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## Welcome, Visitors! Here's Our Church's Take on Sex.

Hospitality demands that some things be clear from the start.

PETER COELHO/POSTED JUNE 5, 2023



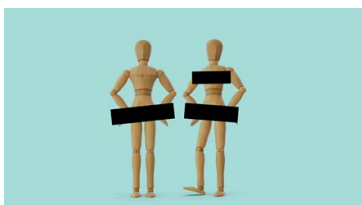
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As Canadians living in Austin, Texas, my wife and I have a sign on our front door that reads, “Please take off your shoes.” The Northern experience of slush, grit, and mud, as well as a few years spent living in Japan, made us committed to the goodness of shoeless indoor living. (Slippers and indoor shoes allowed.)

We hung the sign several years into our time in Austin. After more than a few awkward greetings—an effusive welcome coupled with quick instructions about our footwear convictions—we decided that clarity was a necessary part of hospitality.

This same connection between clarity and hospitality has come to inform our practice in church as well, especially on the topic of marriage and sexuality.

As part of the Anglican Church of North America (ACNA), our church's position is clear: We hold that God's desire for faithful conjugal sexuality happens in the context of a covenant marriage between one man and one woman. But as a particular church in Austin seeking to embody the welcome of God in Christ, conveying that message is more difficult. Our community draws people who are surprised and even pained by this counter-cultural teaching.



INTERVIEW

### Tell Me Your Beliefs on Sex Without Telling Me Your Beliefs on Sex

Over time, our embodied lives reliably reveal the stories and myths that shape us.

INTERVIEW BY RACHEL GILSON

I'm not totally sure why our small church often attracts people with more left-of-center perspectives. Part of it relates to the area of the city we're in, where a lot of young families and professionals come to live. Part of it is simply generational, as these millennial and Gen Z Christians grapple with the legacy of their particular traditions.

For some in our community, the church's teachings on marriage impinge on the most intimate and personal areas of their life. What does it look like for their own sexuality to be conformed to the image of Christ? For others, these issues affect their posture toward family members, friends, neighbors, and colleagues.

As the rector of this congregation, I've had several challenging conversations related to marriage and sexuality. My own insufficiencies and knowledge gaps feel most acute in the area of pastoral care. How do I hold forth the grace and truth of Jesus? How do I hold forth the historic teachings of the church in a hospitable way?

While talking over several months with one gentleman in our church who identifies as queer, I realized that, even after extensive discussions, what I referred to as "the traditional perspective on marriage" had not landed with him as meaning "the marriage of male and female." That moment of clarification was painful and disorienting for him. After a few more conversations, he left our church—a place where he'd been making friendships, forging connections, and feeling loved.

My pastoral engagement of that situation might draw criticism from readers. Some will see it as a failure inherent to the traditional position—the natural outcome of its exclusionary and discriminatory nature. As someone fully convinced of the traditional position, I don't agree. Instead, I see my shortcoming as a failure of hospitality, and by that I mean, a failure to be clear.

In the same way that my wife and I decided to put a sign on our front door to avoid confusion, I've become convinced that clearly stating what our church teaches on marriage and sexuality is necessary in our context. Among those we welcome and minister to, that clarity is an act of care.

I don't mean that sexuality is a regular topic of our preaching, or that it's part of the "barking" posture Alan Jacobs has identified as "[the sheepdog's view](#)." But when the issue arises, as it did not too long ago in a sermon series on Romans, we address it head-on. We do the same when the text of Scripture speaks to racial justice, creation care, or care for the unborn.

In our efforts to be clear with people, we've also created a "white paper" of sorts—a summary of what the church teaches and why, with specific responses to common objections or points of confusion. The document also sketches out some of our pastoral approaches more generally.

Our hope is that the position paper, imperfect though it is, serves as an act of hospitality by providing openness about our views. We make the paper available to those in our community who inquire, and we also share it as part our membership process at the church.

We have a number of people in our church who question or even disagree with our teaching. But many of them have expressed appreciation for the forthright way we've talked about the issue, and they've found a place in our community nonetheless.

Recently, one parishioner who's unconvinced by the historic position told me he appreciated our willingness to let the "weirdness of the Christian position" stand. With the beloved slogan "Keep Austin Weird" so pervasive in our city, maybe that comment shouldn't be surprising!

I'm glad that he and others continue to stay in our community and give our views a hearing, even though their disagreement is significant and consequential. It's better for them to know the vision and convictions that animate our pastoral care and teaching.

The same goes for those who identify as sexual minorities. Within the context of a newer church like ours, I struggle with the common temptation to so heavily emphasize "enfolding" people that I end up downplaying any uncomfortable, countercultural, or burdensome teaching.

The danger of a “bait and switch” is real. The better path, however, is to be clear in a spirit of humility and kindness.

The traditional view of marriage as a sacramental, creative, and covenanted union between male and female is God’s gift and was arguably abandoned by the church long before the question of same-sex marriage rose to the fore. This original vision is worth expressing, clearly and without apology. It’s beautiful and challenging for us all—a good the church can offer in a world of estrangement and disposable relationships. It invites us together to celebrate the gospel with our bodies. And it calls us not only to agree with God’s design but also to confess and proclaim it.

In the biography *Augustine of Hippo*, author Peter Brown [describes](#) how the intellectual climate of the bishop’s time required him to openly refute particular pagan beliefs. In Brown’s view, Augustine might have preferred to devote his energies and gifts to other ends. But the cultural pressure around Christians in Hippo “could not be ignored.”

At our church in Austin, I feel a similar imperative in the context of marriage and sexuality. As a pastor, I believe doctrines worth holding to are also worth talking about and declaring (with great care, of course). For most of our parishioners, the issue is paramount. It can’t be ignored without cost. And addressing it takes courage, humility, and discernment.

I know many other pastors are in the same boat. But how do we go about it, exactly? Here are a few things I’m learning about how to hospitably address sexual ethics:

### **First, make it personal.**

“[Sexual minorities] are not a problem for experts and theologians to solve,” says Melinda Selmys in *Sexual Authenticity*. “They are, first and foremost, the face of Christ, marginalized, bullied, misunderstood, spit upon and rejected, and absolutely beloved of God.”

As you seek to articulate the historic vision of marriage and sexuality, keep in mind the particular members of your church who are most challenged and affected by this teaching. If you can’t think of any, then you might consider voices you can listen to from a distance.

As our church continues to grow in its ability to convey Scripture’s teachings on this issue, our ministry philosophy has been informed by writers from a wide variety of disciplines and perspectives.

### **Second, be ready to grow.**

Our white paper exists as a living document. That doesn’t mean the teaching of the church is up for grabs, nor does it mean that I foresee my own convictions ever changing. If that ever happened, I’d resign rather than seek to lead our church into a different set of beliefs. And yet, I have so much to learn when it comes to pastoral care and the concrete implications of Christian sexual ethics.

In our rapidly changing culture, these questions will only continue to grow. How does the church respond to the same-sex married couple with children who have encountered Jesus for the first time? How does the body of Christ care for those who’ve transitioned from one gender to another? What does participation in the local church look like for those who are unconvinced by the church’s historic teaching?

These are questions that continue to challenge me and the local body I serve. In my own learning process, I’ve sought to frame my preaching and teaching on this topic as an invitation to further conversation.

### **Finally, tell the truth.**

Quoting actor James Cagney, the playwright David Mamet [exhorts](#) aspiring actors to “find your mark, look the other fellow in the eye, and tell the truth.” That’s good advice for the pastoral vocation as well. The historic teaching of the church on marriage is not likely to become more palatable in our culture, at least during my lifetime. It will likely continue to be “on the wrong side of history.” And it will

likely only get harder to embody grace and truth on this topic.

Yet, as an expression of hospitality, pastors and churches must clearly and consistently articulate the church's long-standing vision. Doing that requires reading and listening. It requires putting ideas to paper. And it requires humble courage—something I often feel lacking in.

Rather than “finding our mark,” as Mamet exhorts, we can rest in the knowledge that Christ has been revealed. *He* is our mark, and we can abide in his sovereignty and grace. In that place, the other imperatives still remain: Look other image bearers in the eye. And with the profound humility of Jesus, tell the truth.

Do it as an act of hospitality. Do it as an offering of God's good gift.

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