

Voices: Pence, propriety and devaluing half the American population

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Recently, the [Washington Post published a profile of Karen Pence](#), wife of Vice President Mike Pence. The piece mentioned Mike Pence previously told the press he never eats alone with a woman other than his wife.



Meredith Stone

This small aspect of the profile has attracted commentary in other news publications, as well as on social media.

Some people have praised Pence's isolation from one-on-one contact with women as being an invaluable tool for maintaining integrity and propriety. And I agree with creating measures to guard against inappropriate relationships, especially in a culture where sexual harassment, assault and misconduct are prevalent.

However, I disagree that rules promoting isolation from the opposite sex need to exist and would suggest they might be detrimental toward women.

Those who think men and women should not be alone with one another

unless they are married assume if a man and a woman are alone, a sexual connection, attraction or interest might be cultivated. When a man and woman are alone, temptation is just too great.

Is assumption true?

But I have to ask: Why must the assumption be true?

Do people of the opposite sex only have feelings or relationships with one another that have to do with sex?

I work in a field in which I always have been in the minority gender. I am a woman who has served as a minister in churches and church-related institutions.

Most of my peers are male. Being able to talk with my peers about common situations, struggles and innovations is invaluable.

More than that, almost every mentor and supervisor I have had has been male. My mentors have taught me about ministry, instructed me about nuances of situations and reflected with me during times of difficult decisions. My supervisors have conducted performance evaluations with me, guided me in how to accomplish my responsibilities and developed personal relationships through which we could work together productively.

And when important discussions happen between my peers, mentors, supervisors and me, it often takes the form of one-on-one conversations—sometimes even over a meal.

Awkward and difficult

Can you imagine how awkward it would be for my supervisor to have another person present for my performance review? Or the difficulty in

developing a relationship of trust with a peer if we never could have one-on-one conversation?

Don't get me wrong—there are ways this can happen while still being wise. When these one-on-one conversations take place for me, there is always a window in the room or a person on the other side of the door. When we have lunch, we do so in a public place.

And as for those who suggest having lunch in a public place might suggest an appearance of impropriety, maybe they should think the best of people and assume a public, professional, platonic lunch is not the equivalent of sex.

I know that for me, if any of the men who have been my peers, mentors and supervisors would have created a wall in which I could not spend time with them one-on-one, I would not have been able to learn and grow into the ministry I do today.

Devalues women

I grew up in a church culture that said girls needed to do certain things so the boys wouldn't be tempted. The girls' job was to prevent the boys from struggling with sexual sin. It took me years to realize someone else's sin was not my responsibility. If a boy lusted after one of the girls in the youth group, that was his choice, not her fault.

No matter what a person is wearing, what they are doing, or where they are, responsibility lies with the person who thinks or acts on lust. Not the other way around.

Telling women they cannot have one-on-one conversation with men who are their peers, mentors or supervisors out of concern it is just too tempting sexually devalues women as solely sexual beings who are not full persons

who have something positive to contribute to the world.

Suggesting men and women cannot share a professional meal borders on communicating men and women cannot be held responsible for their choices and actions when they are put in the same room together.

Limiting conversations between men and women potentially robs women of opportunities and professional growth, contributes to inequity and leadership gaps between men and women, and perpetuates the “good ol’ boy network.”

I wonder how men would feel about rules limiting their interactions if their gender tended to be in less powerful and less influential positions.

By all means, let’s be smart about our interactions and take action to thwart sexual harassment, misconduct and assault. But let’s not do so by devaluing half the population.

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