Barriers to Godly Living

As we think of barriers to godly living, and what is sometimes called the 'dark side' of leadership, areas such as money, sex and power readily come to mind. But do these issues affect women in the same way as they affect men?

When thinking about women and sexual pressures there seem to be two equal and opposite dangers: one is that the male is seen as the norm, and that if the subject of sexual pressures is addressed at all, it's assumed that women have the same experiences as men. The other is to assume that women are different and that male sexuality is quite different from female sexuality.

This paper sets out to address first, why these contradictory approaches can co-exist, and then to gather thinking and research on the subject and to set out some ways of thinking about sexual pressures for women. Given the almost complete lack of material on the subject, we hope it will be of use both to women, and to men who seek to understand how sexual pressures affect women.

While the 'dark side' refers to those things which can pull leaders away from God, and, if not dealt with, destroy their ministry, when it comes to sexual issues, women have often been on the receiving end of the dark side of other leaders. Thus this paper also focuses on sexual harassment, sexual exploitation by other leaders, domestic violence and sexual abuse, and points to some sources of help.

Women, Sexuality and Christian Faith

What is known as the sexual 'double standard' has existed in different forms for much if not most of human history, and continues to exist today. This double standard is based on the idea that the 'sex drive' is some kind of biological force, which is stronger in men than in women. As a force which is to some extent beyond control, its expression, therefore, in men should be regarded differently from its expression in women. At its most extreme this view implies that men have sexual needs, but women don't.

How does this 'double standard' manifest itself? From first -century Greek and Roman society to Victorian Britain, the double standard allowed society to condone the behaviour of men seeking sexual satisfaction outside marriage, while maintaining a wife and marriage for the purpose of procreating and raising children (think Tess of the D'Urbervilles, for example).

Only ten or 20 years ago, boys' sexual expression was expected, and in some contexts encouraged, but girls' was not. While for young women there is now more equality, it is sometimes still assumed that men's sexual needs are different from women's; while married women may no longer hear Christian teaching on how to appear in suitable apparel at bedtime, sometimes the idea that a woman's role is to meet men's needs is not far under the surface.

Furthermore, these 'sexual scripts' of active/passive and dominance/submission may allow men power over women in sexual activity, both within marriage and outside it, justify brutal or violent behaviour by men as normal, and leave some women open to exploitation by other powerful males. This situation may be compounded in a church context where male dominance and female submission is taught as a biblical principle.

Since the time of so-called 'sexual liberation' in the 1960s and 70s, and the publication of books like The Joy of Sex (1972), our culture has adopted the idea that sexuality enables you to become a truly individual person, while the rise of awareness around homosexuality has pushed us towards becoming even more identified through our sexual behaviour; gay or straight, homosexual or heterosexual.

The 'permissive society' brought mixed blessings to both men and women: had women gained more control over their sexuality, more freedom to be themselves, or were they more sexually available, and open to exploitation in different ways? As the women's liberation movement brought greater equality between men and women, while many men genuinely changed, some sought to marry women who were like-minded equals, but in bed still maintained their assumptions of male supremacy and demanded submission.

Today, there is continued change towards more equal relationships between men and women, but some continuing barriers. In a consumer society, women's sexuality can be seen as another commodity to buy – witness the rise of human trafficking, sex tourism and internet pornography, or more controversially, the presence of shops such as Ann Summers in the high street. Domestic violence (the majority perpetrated by men) continues to be entrenched in most societies including our own, testimony to a continuing culture of male power and control which exists within the Church as well as outside it.

BELIEVING DISTORTIONS

On the one hand women are bombarded by expectations and images from a media obsessed with sex, and on the other, some women have not been encouraged to recognise their sexual feelings – as suggested above, many women find sexuality confusing. In Temptations Women Face, Mary Ellen Ashcroft suggests that Christian women may believe one of several distortions about sex:

- **Sexuality is bad** The models of women presented to women in the Church have been somewhat limited: saint or whore. Lurking in the background of 'Christian' thinking is the virgin Mary (unattainable sinless mother), Mary Magdalen (wrongly thought to have been a prostitute), plus the legacy of Augustine's 'theology' of sex – that all sex is shameful.
- **Women don't 'lust'** The double standard which tells women that they have weak or non-existent sex-drives may hinder women from recognising their sexual feelings for what they are. The danger is that if a woman does not realise she can be capable of intense passion towards someone, then it is easier for her to slide into an inappropriate relationship.
- **Sex is a male need** Sex taught from a male perspective can assume that a woman is there to satisfy male needs – hence guidance for women on what to wear in bed. Christian women can experience several contradictory things: she may feel that her main role is to ensure than her husband gets what he needs – and sublimate her own desires. She may believe that being married to a Christian man will mean that everything will be wonderful – and if she feels dissatisfied she may feel guilty, be out of touch with her real feelings, and very vulnerable to sudden sexual temptation.
- **A happy marriage means fulfilling sexual intimacy** If women see themselves as existing for the sake of the other, they may blame themselves for any dissatisfaction they feel. They may also be tempted to find sexual satisfaction elsewhere.

So if these are distortions, where do we find the truth? Our starting point must be the Bible.

Starting With the Bible

What does the Bible tell us about godly relationships between men and women? Before we look at how sin so easily distorts human sexuality, it's good to start with a brief look at how God intended things to be.

Genesis tells us that God made human beings in his image, 'male and female he created them' (Genesis 1:27), and that God saw that 'it was not good for the man to be alone' (2:18). The foundation for godly relationships come from the mutuality within our Trinitarian God, patterned after the relationships between the first and second persons of the Trinity: interdependency and mutuality. The

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biblical narrative also points to the goal of godly relationships, reflecting the character of God. The image of God is not reflected in men only or women only, but found in human community. The man Adam was incomplete until introduced to his counterpart, a woman.

Thus God's intention is a life-long 'one flesh' relationship between a man and a woman, a relationship of equals. For many Christians, this will be the context in which they enjoy a sexual relationship and grow in maturity to make a strong marriage and a sexually pleasurable one. The Song of Songs can be read as an allegory but is perhaps primarily an insight into intimate love between a man and a woman.

But marriage is not the only context in which people can grow in godly, loving relationships. Many people are single, out of choice or circumstances, and Jesus showed that it is possible to enjoy close relationships without the exclusive relationship of marriage.

Like every aspect of our humanity, though, our sexuality is marked by the consequences of our fallen state. Hence it is a source of both joy and sorrow, and at times we may find ourselves struggling both with our own feelings and the circumstances in which we find ourselves. We may struggle with temptation, and when we sin, with guilt and with the consequences of past actions. With God there is always the possibility of forgiveness and healing, and the power to make a new start.

So how do we find godly relationships? Stanley Grenz puts it like this: 'godly relationships emerge as men and women offer their unique perspectives as gifts to each other, so that together they might become the community of persons God intends humans to be'.

But how does this work out in practice? The film When Harry met Sally asks the question, can men and women be friends, or only lovers? Can there be friendship without 'the sex thing getting in the way'? Christians may want to answer: yes men and women can be friends, but only when their relationships are not tainted by power, by fantasy, or by secrecy.

Areas of Sexual Pressure

THE SPECIAL DANGERS OF MINISTRY

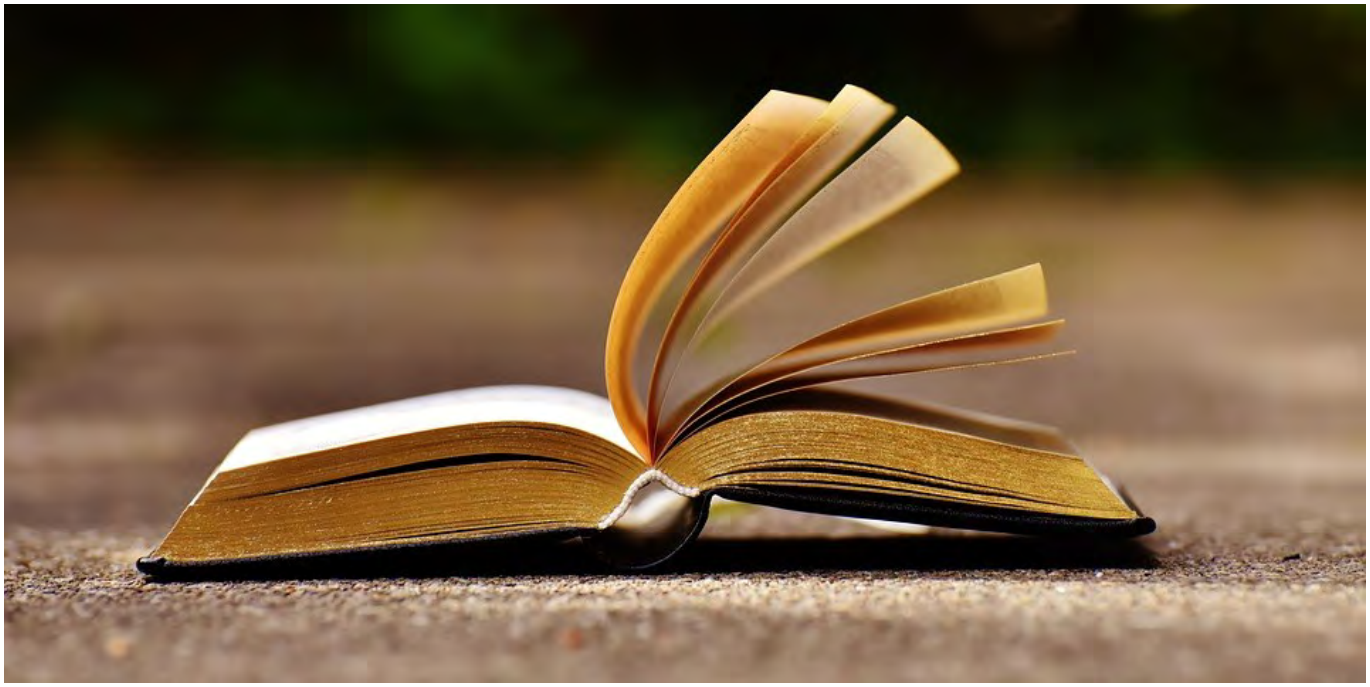
It is important to bear in mind the special circumstances of clergy and others in ministry. Those who are ministers find themselves interacting with others at a deep level. They are drawn into areas of intimacy with others – but may find that they in turn have no-one with whom to share their own deep thoughts and feelings.

In addition, some ministers find it hard to make good friendships – with those in their parish or work context, or outside it – and can be lonely, and vulnerable. Some react to being hurt by withdrawing, but that brings a variety of dangers, of being thought superhuman or subhuman. To depend solely on one's spouse as emotional support may be to put tremendous pressure on one person. And for those who are single, (more women than men in ministry) there are increased dangers of loneliness.

To be isolated or lonely may be to become dangerously vulnerable to the warmth of friendship (and more) with colleagues or those to whom one ministers.

SINGLENESS

The Church does not always know what to do with single people, and some churches are more couple-oriented than society is, making it very difficult for single Christians.



Sexuality and singleness are rarely considered. It may be even more difficult for single leaders.

Some single people may have come to terms with the possibility of life-long singleness, others may long for marriage. There are more single women in the Church than there are single men, and for women the lack of single Christian men can make them feel their situation is increasingly hopeless as the biological clock is ticking away.

Single people need love and friendship as much as married people do. Within the Church there are huge pressures on single people to be celibate, but this may seem hard when so many people in our society seem to define themselves by their sexual behaviour. For those who find themselves single after being widowed or divorced, that lack of intimacy may feel extremely difficult.

HOMOSEXUALITY

Same sex relationships are a difficult area, especially now that there are different 'Christian' viewpoints, even within the evangelical wing of the Church. But the traditional biblical view is that God's intention for his people is lifelong, monogamous, heterosexual union, and that sexual activity outside marriage is less than God's best.

Some women (and men) experience a same-sex attraction as a temporary phase during teenage years, others are attracted to other women as a reaction to abusive or dominating male relationships, while others again may find that what starts as a friendship with another woman develops into a sexual relationship.

Arguments continue as to whether a small percentage of the population are 'naturally' homosexual, and whether people who've had homosexual relationships can change, or whether lifelong celibacy is the only alternative, and Christians will probably continue to differ in their opinions. Those who struggle with their sexuality need to find the Church a place of grace rather than condemnation, and where support is given to single people and chaste loving friendships.

PORNOGRAPHY

Women may be the implicit victims of pornography, or they may be consumers of porn. Pornography may involve stories and pictures in which people (usually women) are degraded and humiliated. Recent research links men's use of porn with their beliefs in traditional roles for women, and use of porn has been linked to dissatisfaction with committed relationships. While outwardly Christians do not condone the use of pornography, some church traditions promote the 'double standard' explored earlier: women are meant to be beautiful, and men more visual and more sexual.

Increasingly, as part of the trend of so-called sexual liberation, with pole-dancing promoted as a fun night out for the 'girls', and raunch culture encouraging women to be sexy, more women are viewing pornography too. For some women, porn seems to be about reclaiming power, turning the tables on men and putting them in positions of humiliation and submission. Yet for women, as for men, it is addictive, and detracts from real relationships.

By 'gendering' sexual sin, there is a danger that churches assume women are not affected by sexual addiction and pornography. Women can be as visual as men, and women as well as men struggle with pornography and lust.

Women – or men – who find themselves in the power of pornography need to find help: by admitting the problem, confessing it as sin, and addressing the underlying issues which have caused the addiction. As with all addictions, it is not easy to overcome the addiction to pornography, and it is not something which can be done by oneself. It is a struggle, and one which involves progress and setbacks. Every day may be a constant battle, but it is a start to recognise the temptation, and then one can make progress, through a combination of prayer, accountability, and building new patterns of thinking and behaving.

WOMEN AND TEMPTATION

There are thus all kinds of ways in which women may struggle with sexual temptation. Some may be surprised when they identify within themselves strong passions or lust. For others, romance novels or soap operas can become fantasies which (as porn does) feed the hunger for intimacy and pleasure that they are not getting from actual relationships.

Some wrong relationships grow out of friendships or working relationships. We may be more aware of when male clergy end up in wrong relationships with women, but a female leader may have an inappropriate relationship with a male colleague.

How does one see the signs of danger? One writer suggests that friendship is moving out of safe bounds when there is secrecy, emotional intimacy and sexual chemistry. These three elements can combine in potent mix. If a relationship is open, it is probably a friendship. There may well be a degree of sexual chemistry with a friend of the opposite sex. But if one starts to want to meet alone, or to keep those meetings private, then it's time to acknowledge danger and to withdraw.

If friends and colleagues can acknowledge that there is sexual energy around, and that sparks are present, they may be able to acknowledge this to themselves at least, and possibly to others. Then they can set their own boundaries and keep accountable – to spouses and others.

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There are guidelines for Anglican clergy in the form of the Guidelines for the professional conduct of the clergy, issued in 2003, but once an inappropriate relationship develops, rules are unlikely to stop it. It is more important to look at underlying issues.

It may take some time for a person to acknowledge and come to terms with sinful behaviour, since they may have rationalised or justified it in some way. Once a sin is acknowledged, it needs to be confessed. Confessing to another person as well as to God can give the opportunity for prayer together, for conversation (and perhaps referral for counselling) which can begin addressing the problem, and for future accountability. Confession of sin will enable a woman who has sinned to receive God's forgiveness and to have her sense of being accepted by God restored. She may also need help to be freed from any bondages created, to deal with the consequences of the sin, and then to move on.

KEEPING SAFE AND FINDING GRACE

How do women keep safe, and find grace when they fail? Here are a number of principles:

- Acknowledge your vulnerability.
- Be accountable.
- Be alert to warning signs and avoid or remove the opportunity.
- Face deeper issues that make you vulnerable.
- Cherish the special relationships God has given you.
- When you fail, acknowledge it to yourself, and confess to God.
- Endeavour also to acknowledge your failure to others, through formal confession or informally in a secure place, in order to receive support as you work through the implications.

'More Sinned Against than Sinning'? Women, Harassment and Violence

The subject of sexual pressures from women's perspective needs also to acknowledge that women may have been on the receiving end of harassment, violence or other inappropriate sexual behaviour. As with any form of abuse, this may be part of a woman's past experience but never shared with others or resolved.

SEX IN THE FORBIDDEN ZONE

In his seminal book published in 1989, Sex in the Forbidden Zone, Peter Rutter suggested that the fulfilment of sexual fantasy in the 'forbidden zone' (any sexual contact that occurs within professional relationships of trust – including clergy) was always the product of an inequality of power. The dynamic was that the man held a key to the woman's future, and the woman was unable to say no to him. Rutter's research showed that the problem was huge, yet largely unacknowledged.

While there seems to have been little written on the subject more recently, the fact that many such relationships today involve less power makes the exploitation of women in this way less likely, but there are still male clergy who hold power and have the potential to abuse it.

In the past (and when Rutter was writing), it was mainly men in those professional positions. Now, leaders, whether men or women, need to be aware of the power they hold over others and how this influences the dynamics of relationships. Talking about power, sharing it, and using it humbly can help keep others safe from the abuse of power in a sexual way as well as in other ways.

Women minsters may be in danger of exploiting their power in a sexual way, or may have been victims of male church leaders in the past. In either case there will often be a variety of reasons why this has happened. For women who have been victims, the results may be devastating;

however, the potential for healing is enormous if they are able to talk about the experience.

DOMESTIC VIOLENCE

Domestic violence affects between one in four and one in three women at some time in their lives, and appears to be as prevalent in Christian as in non-Christian relationships – sometimes reinforced by so-called biblical views of 'headship' and submission in marriage. While men can be victims too, the majority of such violence is against women.

This is a huge area, and much has been written on the subject. Domestic violence, whether physical, sexual or emotional, usually involves power and control. Victims usually feel trapped and unable to escape, and their esteem often reaches rock-bottom. People who have been in abusive relationships may find it hard to achieve their potential because they are still living with feelings of regret, guilt and inadequacy.

SEXUAL ABUSE

Sexual abuse can leave a terrible legacy, but a story which has been hidden can come to light in an atmosphere of safety and support, and the person may then be able to begin the journey of healing.

SEXUAL HARASSMENT

Sexual harassment is any unwelcome behaviour of a sexual nature, and it is estimated that around 50% of women in employment are or have been subject to harassment in some form. In 2007, staff of Gifted for Leadership, a US resource for Christian women leaders, commissioned a survey on sexual harassment. Out of 779 'active Christian women', more than a quarter said that they had experienced sexually inappropriate behaviour, and one fourth of those who had experienced it said it happened in a church or ministry setting. In addition, many women who said they'd never been the victim of sexual harassment went on to report behaviour such as touching, suggestive jokes, or gender-based discrimination.

In the survey, 53% of those who reported being sexually harassed said they had no intention of reporting it – and the percentage is higher in the ministry setting. The Sex Discrimination Act (as amended in 2005) gives people the legal right not to be sexually harassed at work, and while the Church is exempt, it clearly is not morally exempt. The Protection from Harassment Act 1997 makes it a criminal offence to harass another person, and covers a wide range of actions.

Women who are ministers or working for Christian organisations may have experienced harassment in the past. If it has occurred within a church context they are unlikely to have complained, but may have suffered in silence. The ongoing effects can be debilitating, and a safe, supportive group, or a mentoring relationship, might be the opportunity for telling the story and finding healing.

In Conclusion

Consideration of sexual pressures for women is complex. Today, unrestrained sexual behaviour is increasingly seen as normal, while Christian women's experience is coloured by centuries-old assumptions of male-female difference, and the religious association of women with defilement, shame and impurity. Women may experience the same temptations as men. They may also have been the objects of unwanted attention. However women may have experienced sexual pressures, God is always greater: swift to forgive, and the source of healing and hope.

Sexual Pressures – A Personal Story

The article below is a highly personal account of the issue of sexual attraction and temptation.

THE UNEXPECTED

I would be described by my friends as stable, fulfilled and happily married. I suppose I am. But in the ordinariness of family, work and church life, a woman can feel very mundane and boring. The sense of life passing and days being so predictable was quite heavy on me at the time of the beginning of this story. I was ripe for something to happen.

The man in the story, I came to know quite legitimately in the ordinary course of my job. I work in the wider Church and our paths crossed quite frequently. We came across each other on the team at Spring Harvest, on committees and synods. We had so many groups of people 'in common' that there was never any lack of things to talk about and over a period of time I suppose it was only natural that these began to include much which was personal as well as that which were work.

I don't remember that either of us ever remarked on the way in which the frequency of these chance meetings increased. We certainly never made an actual decision that we would make them happen. But we did. When two people run their own diaries, work outside any box and are surrounded by the trust of their colleagues, partners and congregations, there is no limit to the pattern of their lives. There is no limit either, it seems, to their ability for self-deception.

As the months went by and our interaction became ever more personal and intimate, the only thing which kept me safe was that we never made the decision to meet except on our way to other things. This meant that invariably we were in a car and both of an age where sex needs to be comfortable! But slowly this relationship had become sexual and invaded therefore any legitimate sexual situations. My relationship with my husband became

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distant and my sexual relationship with him was dominated by thoughts of this man. Nor was that enough because before long he not only filled my mind in terms of when and how I would get to see him, but also in the almost perpetual state of sexual excitement I was in. It was only a question of time and place.

Then one day he phoned me at home when he thought everyone else would be out. But my plans had changed and I was working away from home. My son, unexpectedly home from university, answered the phone. Somehow this bridging of the gap between my real life and this 'woman's magazine existence' with this man jolted me awake. I was ashamed that my son had become even in this way, involved. I was embarrassed by his having to get a message through to me. I was shocked that this man was so sure of me that he was prepared to invade my home life. I met up with him that day and we had probably the first really honest conversation we had ever had. I brought the whole relationship to a painful end.

Then began the whole period of bereavement and rehabilitation. I had learnt to live in a particular way; my mind thought that way and my emotions were stimulated through that. Suddenly the whole system seemed to close down. I could not revert to what had been previously. I was unable to receive help because I would have died rather than tell anyone what had happened. There was nothing to tell, after all. We hadn't had an affair. Then as the numbness and grief died down a little, I realised that I was more at risk than ever. Inevitably, soon another opportunity would open up for this kind of relationship and I would be more open to it than the first time and would start the relationship further down the road. I could of course confess all to my husband. But then the high level of trust which was what made our lives and my job possible, would be gone forever. For what? Why should my stupidity wreck his peace of mind? Hadn't I already cheated him enough?

So in the end, I went to see my immediate manager and then two colleagues. I saw each of them individually and told them only the basic facts of what had happened. I asked their forgiveness and said I wanted to be accountable to them. Suddenly the sense of being at risk, overcome by my own sexuality, 'damaged goods', disappeared and I started to pray again. I could face up to my own sexuality with its insatiable appetite, outrageous imagination and unreasonable power for self-deception. In time, I was able to look at myself - my gifts, skills and person-hood as a woman and say confidently 'I am worth more than that'.

Amazing grace! how sweet the sound,
That saved a wretch like me.
I once was lost but now am found,
Was blind, but now I see.

T'was grace that taught my heart to fear.
And grace my fears relieved.
How precious did that grace appear...
The hour I first believed.

Through many dangers, toils and snares
I have already come;
Tis grace that brought me safe thus far
And grace will lead me home.

When we've been there ten thousand years
bright shining as the sun,
We've no less days to sing God's praise
than when we've first begun.

John Newton

Resources

BOOKS

While many people struggle with these issues, there seems to be a lack of accessible books. The following cover issues of temptation generally (the first two), and various aspects of sexual pressures.

- Mary Ellen Ashcroft, Temptations Women Face, InterVarsity Press, 1991
- Karen Lee-Thorp, Peeking into a Box of Chocolates, NavPress, 2005
- Peter Rutter, Sex in the Forbidden Zone, Jeremy Tarcher Inc, 1989 and other editions (now out of print but an influential piece of research writing).
- S. Edwards, K. Matthews and H. Rogers, Mixed Ministry, Kregal, 2008
- Marie Fortune, Is Nothing Sacred? When sex invades the pastoral relationship, Harper and Row,1989
- Rosie Nixson (Ward) Home is Where the Hurt is, Grove Books, 1994 (now out of print but downloadable from CPAS website)

WEBSITES

- www.cbeinternational.org (resources include books, articles and recordings on sexuality, pornography, domestic violence, etc.)
- www.thesurvivorstrust.org (umbrella agency for specialist agencies working with women, men and children who are victims of sexual violence or abuse)
- www.macsas.org.uk (minister and clergy sexual abuse survivors – site includes links to resources and other sexual abuse agencies)
- www.womensaid.org.uk (info and resources on domestic violence)
- www.rightsofwomen.org.uk (legal information on issues affecting women, including downloadable resource sheets)

For Reflection/Discussion

- What assumptions do we have about men and women and their sexuality? How might these affect how we see women's sexual sin?
- How can single people enjoy their sexuality rather than seeing it as a burden?
- Is the celibate lifestyle more difficult today than in the past? How can we help single people to maintain their celibacy?
- Why do you think women may be confused by their sexuality and sexual feelings?
- What power dynamics are at work in relationships between women and their 'boss', their team members, those they serve?
- What 'rules', written or unwritten, do we currently operate by when it comes to sexual issues? What guidelines would best serve us and what boundaries do we want to make? How will we keep accountable to others so as to work safely?
- What safe places do we provide in our churches for women to speak about unwanted sexual experiences?

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