

Women Speak FOR THEMSELVES

4 Ways to Help Your Faith Community Communicate More Effectively About Women, Sex, Birth Control and Abortion

Too often, religious speakers are ignored, misunderstood, or rejected as outdated or insensitive when talking about women, sex, dating, marriage, children, and contraception. How can they communicate both to attract listeners and help them to understand?

The Four Steps to Helping Churches Communicate:

- I Identify which religious teachings about sex, marriage, parenting, and women have the most useful and positive content for today.
- II Identify the common struggles in communicating these teachings, both generally, and particularly in the context of religious freedom challenges, and how to avoid them.
- III Learn the most effective and inviting messaging about these teachings.
- IV Use the right tone and process in approaching religious leaders and influencers in faith communities.

I. Which religious teachings about sex, marriage, parenting, and women have the most useful and positive content for today? (Note: this handout focuses on Judeo-Christian teachings)

A. The equality of women and men, and of all human beings.

- The book of Genesis speaks about God creating both men and women in his image and likeness. This means, at the very least, the affirmation that each sex is gifted with reason, free will, creativity, individual dignity, and a call to be in relationship with God and to give one's gifts to others.
- Likewise, St. Paul tells us in Galatians that in God's mind, a person's value does not depend upon one's sex, but that we are all equally "one in Christ Jesus."
- It's hard to find any foundation for the equality between the sexes or across the human race more strong and substantial than the notion—appealing to people of different faiths or no particular faith—that we are all children of a loving Creator who made us.

B. The good of sex, male/female relations, and of men and women procreating children together.

- The book of Genesis tells us that God made the human body and says that it is “good.” And makes a sexually complementary being for Adam, acknowledging that there was nothing in the universe he had already created – no magnificent natural thing on the earth—sufficient to be the companion to the male, and he to her, save the woman. Only the woman is “enough.”
- God also designs what scripture calls the “one flesh” union, and decides – though he could have put the procreation of new life *anywhere and anyhow* – to link the creation of every human being with sex, understood as an act of loving union between a man and a woman.
- Though sex and relationships between men and women can become very distorted in our world, they are, in reality, God-made, and good.

C . The good of marriage.

- In the Old Testament and the New, we read that a good marriage helps us to understand how God loves human beings and how we need to love Him and others.
- Marriage is the closest physical relationship; it is oriented to forever love of the other person; it is faithful; it is creative. Most of all, marriage is the way we get a glimpse of the intensity with which God loves us, and how he wants us to love the human beings he places in our path.

II What are the most common struggles in communicating these teachings: both generally, and specifically in the context of religious freedom challenges? How do we avoid them?

A . Generally speaking, people have multiple misconceptions about religious teachings and attitudes about sex.

- The misconception that religions think sex is “icky”, so that religion is a big NO to sex
 - Takeaway: avoid appearing to be suspicious of sex generally.
- The misconception that religions hate women
 - Takeaway: avoid ever suggesting that women’s differences make them lesser than men.
- The misconception that that religion is irrational. Based on texts only a few understand. The opposite of “reasonable” or “scientific” or “proveable.”
 - Takeaway: start by communicating on any topic with principles and values all people understand, and THEN speak of how religion affirms or even illuminates these.

B . Religious leaders can fear talking about what they think is the “too controversial” set of issues concerning the family. Why?

- It generates the response that it’s a “single issue” as opposed to the “spirit” of the church’s teachings
- There is the fear that talking about it identifies you as on one political side
- Religious leaders may fear stigmatizing anyone who might disagree with them, or live in a different family structure than the ideal.

- Or, they just believe that no one is listening, or the matter is too private, or there's nothing one can do anyway.
- Takeaway: When we get sense that fear is leading them to avoidance or passivity, we can get around ALL the above fears and encourage them to speak by following the advice in Part IV, below!

C . In the "religious freedom challenge" context, common pitfalls can prevent churches from using the opportunity of controversy to explain the fullness of their teachings.

- When religious individuals, schools, charities, or even churches are told that they can't operate as they wish, it is usually because a "nondiscrimination" law will label their obedience to their faith's doctrine as some form of sex, or sexual orientation discrimination.
- In combating these challenges, the targeted religious group too often uses an unattractive approach: insisting narrowly that the Constitution or the Religious Freedom Restoration Act gives them a "right" to refuse to cooperate with the law.
- When the public hears the objection phrased in this way, they hear the religion claiming a "legal right to do wrong" or "a legal right to discriminate"
- Or, they hear that the religion is "just following the rules"—rules that they see as being inherently out of date and irrational—made by men thousands of years ago. Most likely, these objectors have never heard of the positive case for these "rules," in part because the religious group in question is refusing to try and communicate them.
- Takeaway: avoid the "right to discriminate language, and identify the more effective ways of speaking of religious teachings below in Part III!

III What are more effective ways of speaking about religious teachings to believers who do not understand them, or those "outside the fold?"

A . The best way to begin communicating any message is to begin by "meeting the listener where they are." Speakers, including religious leaders or religiously-minded individuals, will find their message best received if they start their speaking by putting themselves in their listeners' shoes, using a respectful and patient tone.

- When talking about a controversial or hot-button issue, begin by offering preliminary reassurances to listeners. Start with "I know this topic might be controversial," or "I know this topic can be sensitive", or "I know that people think that religions' teachings on these subjects are out to judge or stigmatize people but...that's not the goal at all!"
- If people interrupt or argue that your perspective has less merit because it is coming from a religious perspective, you can say that religious teachings have been so misrepresented in public discussions that it is unfair to deny religious voices the chance to set the record straight!
- You might also let them know that most American citizens are religious, and have a right to speak equal to nonreligious citizens.

- You might say that there is no intention (or possibility!) to impose religion's will on nonbelievers: people will listen, and make up their own minds about issues.
- Finally, you can reassure listeners that there is no genuinely religious speaker on the planet who doesn't know that she or he is a sinner in need of God's mercy. Religious speech isn't about judging, but about assisting others' true happiness and freedom through sharing the truth in love. And they should be free to do that!

B . After you "lay the ground" with a respectful preliminary, you can pivot to more effective messages. Here are some effective religious messages about hot button issues that have a broad appeal:

- All religious contributions about sex, marriage, kids, contraception and abortion start from the conviction of the absolute equality between men and women, created equally by God.
- Sex is in itself a great good, but that like a lot of good things (like all of nature in fact) it can be misunderstood, abused, exploited.
- It's illogical to reject religious contributions on the grounds that religions have "rules" or principles or values about sex, dating and marriage which seem to limit human desire. Everything worth knowing and doing has rules, principles and values which contribute to its success! Music, sports, care for the environment.
- Religions promote certain ideas about sex, marriage and related issues not only for the already-true-believer, but for the freedom and happiness of all human beings, who share a similar human nature.
- Religious ideas about sex, marriage and related issues are affirmed with incredible precision in current scientific studies (see WSFT's Fact Sheets for more info). They can also be readily known by even a brief reflection on human experience.
- Religions, often thousands of years old, have incorporated what nature, science, reason and human experience tell human beings about their "natures" in regard to love, sex, marriage, parenting. They have incorporated these into the very heart of their teachings.
- Regarding non-marital sex, not only religions, but also science and common sense, have observed the problematic outcomes for men and women and children: the adults' heartbreak, the children's losses of stable parental unions, rampant disrespect or even violence toward women, and the decline of strong male/female relationships and marriages.
- Living according to religious principles is closely empirically associated with happier, more stable couples, and great advantages for children.
- Religious teachings about sex and marriage work out better for the poor. One of the largest factors in the growing gap between rich and poor in the US is the huge rate of non-marital parenting among poorer groups.
- Religions don't spend their time "blaming" the poor or others, but instead speak about the good of marital sex and parenting, WHILE offering HUGE amounts of

assistance to the poor in order to assist them to achieve their family, work and economic and educational needs.

- When religions speak about the controversial matters of contraception and cohabitation, it is not to “scare” people away from having sex, or to suggest that sex is no good unless a pregnancy results. It is not to deny people a chance to “evaluate” how to make a future marriage stronger. It is rather to say that:
 - Adults must be responsible to children, who do best in marriage
 - “Practicing noncommitment” by participating in premarital sexual relationships and/or cohabitation works too well by making couples more likely to split up later.
 - Women, who prefer sex WITH commitment even more than men, get hurt by both contraception and cohabitation.
 - Men and women long for, and need, solid, committed, forever love
 - Love and sex are meant to open people’s eyes to the entire meaning of life as God constructed it: love given and received, freely chosen, but also absolutely faithful.

C. When religious people or institutions are speaking in the context of a challenge to their religious freedom, here are tips for more effective messaging:

- Don’t insist that religion is “just obeying its rules.” This reinforces people’s idea that religion is mindless, oppressive, and obscure to nonbelievers. Instead, say that one’s religion “has this wonderful teaching,” good for co-believers, but also good for the world! That the teaching may currently be countercultural, but it is wonderful – as a great deal of personal experience, and even data show!
 - Add that while the institution DOES have a legal right to witness to these beautiful teachings, it ALSO wants to be a light to the world...to be a “demonstration” of how good these teachings can be, especially for women, and through them, for men and children too.

IV. What are practical ways in which women who speak for themselves can put these new ways of speaking into practice...to HELP their churches and other religious institutions to be more talented communicators about these matters?:

A . FIRST, a lot of religious people and institutions probably need a “pep talk” to believe how good and necessary they are today.

- Instead of giving way to an inclination to keep their heads down in the continuing storm, they need to be reminded of how many compatriots they have across our land!
- They also need to be reminded that their teachings are proved true by both human experience and multiplying numbers of studies.

B . Second, they have to be advised to do a better job about communicating. They need to see that communications is not a “lesser art” but an absolutely essential part of succeeding in sharing the truth. It takes advance thought, and lots of practice to find opportunities and the words to say truthful things attractively. You can support them to agree on making communication a priority. Here’s how:

- Approach the people that are most appropriate to listening to you on this-you don't have to go directly to your Bishop, for example, although you can! You might want to start by approaching the following people or offices:
 - Individual clergy and religious you know would be open,
 - Personnel from religions' offices of:
 - Marriage,
 - Sex,
 - Youth,
 - Education,
 - And women.
- You might also have subgroups in your religious institutions you could address:
 - Sodalties,
 - Book clubs,
 - Mothers' clubs,
 - Knights of Columbus
 - Retreats,
 - RCIA,
 - Marriage prep,
 - And other specific programs.
- When you approach your church or other religious institution, it has to be POSITELY!!! Instead of mentioning what they did wrong, lead with excitement. You can say you have found some terrific materials/sources to help them speak in a 21st century kind of way which attracts people to your message.
- Come prepared with a specific purpose. Like, "I think our Respect for Life group could spread awareness about how contraception and uncommitted sex and causing more abortion!" Or, "If our school is under a religious freedom challenge for failing to provide contraception to employees, these talking points may be helpful in explaining our position to others."
- Come prepared with specific materials. Our e-books, our videos, fact sheets, training manuals or other publications. If you haven't already, sign up with your e-mail at womenspeakforthemselves.com. We make a whole lot of materials on the subjects of women, sex, marriage, contraception, and abortion available to you for free. Choose the materials that you think your faith community most needs to have: talking points that suggest helpful messaging, fact sheets that show the social science data, etc.
- Offer to help! Say you know the diocese/church/pastor is overloaded- can you help craft a press release for the media, that they can edit; start a women's group or WSFT Gathering to help the parish understand the social science behind religious teaching; or offer to be a resource to pastors who want to discuss issues with their congregations.
- Pray! If you are a woman of faith, you know that you are not on your own when you seek to share the truth in love.