. And start we must if we are to get where we need to go—a place where sex is regarded as the holy thing God intended.

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