

Volume 2 Issue 3
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The subject: The Call to Build Community

When we become followers of Jesus we not only enter a new relationship with God, we enter into relationships with His people. We become brothers and sisters in a family with God as our Father. We become interdependent members of a body. We become citizens of a kingdom, members of a household, stones in the temple of the Holy Spirit, and partners in the cause of the gospel. The Bible piles up these metaphors to describe this exciting new life together.

This issue continues the dialogue on this fascinating topic. How do we get together and stay together? What forms and forums work well today to build community? We hope you'll read and then go talk to some significant people in your life and consider how to build a place for Jesus to live and work in the world.

Also in this issue: a new development. People responded to last quarter's issue with articles of their own! JUST WHAT WE WANTED! As always, the *DIALOGUE* is just that — not a pronouncement from the authorities, just a community in Christ trying to stay functional through healthy conversation.

The Boundless Church

We were invited by a bunch of wealthy Christians to be a part of a gathering of radical communities, discussing what it means to be the Church and to follow Jesus together. (Michael and I went -- it was in FL, it's tough when God calls you to the beach, but we went). So there we were, talking about what it means to follow Jesus. My friend was conversing with a very wealthy Christian. The rich man said, "I, too, have been thinking about following Christ and what that means... so I had this made to remind me to ask What Would Jesus Do?" The man pulled up the sleeve of his shirt to reveal a large, custom made 24 karat gold WWJD bracelet. Ouch. I heard Jesus referred to by a salesman as the greatest Product in the world, a product, a thing (I remember Rich Mullins lyrics "*The world can't stand what it cannot own, so I guess you had to get sold.... but they can't own you*"). I listened to wealthy people hysterically joke about who would give up one of their "extra" houses for the "homeless people" to live in, as they all laughed. It was a hard time.

A few days before, we had been on the march with the tomato pickers in Immokalee (who get paid \$30 to pick a TON of tomatoes... slave labor). And days before that we had been with the kids shivering in the cold streets of Philadelphia. Now we saw WWJD trapped in gold.

It hurt. We cried. But we did not give up. I've always known God to be a God of surprises, who shows up where you least expect it. And we saw Jesus in a new disguise. We were talking to a wealthy man about the mass imprisonment of the poor, of the unjust system of incarceration...thinking he had no idea. Then he said with tears in his eyes, "I know, my brother is on death row." Over and over, we truly encountered wealthy people -- as human beings, as broken and weak, as beautiful and ragged. I remember the words of Jesus, despised for hanging out with the rich and the poor alike -- Anyone can love those who love them. Everyone loves those who are like them. "Even the pagans do that", says Jesus (Mt. 5:47). But you are called to be different. There is another way of life in an upside down Kingdom. Love those who hate you. Love those who create poverty. See in them your fallenness. See in them your wretchedness. We have the same blood, and cry the same salty tears. We are made of the same dust. We are all

capable of the same evil, and we have potential for the same good. From the addicts I learn of my addiction, and from the saints I learn of my holiness. Someone once said, "In the oppressed I recognize my own face, and in the hands of the oppressor I recognize my own hands." As the Body of Christ, we must find those who are hardest to love, and dedicate ourselves to seeing God's image in them. The God of love and the love of God know no bounds. Whenever we think we understand, there's always more. Love has no boundaries. Jesus teaches the zealots and anarchists to love the soldiers and politicians, the cynics and hippies to love the meat eaters and road builders, the Pharisees and religious people to love the homosexuals and the heretics. It is this love unleashed in the world that will bring the Kingdom down. It is this love that makes us the Church.

The Church is not a building, nor a meeting. Institutions are not "churches". *[In fact, I have tried to remove the word 'churches' from my vocabulary. I believe there is only one Church. Sure, there are many congregations and many "parts" but one Body].* Whenever Jesus speaks of His Church, He always speaks in the singular and the metaphors He uses are always singular (Bride, Body...). As the old Gospel preacher said so well, "Jesus is coming back for His Church... and He's coming for a Bride, not a harem." Jesus never refers to the Church as a building or meeting. Church is not something we go to; **SHE** is something we **are**.... an organism not an organization.

We got a glimpse of this unity at the Family Reunion we did last month (each year we have a conference gathering in February). The Church is a family of rebirth. Jesus tells Nicodemus he must be born again. When people ask Jesus about His relatives, he says: "Here are my mother and brothers! Whoever does God's will is my brother and sister and mother" (Mark 3:35). It was this hope we tried to bring to that meeting in Florida. I am convinced that the great tragedy is not that the rich Christians don't care for the poor, but that they do not **know** the poor. For if a father only has one can of soup, he does not devour it himself and let his kids go hungry. In the same way, if the rich could encounter the Poor as their Sisters and Brothers, the world would begin to change. Wealth cannot exist when the rich truly encounter the Poor, as Family. And so, last month we had a Family reunion. Many of you were there. There were dozens of folks from tons of different communities and styles of life. We drank Truth together in our intentional discussions (on the government, the Church, the world...). But here is what was Sacred -- Age did not stop love. Race did not stop love. Politics did not stop love. Class did not stop love. Institutional religion did not stop love. God was there in the Temples. I felt like never before the unity of the Body, as we groaned together for the coming of the Kingdom. On Earth.

Shane Claiborne

Community Life in Cell Groups

By the time I found Circle of Hope, God had brought me to a place where I could be honest with myself and admit that I needed people. Not just wanted them around, but actually needed them. This was a hard thing for me to admit. I had always considered myself an independent, capable person that had infinite resources to hand out to the people around me. To need people was to be needy and that in turn was to be pathetic.

Before coming to Philly I worked as a pioneer student worker in the Czech Republic. For the first year and a half I worked as part of an international team — which was great. Halfway through the second year, however, most of my team was gone. The Czech leadership was not there just yet to take things over, and I found myself, along with one American who couldn't speak Czech, trying to hold it together.

I spent two and a half years trying not to look pathetic. I became the travelling secretary for the movement, on the road three to four days every week. I traveled by myself, slept on student floors, organized and ran conferences and retreats, led small groups, and slowly but surely, burned myself out. I placed the weight of the entire country squarely on my shoulders alone, and it was just too heavy.

Clearly I had issues...But I'm not convinced that most of us don't. We carry the baggage of our past communal experiences — our families, relationships, past church interactions. I was scared of being a community drain. I wanted to serve, and honestly, I think I fancied myself a

“Super-Christian-Missionary-Woman” story in the making.

Whatever our issues, we tend to fall in one of two camps; runners or drainers. Those who tend to avoid community may not be comfortable setting healthy boundaries for themselves or for others. They fear both being overwhelmed and being overwhelming. There are those too, who drain the life out of community by playing out expectations that the community can meet all their needs for intimacy and love.

The result can often be community that is either disconnected and superficial, or enmeshed and closed.

At Circle of Hope we are trying to work this out in our cell groups. It is a profound challenge to create community that goes both deep and wide. A space where we can be both real and intimate with each other while remaining open and non-intimidating for the next person God brings. Jesus calls us to community- **through** a relationship with him. It is only through him that we can ever hope to find wholeness and health in our communal life. We find our needs for intimacy met first and foremost **in him**, and we experience it best with others as we experience Jesus **in them**.

“Instead, speaking the truth in love, we will in all things grow up into him who is the Head, that is, Christ. From him the whole body joined and held together by every supporting ligament, grows and builds itself up in love, as each part does its work.” Ephesians 4:15-16

Healthy community happens through Jesus and because of Jesus. How healthy our cell communities are depends on how we define ourselves both as leaders and as a cell. In a recent session I attended at the Brethren in Christ General Conference, several key components of healthy community were outlined. These include:

- 1) Atmosphere of joy and trust.
- 2) Interdependent relationships
- 3) Affirmation and encouragement
- 4) Intentional conflict resolution
- 5) Common mission

Point for Dialogue: If I had to characterize our cells over all (and although it is not always a helpful thing to do, it may spark some dialogue), I would say that we are pretty good at helping to foster interdependent relationships and atmospheres of affirmation and encouragement. We love Jesus and we try to love each other. These are positive and important elements.

Resolving conflict is difficult for us. Perhaps this requires a greater atmosphere of joy and trust. We need to trust our love for one another to be able to “speak the truth in love”. Most importantly- we do not grow, nor do we help each other grow to maturity if we do not deal with the hard things openly with one another.

Lastly, while people are getting into our cells, people who don’t already have relationships with Christ are not. Jesus brings us together as a community of believers so that he can show the world what he’s like. We are witnesses together — the way for someone to find Jesus. When they can get in — they can see Jesus. Perhaps we need to focus for awhile on how we can go for both depth and breadth in our cells -- as we 1) love Jesus, 2) love each other, and 3) love the lost.

To exist on each of these levels requires nothing short of the Spirit of God. It is, however, the life we were created for. As I discovered, trying to manage any of this outside the safety net of God’s family is not only unadvisable, but also impossible. Loving Jesus and the lost leads us to each other. We grow, and the kingdom grows.

“From him the whole body joined and held together by every supporting ligament, grows and builds itself up in love, as each part does its work.”

Annette Jeffrey

Things to Think about Before You Move In

Many people among the Circle of Hope are interested in “living in community.” Basically, this means that people are living together in a common space. It could be a couple of couples, some single people, or a mix. Our community households fit on a spectrum anywhere from “monastery” to “boarding house.” We are experimenting with many variations on a theme, with many motives: sharing expenses, sharing work, avoiding loneliness, staying safe, giving a helping hand, working out a conviction or philosophy. Most of us seem to have some consciousness about trying to follow God in the process. We want to love and serve each other, we want to *be in* community; we may even want to live out Acts 2 for today. Much love has been built, already. For some, these days of “living in community” will be days they always remember fondly.

Community does not always create fond memories, however. People who join in an experiment that puts together a variety of personalities crammed into a common space, may feel like they are experiencing a bit more of *The Real World* than they’d hoped. So here are a few random suggestions for ways to save yourself some grief and perhaps get closer to what the Bible idealizes as the way Christians are called to live together. Reader beware! The unsolicited advice-giving now begins. I don’t know your specific situation, so you’ll have to sort out how much of this applies!

Answer these questions before you move in (or now that you are there):

1) Why are we doing this?

If you think your household is all about being a radical community of faith and your friend thinks it is a short-term way-station on the way to grad school in another state, there will be problems. It may be worth waiting to find a person who shares your assumptions rather than grabbing the first person who can pay the rent. Have the talk about what this is all about. WRITE IT DOWN. I know writing things down seems awfully formal. But having an agreement to which you can refer, which can be changed, is usually better than living in *Survivor* mode, where the strongest wills dominate according to their whim. In community, people often act out of their old family instincts and don’t even know it. Unless you want to replay those scenes endlessly, spontaneously, you will want to agree on some common patterns that everyone can shoot for, mutually. So write down the kind of life you want to live together. Begin with an honest statement of why you live together – *our house is for people who want to help each other realize the fullness of their faith and gifts or our house is for people to share the expense of rent or our house is about serving the poor or whatever*. Some households make rather elaborate covenants with one another. Yours may not be so intentional. However elaborate, it helps to have a good understanding of “what this house is all about” if you don’t want distance and hurt feelings.

2) What are the financial agreements?

Again, I say that anything about money, especially, needs to be written down (if it isn’t already in your lease). It is very hard to talk about money, and people often go on their assumptions. For instance, some people assume that everyone will chip in because that is “how it ought to be.” Some people might assume that if a person breaks their stuff they will pay for it. Don’t trust your assumptions. People need to know what their share expenses will be up front. Everyone needs to know what is going to happen if people don’t pay. Who is in charge of collecting the money and paying bills should be agreed upon.

3) How is our space to be used?

After several experiments in community living, I personally don’t think Americans should be fit together too tightly. They often explode. It probably shouldn’t be this way, but we need our space. To have a long-term situation, consider how to get enough room. Talk about how the common spaces will be used. For instance: Does my TV belong in the living room? Is that where I hang up my mom’s picture? For instance: When my friends come over every night do they hang out in the living room, or is that where you get to curl up with a book? Do I have to include you in everything that happens in public space? Likewise, talk about what is private. For instance: Are bedrooms off limits? How about my bathroom? Should I have my bath clean in case your cousins visit? One reason I like things written down is that someone will move out and the next person will not have been in on the discussions and then they will have to bump into a lot of unspoken “rules” and get offended.

4) How do others relate to the household?

A household soon arrives at an identity of its own. It is a “thing.” People are either in it or out of it. This creates yet another set of boundary issues. For instance: Can people come and spend the night, eat our food? Can they stay for weeks in your bedroom without sharing our agreements (like paying)? What do I do when I don’t like what one of your friends is doing? It makes sense to have some kind of regular meeting of the household to keep talking about new things that come up. Since communication is so key to harmony, perhaps it should be stated up front that when you stop communicating you may soon be “out.”

5) How do we do community work?

Since no one usually likes to do any housecleaning or yard keeping, whole friendships have gone down the drain with undone dishes. I’ve known of idealistic groups who just let the work get done out of the goodness of hearts. But those groups often build in a lot of resentment. There is always someone who is “too busy” or “too unskilled” to do any of the upkeep. And there is always a person who can’t stand to have the place a mess. There will be someone who feels that housework means love and one that feels housework means bondage. Set out some kind of approach that works for you.

6) How does it end? How do I leave?

Have you had the roommate, yet, whose lease ended two months before their next lease began? Have you had a partner who just took off because another opportunity came and now you’ve got an empty room or worse, an empty heart? It often seems sort of cold-blooded to talk about this great, new household arrangement changing or ending. But I think we guard our hearts when we talk about what “could” happen. Unless you are on the monastery end of the spectrum, things will probably be changing at some point. Should a person give a month’s notice? If an intentional community has common assets, how will they be distributed? If you own property together, can the person leaving demand a buy-out or do they have to wait until the community dissolves?

7) Is Jesus at the center?

I think you have to hear housemates say this, and often: “Jesus is Lord, here.” It is sort of like husbands, wives and children reaffirming that they do, indeed, love one another. If you haven’t heard it lately, it may be inappropriate to assume. Personally, I don’t want to make any household agreements with people who can’t say that “Jesus is the Lord of our household.” Even if they don’t know what they are talking about, or they haven’t even made a relationship with Jesus, I can at least hope for some respect for what is central to my life in my own house. Community living can be very hard. At the same time it is irresistibly wonderful and life-transforming, as well as downright practical and just. Without Jesus at the center it is even more likely to be only hard. At the very least, make sure Jesus is welcome in the house before you move into it.

Rod White

Reflections on Our “Dialogue on Community”

I grew up in a suburb outside of St. Louis, Missouri with a brother, sister and a mom and dad. My two children are growing up in the city of Philadelphia with a sister, a mom and dad, a Nathan and a Dan and Tess. We have chosen to live miles and miles away from our family of origin, but live in intentional community with others who also feel called to do so. We are not alone in this way of life. We are among a few households who attend Circle of Hope who have also chosen to live in community. Jean Vanier, the author of Community and Growth, explains community as, “...groupings of people who have left their own milieu to live with others under the same roof, and work from a new vision of human beings and their relationships with each other and with God.” On July 23, many of us in Circle of Hope got together to discuss the idea of how to “do community.”

We were invited to explore three questions: 1) Why do you live in community? 2) What is most precious to you about community? and 3) What is your greatest dilemma?

It was clear that most everyone felt that the message of Jesus invited them to live in community. To some, community was about duplicating the first century church and living as closely to the scripture as one could get. Others explained the need in their life to stray away from individualism. There was also a household represented that was formed for the primary purpose

of living and ministering with the poor. In our exploration of why we live in community we were reminded that the communities we form within our households are not to be closed in on themselves, but a place to bring people in and bring life to the world.

In our exploration of discovering what is precious to us about living in community we found that a common feeling was that of being loved in spite of our “stuff”. Ironically enough, it seems as though the feelings of acceptance were usually precipitated by a conflict or an intense discussion. When we are able to come to the table, be vulnerable and then work it out, it breaks down walls that may have been built and we feel a deeper connection than we felt before we revealed our souls. We are able to sense the commitment to God and to each other in challenging and loving one another through the process of working out our lives together. It was mentioned that a huge conflict that was worked out in one household became the turning point for a closer relationship with others in the community and a better awareness of the weaknesses that were being played out in all aspects of the individuals life. Sharing also seemed to be a prominent benefit of living in community. Households share chores, food, money and even children. One individual expressed that she may be facing the possibility of never conceiving her own children, but now is able to relax because by living in community she will always have children in her life.

As ideal as they may seem, intentional communities are hard work and at times seem more difficult and painful than they are worth. People shared the hurts they experienced as they struggled to figure out their lives with other individuals who may not necessarily have the same vision. In working through the process, lives were enriched, but the hurt of dashed expectations was very real. Some individuals shared that they have come to the conclusion that it is not working and their household can not continue. Families with children shared frustrations in knowing how to establish appropriate boundaries with their children and not intrude on the childless members of their households. One member of a household described his struggle of figuring together how they can serve the poor and still be a place of dwelling and shared space. In a household where money was completely shared there were intense discussions on what was a priority for purchases and what wasn't. When we choose to live in community, we also may deal with the aspect of our unconscious needs being played out in our communal experience. We must ask ourselves, “Have I come here to receive more than I came to give?”

It was a blessing to gather with people who are embarking on this process of living together to give life to others and receiving life back. We barely scratched the surface in our dialogue, but we all agreed we would like to support each other in this journey and will meet again to continue our discussion. As we ended the meeting, I was reminded of the fact that God has placed each of us where we are for a purpose. We must continue to work out our lives with each other, but not just as individual households, but also in the larger body of believers. We must always remain open to one another, growing in love and humility. Hebrews 10:24-5 says, “Let us consider how we may spur one another on to love and good deeds. Let us not give up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but let us encourage one another-and all the more as you see the day approaching.”

Angie Petersen

Response to the last Dialogue

Fair Warning

By Anna Kunnecke-VanBeers

In the last issue of *Dialogue*, Rod White wrote an article encouraging folks at Circle to “just get married.” Stop worrying about it, he said, and just do it. Since he's been married for more than twenty years, he can look back and see the big picture of his life. It's inspiring that his marriage has been so rewarding that he feels that lots of people should get married, and soon. Maybe I'll feel the same way in twenty years. In the meantime, and in the spirit of a true dialogue, I want to tell you how it feels two and half years after taking his advice.

Marriage is really, really, really hard. I know everyone knows this. I knew this too, even before I

got married. It's just that my definition of "hard" has changed since then. I pictured the kind of difficult relationship I'd been through before, where you fight with your boyfriend and you walk away from each other angry, with tears and usually rain streaming down, with Aimee Mann playing in the background and the whole thing soaked in despair and grand tragedy (admit it, it's a romantic image). And then you'd kiss and make up and make out and it would be even better than before. As it turns out, that isn't what "hard" means in a marriage. It's more like waking up one day knowing that you have permanently joined yourself to the most selfish person in the world, whose very joy and purpose is to make you miserable. Even worse is that you wake up one day and realize that compared to you, your spouse is Mother Theresa.

Because this is what marriage does: it shows you how sad and sick and scared and selfish you are in the secret places where no other person has ever seen into before. Sounds fun, right? It also places on two lone people the crippling burden of trying to unlearn oppressive or passive aggressive gender roles that have been around for eons. On top of that, being married is like walking around naked all the time and then having God open a hole in your gut so that everyone in the marriage (you, spouse, God) can no longer ignore all the poisonous gunk that's been hiding in there. Exposing the gunk is probably the first step to healing it. But let me assure you, you don't want to undertake this without some serious thought.

Don't get me wrong. I think that John and I have a REALLY GOOD marriage. I'm finding out as I talk to other married people that our experience is just par for the course, but no one told me ahead of time, so I'm telling you now. I never regret marrying John—except for the days when I'm absolutely convinced that getting married young was the worst, most misguided (and permanent) mistake I've ever made. I can't even *tell* you how terrifying that is.

Some wise women in our church have very helpfully pointed out a couple of things to me recently. 1) We often marry people who are *least* capable of giving what we *most* need, and 2) That happy little chemical that's in your body when you're madly in love never hangs around longer than two years, and it never comes back. This is just the way it is for almost everyone.

So let me demolish a couple of myths about marriage that are skulking around out there. Of course, none of you believe these. But they might be really helpful for um, you know, that really dysfunctional friend of yours.

- 1) You will no longer be lonely.
- 2) Your partner will make up for the loving that you didn't get from your family.
- 3) Your lust will go away and you will never again be tempted by porn.
- 4) You won't need to live in the future (or the past) anymore.
- 5) Your sex and intimacy issues will resolve themselves.
- 6) Your life will have purpose and be more spiritual; you will feel complete.

Once you dismiss those wild flights of the imagination, you will be free to move on to some more promising ones. My current favorites are the house myth (if I just had a beautiful house with a garden it would cure me of material cravings forever); the baby myth (I would finally feel like I was doing something really meaningful and worthwhile and on top of that would suddenly possess tons of patience); and the grad school myth (I would always feel secure and smart and sure of myself if I had that shiny piece of paper). If you already have those things: kids, a house, an advanced degree—it must sound ludicrous that I actually believe that they'll solve all my problems. What's ludicrous is thinking that anything will solve any of our problems. But our culture, especially Christian culture, is saturated with promises that marriage will do that very thing.

Marriage can feel like a prison sometimes, so you need to walk in with your eyes open. In fact, you have to pull the door closed and lock it and throw away the escape hatch *out of your own free will*—till death do us part, through all kinds of crap—so you'd better be ready. Please don't just get married. Maybe twenty years down the road you'll appreciate just how wonderful and fabulous and rich the marriage process is. But twenty years is a long time to wait for that kind of enlightenment, and it isn't all fun.

At some of my lowest points I have felt betrayed by married friends who blithely encouraged us to marry—why didn't they warn us, for God's sake? And at my less admirable moments I've decided that it's because misery loves company. So here's the view at two and a half years. This is a great place to be, but it's not easy and it's certainly not something I would push people into. A lot of days it's wonderful, and John and I seem to be finding a nourishing rhythm of partnering and companionship and affection and passion. Other days, however, we're more like vampires on crack, sucking the life out of each other with great vim and vigor. And this is in a loving, committed, growing relationship. So consider this fair warning.

Response to the last Dialogue

I Wish Someone Had Told Me...

By Pam Rowen

In the spirit of dialogue, I am responding to last month's issue on marriage and singleness. In particular, I am addressing the article on sexuality and singleness. However, I'm not so sure my being single has much to do with my sexual journey so I'm going to talk about sex from the perspective of being 33. In other words, I've learned some hard, crucial things over the last 15 plus years. Upon reflection, I'm sad and angry that no one was ever brutally honest with me about sexuality, my sexuality. So if you, too, have suffered from shallow, irrelevant, and harmful advice on your sexuality from your church or youth group, or if you've ever been handed a copy of Passion and Purity (if you don't know, don't ask), read further.

Those of us with even the smallest amount of experience with urban issues know how absolutely ludicrous the "Just Say No to Drugs" campaign was. The campaign completely isolated the choice to do or not to do drugs to the moment you are asked, ignoring the overwhelming social context of materialism, consumerism, racism, poverty, etc. It was a horribly over-simplistic campaign that ultimately blames the drug addict! I mean, we wouldn't have a drug problem if kids just said no, right? In the same way, your sexuality cannot be reduced to a moment when you decide to have sexual intercourse or not to have sexual intercourse with someone. Life just isn't that simple.

Well, unfortunately, when I was growing up, this was the "war on sexuality" strategy of my church and youth leaders, and I'm guessing what you may have experienced too. "Just say no to sex." For that matter, just say no to making out a lot, or putting yourself into "dangerous" situations, or going past first base (what?!?). Don't lay down together or fall asleep next to each other. Don't spend too much time alone. Sexuality was evidently so painful for everyone to discuss (however, not to do, apparently, as I later found out my Sunday School Superintendent was having sex with the town prostitute and with my piano teacher, the church organist, who was also sleeping with the tenor in the choir and so on and so on), so why not just develop the catchy motto JUST SAY NO!

Following is a list of things I wish someone had told me when I was a teenager. Maybe you know them already, but maybe no one has yet told you either.

1) I wish someone had told me that my sexuality is an integral part of who I am, and no matter how much society and the church tries to isolate it from the rest of me, it can't be separated or denied or suppressed until my wedding night when it is supposed to magically resurrect. Both society and the church teach us to separate our sexuality from the rest of ourselves; society says to experience sex freely, and the church teaches us to deny it. Therefore, growing up, I became embarrassed by my sexuality—at times just because it existed, and at other times because it was so disconnected from who I was. It especially seemed a polar opposite to my spirituality. This led to a very painful sexual discovery journey as I awkwardly sought to express my sexuality, at times tried to deny it, all the time relating to other broken people who were in the same sexual identity turmoil. As a result I suffered many bad sexual experiences, including being raped at, of all places, Wheaton College; sexual abuse by a cousin; and I'm sure you can commiserate with my countless hours of fully-clothed grinding and other cheap, embarrassing orgasms with guys who I can't even remember their names now. These are only just a few of the dehumanizing highlights.

2) Growing up I wish someone, no, I wish a lot of people had told me that I am beautiful, not just my mind and personality, but all of me including my sexuality. I wish it had not taken me so long to learn that God doesn't just love my soul, but he also loves and takes delight in my body, including my breasts and vagina. It was a revolutionary moment a few years ago when I realized that Jesus lovingly looks at me – all of me – calls me beautiful and doesn't get a hard on! At that point in my journey I didn't realize that was possible for a man (and yes, unfortunately God is still too wrapped up in being male for me--church taught me that, too--so he still bears many of those limitations). Intimate love from a man that wasn't necessarily about sex, and sexual love from a man that was more than sex have been fairly new experiences for me.

I wish someone had pointed out what I finally now realize, that how I was dressing – in extreme opposites of baggy, masculine clothes and boots one day, and the next in a mini skirt, tight shirt and heels – was an expression of me detesting my sexuality. I was ashamed of my sexuality so I tried to hide it some days, and then it would burst forth other days in the extreme. I was miserable in both costumes. A few years ago God began to teach me that he loved more than just my mind and soul, and longed for me to reintegrate my sexuality back into myself.

3) I wish someone had told me that there is an incredibly fine line between sensuality and spirituality. That I have this deep, deep place inside of me that desperately longs for God, and that because of this fine line I would often try to touch this spot through sensual means – sometimes binge eating, hoping that if I cram enough food down, I would hit the spot and feel full and satisfied; or at other times I'd search for a penis to reach this unreachable void. This has been very confusing to me at times because there are two things going on at once—the re-emerging of a healthy sexual appetite which is to be celebrated, and the desire to have sex only to fill a deeper void. I still struggle for clarity on which one is motivating me at times. Although, compared to before when I just beat myself up for not adhering to the right "rules", I now understand my impulses on a much deeper level.

4) Last, I wish someone had told me that as a girl, I wouldn't just have to avoid "dangerous" single-

minded boys and “compromising” situations but that I would want to have sex, too! And that that is a great thing! Girls were warned against provocative dancing or dressing because it would make boys “stumble”. However, boys weren’t strictly warned against flirting. They were allowed to dance like they wanted to get some action or wear short shorts and tank tops, heck, even go topless and show off those irresistible chests at the beach. Why? Because girls don’t lust—they just want emotional connection, or control over boys, or something like that. I had spent so much time trying to ward off boys’ sexual advances that I was totally unprepared when I developed my own sexual desires.

These are only a few of the things I’ve learned over the years. Maybe knowing them would not have changed my journey much. But I believe I was deceived about both my sexuality and about God, and in doing so, the church made itself irrelevant to my sexual journey. Then, having to dichotomize my sexuality from God led to painful experiences.

My advice to you? Well, you can try to make up a lot of rules and boundaries, but that never, not even once, worked for me. It only led to a lot of guilt and frustration from failure, and I believe inhibited me from exploring the deeper issues. So go deeper than baseball analogies. Search your heart for what you want, what you are after. If you find yourself out of control – being involved in sexual things which afterwards make you feel dehumanized— then there is a lot more going on with you than just trying to do “better” next time. If your sexuality – and by this I include how you dress, what movies you watch, what turns you on, how you view your naked body in the mirror, etc.-- seems urgent, desperate or disconnected from the rest of you, then its time to be quiet. Allow God to search you and “know” you. It’s no accident that that’s the biblical word for having sex (remember Adam “knew” Eve?). That’s exactly how God wants to know you, in the most intimate way possible.

When this happened to me a couple of years ago, that deep, deep place in me was touched in a way no triple, gooey, chocolate dessert or any penis can ever do. And over the years, because of God’s grace, I’m slowly losing my desire to fill that void by those means. At the same time I’m learning to love my sexuality. Ironically, this first took several loving sexual relationships to heal me. However, recently God has brought me to a more freeing place where I can celebrate my sexuality by being celibate. For the first time in my life it’s a free choice I’m making!

My deepest prayer has become the desire for wholeness, namely, that God would reintegrate my sexuality, and other straggling elements of myself, into the rest of me. So often the struggle with our sexuality is set up as the desire for purity versus the desire for freedom. I’ve found this to be a lie. Even though I may have been told to be pure, I’m not sure I ever really wanted to be pure. However, at my deepest level I’ve wanted, and still desire, God to penetrate me, to heal me. Therefore, I think the sexual journey—it’s a process, not a battle--should instead be seen as one from brokenness and fragmentation to wholeness, from bondage to freedom. God wants us to be free in our sexual expression. God wants us to be whole. I’m so grateful God deeply knows me, and lovingly picks up the fragmented pieces of myself, freeing me to be a whole person.

Response to the last Dialogue

Sex and the Single Adult

By Calenthia Dowdy

We’re a Circle of Hope committed to fresh expressions of God on earth. We talk about casting off binding tradition and embracing the true, whole gospel of Jesus. “Counter culture speak” permeates our dialogue as we work for peace and justice right here and now. We won’t tolerate division amongst ethnic groups or gender inequality, claiming a New Humanity that’s mutual and inclusive. In all this, some of us find identity, friends and a position from which to deal with the greater society. Circle has made strides in becoming a vibrant community breathing new life into an otherwise irrelevant, dying institution, the church. I think we do a good job at celebrating tradition that’s useful and throwing off tradition that’s been hurtful. But sadly, when it comes to the topic of SEX even with all our enlightenment, we fumble. Learned fear takes over, we reach back to some useless tradition, back to 1st century Greco-Roman body/soul dualism. Christian Ethicist, Christine E. Gudorf tells us, “We’re still teaching a sexual code based in fear of the body and of sexuality, in understandings of sexual virtue as the repression of bodily desires by the force of the rational will, ... sexuality as an obstacle to spirituality...”

The last issue of the Dialogue offered what was purported as words of wisdom for single Christians dealing with their sexuality. How to avoid going too far, and putting ourselves in compromising positions. How do I keep my wild flesh under control? The advice given was all too familiar to me, I probably gave some similar advice when I was a youth minister a few years ago. Sex is powerful, nothing for children to play with. I wanted to dust off that Josh McDowell “Why Wait” film our church youth group made us watch over and over again when I was thirteen, but then it hit me, I’m not thirteen anymore. I’m a real grown-up.

Does the Bible say anything about sex and sexuality to real grown-ups? It sure does!

Sex is sacred, even holy and sexual expressions are necessary. Our bodies with all its feelings and desires were created by God. The desire to share mutual sexual pleasure is absolutely delightful to God. I like what Gudorf writes in this area too, "Sexual pleasure is good because it enables our sense of well-being by satisfying some basic human needs: for touch, for excitement, for physical release, for companionship. Sexual pleasure can also be a means to the satisfaction of other human needs and desires, through its ability to bind persons together in intimacy." She goes on to write that mutuality in sexual pleasure is key to its being pleasing to God. In the sexual act each partner, through respect and care seeks to meet the needs and desires of the other. The act is cheapened and displeasing to God when it's selfish, motivated by taking vs. giving.

I'm not one to discourage marriage but I will argue that just because a couple is legally bound by secular law, does not mean their sexual acts are pleasing to God. There's a lot of cheap, sinful sex going on in marriage beds just as there's some glorious, good sex happening between people who know each other spiritually and physically, loving one another, understanding sex as a celebration of their togetherness and mutual care.

Jesus never directly addressed sexual behavior. Many of the old, core beliefs we have about sex and bodies come from a particular philosophical perspective. That perspective was not handed down to us from God, it was created by men of antiquity. Greek philosophical thinking of Jesus' time felt that all passion was evil, signs of weak flesh and lower nature. The mind and rational acts were viewed as good and strong, the spirit or higher nature. They were wrong! Israelites understood the God of Creation as being full of emotion. Yahweh is the divine pathos, showing love, anger, care, concern, hurt, passion, jealousy over his beloved. In Hosea God is hurt because Israel has left their mutuality with Yahweh and gone seeking after other gods. Some other Old Testament writings are downright sexy! You ever read Song of Solomon? The Bible drips of sexuality and sexual innuendo and marriage isn't always the commencement or blessing point.

To the single adult, I wouldn't attempt to tell you what to do (especially in this article) during those moments of yearning. I certainly wouldn't advise you to "just get married" because that doesn't guarantee sexual gratification or mutuality, nor does it cure lust. I do however think that if we can begin to realize that we're neither animated bodies or encapsulated souls, rather we're whole, body and soul; when we understand that traditional sexual ethics has failed us and created the mess we find ourselves in today, perhaps we can begin to bring some real life to this thing. We have to do it ourselves, can't wait for our churches or leaders because they're paralyzed by fear of stepping away from tradition in order to develop an honest sexual ethic. The old framework is familiar but it obviously doesn't work!

Many of us have been mentally and emotionally scarred because of what we've learned about sex from our churches. We're lop-sided Christians, afraid of parts of who we are. The church, however well-meaning and misguided, has sinned. Gudorf says the church needs to renounce traditional teachings of sexuality and then repent because of all the suffering and victimization its long supported and legitimized. There's lots of clean-up work to do. But in the meantime, know that the Body is Good. Sex is a gift. In Love, Care and Mutuality. Explore. Touch. Feel. Hold. Be held. Be Free.