

Should Churches Openly Discuss Marital Sex?

Bragging of sexual conquests, suggestive jokes and innuendo, and sexual one-upmanship all can be a part of demonstrating one's manhood—especially for young men eager to exert their masculinity.

But how does masculinity manifest itself among young men who have pledged sexual abstinence before marriage? How do they handle sexual temptation, and what sorts of challenges crop up once they're married?

"Sexual purity and pledging abstinence are most commonly thought of as feminine, something girls and young women promise before marriage," said Sarah Diefendorf, a sociology graduate student at the University of Washington. "But I wanted to look at this from the men's point of view."

Studying a group of 15 young evangelical Christian men, Diefendorf learned that support groups and open discussions about sex with trusted companions were key in helping the men during their pre-marital years. But once married, they faced trouble.

Instructed by the church to keep problems "in the dark" after marriage, the men reported feeling that they couldn't discuss sex with their friends and didn't know how to comfortably broach the subject with their wives. The newly wedded men also expressed surprise that sexual temptations continued to taunt them.

Diefendorf presented her findings Sunday at the annual meeting of the American Sociological Association in San Francisco.

At the start of her study, in 2008, the men were in their late

teens and early 20s and part of a support group for young men who had pledged to remain virgins until marriage. The group was affiliated with a nondenominational evangelical megachurch in the southwestern United States that had about 14,000 attendees at Sunday services.

Over the course of a year, Diefendorf attended their meetings and conducted one-on-one interviews and focus-group meetings with the men.

The men talked about sex as both “sacred”—a gift from God meant for the marriage bed—and “beastly” if it occurs outside of marriage.

“To maintain this gift from God, they believe that they must control sex before marriage,” Diefendorf said. The support group is one way for the young men to explore their sexual urges, she said. Many of them opened up to struggles with pornography and masturbation, which some considered as “destructive” and a threat to their commitment to abstinence.

“People think that evangelical support groups are just about suppressing men’s natural urges, but really they are caring, supportive and safe space that allow men to have a remarkably open and frank discussion about sexual desire,” Diefendorf said.

Besides the support group, the men sought out accountability partners to help control their behavior. One of them, for instance, had an accountability partner who would text-message him each night, “Are you behaving?” Some of them used software to track which websites they visited and shared the results with the partner.

A few years later, in 2011 and 2012, Diefendorf followed up with the men. Fourteen of them were married, and she wanted to find out how the men’s views of sex and masculinity had changed since marriage.

During a focus-group meeting in one of their homes, it soon became clear that as taboo as sexual activity had been before marriage, it was now taboo to talk about sex, because it was seen as disrespecting their wives.

“After marriage, the church culture assumes that couples become each other’s support, regardless of the issue at hand,” Diefendorf said. “There’s little support in figuring out sexuality in married life, and these men don’t know how to talk to their wives about it.”

As one of the men put it: “For me to come home from work and say, ‘Hey, did you like it last time?’ I mean that would be—that would be such a weird question for me to ask.”

The newlyweds also revealed they continue to think of sex in terms of control, and how the so-called beastly elements of sex—temptations by pornography and of extramarital affairs—do not disappear with the transition to married life.

“Before you get married, the biggest thing you struggle with, usually, is premarital sex,” one of the men told Diefendorf. “But once you are married, you can’t be tempted by that anymore, so you get attacked by completely different things. ...Essentially Satan has to find a new angle to attack on.”

They wished for more guidance from the church, and someone in the group said he’d cheer if his pastor decided to talk more about sex.

“While the whole point of these support groups is to honor sex in marriage, these men have gotten so used to thinking about sex as something negative that they bring those concerns with them to the marriage bed,” Deifendorf said. “Once they’re married, these men struggle to manage those concerns in the absence of the supportive community they once benefited from.”

She hopes that her study leads to more positive discussions of sex and how it is healthy, especially within the context of

abstinence-only sex education.

“There’s an obsession with virginity in this country,” Diefendorf said. “And we forget to have informative, successful conversations on sex.”