

Our whole selves

By [Bromleigh McCleneghan](#)

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When I

was presenting my M.Div. thesis on Christian sex-ed curricula, one professor asked, "Why should the churches be talking to kids about stuff like this? Shouldn't we leave it to their parents and let the churches tackle things like money and justice?"

It was

the one question that really threw me for a loop. I'm a pastor's kid now in ministry--it has always seemed completely natural that the community of faith should address every aspect of my life. Yet whether out of fear, uncertainty or an unwillingness to be vulnerable, we clergy often avoid talking with our congregations about sexuality. Then we find ourselves in damage-control mode--we wind up counseling adulterers because we could never figure out how to talk about temptation and infidelity.

In its

February issue, *Marie Claire* includes an article called "Confessions of a Single, Female Pastor," an interview with a pastor in her 20s whose calling impacts her sex life--in her denomination, ordained people vow to uphold the highest ideals of Christian life, including celibacy in singleness and fidelity in marriage. She's single, so she's celibate.

The

pastor speaks openly about her struggles as a healthy sexual person without any sanctioned outlet for sexual relationship. She (or the writer who wrote up her comments) uses words like "masturbation" and "orgasm," words that are frank and explicit but not unknown to graduates of a high school health class ([one hopes](#)).

Response

to the article has been quick and loud and negative--and much of it has come

from other clergy. These are the people who should be supporting this pastor--who should be thanking God for the opportunity to talk about sex with a secular audience, to demonstrate that clergy are not out-of-touch weirdos. Yet [some](#) of the pastors engage in accusation and outright shaming. [Others](#) are nicer but still suggest that there's something wrong with having these conversations in public--and that prayers for the young lady are in order.

When I showed the article to an unchurched friend, he was decidedly unscandalized. He thought it might be a real boon for the pastor's congregation and conference. I think articles like this could be considered evangelistic: a pastor shares that the road of discipleship is difficult but rewarding, complex and deeply embodied. She's giving a testimony here--it's just not in a forum that we in the church are particularly used to. It's a perhaps unintentionally vivid testimony, but the details make it that much more compelling.

Our culture sexualizes all sorts of [the wrong things](#), but those of us in the church could glean some wisdom from secular culture about how to talk about living as faithful, sexual beings. ELCA pastor Ben Dueholm [writes thoughtfully](#) about why pastors should be reading sex advice columnist Dan Savage, laying out a useful framework for thinking through sexual ethics. The Young Clergy Women Project is dedicating [its next month's online publication](#) to considering various aspects of love and sex in ministry and how the church is called to speak to and with the broader culture.

Pastors should be talking with people about how God is present in all facets of our lives. If we're not talking frankly and authentically about sex, we're failing those in our care.