



A TIME TO SEEK

STUDY GUIDE ON SEXUAL AND GENDER DIVERSITY

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Religious Institute on Sexual Morality, Justice, and Healing



RELIGIOUS DECLARATION ON SEXUAL MORALITY, JUSTICE, AND HEALING

Sexuality is God's life-giving and life-fulfilling gift. We come from diverse religious communities to recognize sexuality as central to our humanity and as integral to our spirituality. We are speaking out against the pain, brokenness, oppression, and loss of meaning that many experience about their sexuality.

Our faith traditions celebrate the goodness of creation, including our bodies and our sexuality. We sin when this sacred gift is abused or exploited. However, the great promise of our traditions is love, healing, and restored relationships.

Our culture needs a sexual ethic focused on personal relationships and social justice rather than particular sexual acts. All persons have the right and responsibility to lead sexual lives that express love, justice, mutuality, commitment, consent, and pleasure. Grounded in respect for the body and for the vulnerability that intimacy brings, this ethic fosters physical, emotional, and spiritual health. It accepts no double standards and applies to all persons, without regard to sex, gender, color, age, bodily condition, marital status, or sexual orientation.

God hears the cries of those who suffer from the failure of religious communities to address sexuality. We are called today to see, hear, and respond to the suffering caused by violence against women and sexual minorities, the HIV pandemic, unsustainable population growth and over-consumption, and the commercial exploitation of sexuality.

Faith communities must therefore be truth seeking, courageous, and just. We call for:

- Theological reflection that integrates the wisdom of excluded, often silenced peoples, and insights about sexuality from medicine, social science, the arts and humanities.
- Full inclusion of women and sexual minorities in congregational life, including their ordination and the blessing of same sex unions.
- Sexuality counseling and education throughout the lifespan from trained religious leaders.
- Support for those who challenge sexual oppression and who work for justice within their congregations and denomination.

Faith communities must also advocate for sexual and spiritual wholeness in society. We call for:

- Lifelong, age appropriate sexuality education in schools, seminaries, and community settings.
- A faith-based commitment to sexual and reproductive rights, including access to voluntary contraception, abortion, and HIV/STD prevention and treatment.
- Religious leadership in movements to end sexual and social injustice.

God rejoices when we celebrate our sexuality with holiness and integrity. We, the undersigned, invite our colleagues and faith communities to join us in promoting sexual morality, justice, and healing.

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INTRODUCTION

Since the beginning of organized religion, religious bodies have wrestled with sexuality issues. The Hebrew Bible includes many chapters that focus on the goodness of sexuality in people's lives, while warning of its destructive and exploitative uses. The Talmud, the Jewish writings of the early rabbis, and the Christian ecumenical councils, starting with the Council of Nicea in 325, debated marriage eligibility, the propriety of sexual acts and sexual relationships, and the appropriate roles for women and men in religious life and society at large. The Reformation challenged a celibate clergy.

In the latter part of the 20th century, the majority of religious denominations struggled with accepting divorced people into their communities and ordaining women. It was only 30 years ago that these issues were causing schisms in denominations, local congregations, and even among friends and families. People of good faith were able to work, study and pray together about these issues, and today the majority of religious institutions in the United States now welcome and include divorced persons and many recognize women as ordained clergy.

During the past two decades, religious institutions have struggled with issues related to sexual orientation and identity. Many have taken positions to welcome and include lesbian and gay members. Some have affirmed the rights of lesbian women and gay men to serve the faith community as ordained clergy, deacons, and elders, and they also offer commitment ceremonies to same-sex couples. A few denominations have affirmed full inclusion of people who are transgender. There are many organizations working to ensure the rights of lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) persons within specific faith communities.

Other major religious institutions have been roiled by controversy over these issues. Several of the largest mainstream denominations in America are currently engaged in fierce debates about how to include LGBT persons. On a local level, congregations find themselves mirroring these struggles about how to truly welcome people of diverse orientations and identities.

We have prepared this multi-faith Study Guide to help you and your congregation seek answers to its questions about sexual orientation and gender identity. We recognize that issues regarding sexuality and gender vary among the different denominations, geographies and ethnic groups of this country. This Guide is intended to address the broad spectrum of the American faith community. We have tried to bring you the most up-to-date science and religious information. In each section, we have included resources for additional information and suggested questions for use in group discussion or individual reflection.

But, we also recognize that these are complex issues, requiring balanced information, study, discussion, reflection and prayer. Too often, ideology trumps reason in discussions of sexuality and gender; scientific findings are misrepresented, and Scriptural argument is reduced to proof-texting. We have provided full citations to sources and references so that you and your community can go further on your own with these issues.

As religious institutions continue to discover the rich dimensions of sexual and gender diversity, we hope this Study Guide will be a valuable resource in your discussions and deliberations. We pray with you for courage, respectful dialogue, and patience with one another as you seek the truth with love.