

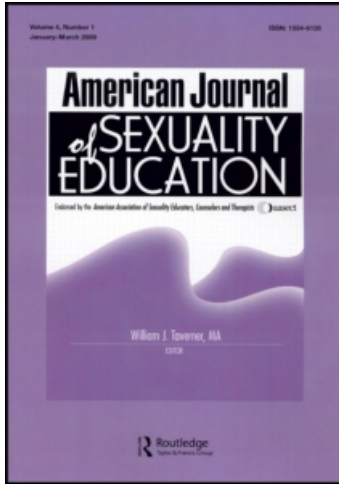
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Melanie J. Davis^a

^a Honest Exchange LLC, Somerville, NJ, USA

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ARTICLES

Sexuality Education as a Ministry

MELANIE J. DAVIS, EdD, CSE
Honest Exchange LLC, Somerville, NJ, USA

The author describes her development from being her religious congregation's sexuality educator to completing doctoral studies and finding her place in the professional sexuality education community. She equates sexuality education to a ministry that reaches out to those in need of knowledge.

KEYWORDS *Sexuality education, ministry, sex and faith, OWL, Our Whole Lives, Widener University Graduate Program in Human Sexuality*

Is a ministry a calling to share the word of God or Higher Power? Or is it the act of working with passion and integrity in service to others, to increase their awareness of a subject laden with values, beliefs, and attitudes? The second definition rings true for me, although both definitions might work for others. My ministry is sexuality education, and my calling to this work is no less integral to my being than is the call others may feel to religious ministry.

The supposition that sexuality education is a ministry may be anathema to educators who struggle daily to keep religious hands off sexual health curriculum; however, I believe that sexuality education can be effectively rendered as a secular ministry, allowing educators and learners to ascribe their own values to the subject matter.

The call to ministry has been described as comprising three aspects: the inner call, the call of gifts and aptitudes, and the call to others. While some sexuality educators may happen into their jobs, most educators I have met have entered the field because they feel compelled to do so, or, one could say, they feel an inner call to do this work. It is not unusual to hear a sexuality educator say something akin to, "I do this work because I can, while so many others cannot," which I consider answering the call of gifts and aptitudes. And the call to others? I suspect most sexuality educators are

Address correspondence to Melanie J. Davis, Honest Exchange LLC, P.O. Box 268, Somerville, NJ 08876. E-mail: melanie@honestexchange.com

called to provide information to people in need of it the way moths are attracted to a flame.

Bruess and Greenberg (2004) posited that sexuality education can “treat sexuality in its proper perspective”; take sexual themes that have been distorted in mass media and “place these aspects in their true perspective,” and “provide factual information that will help reduce many misconceptions” (p. 21). This is not unlike other types of ministry devoted to helping people put their most pressing concerns and questions into perspective.

I could say that I feel *compelled* to be a sexuality educator rather than called, but the ministerial construct more accurately describes the sense that I am doing not only what I want to do but also what I cannot avoid doing. To not do this work would be to ignore the voice inside me that tells me to use my comfort, knowledge, skills and compassion in service to others. That I am not ordained by my faith community makes me no less a minister than someone who is ordained; I am simply called to serve in a different capacity.

In a sermon about shared ministry, Julie Newhall, a Unitarian Universalist minister, wrote about the experience of being called to the ministry:

Many [ordained ministers], but not all, can describe their experience of feeling or hearing “the call.” The details may vary, but the sense is often the same—of realizing something deep inside leading one irresistibly into service for a faith tradition and community, no matter the cost; not to do so would be ruinous to one’s sense of being, to one’s core identity. This is what they do and what they are all about. (Newhall, p. 1)

While sexuality educators are not ordained into the profession, many might consider ourselves to have gone through a similarly life-changing experience by earning a degree in our field, earning American Association of Sexuality Educators, Counselors, and Therapists (AASECT) certification, or by passing the daily test of committed service. Certainly we can empathize with ministers who work in a field that requires practitioners to address emotion- and value-laden topics with individuals and groups who must be approached with sensitivity.

The Rev. Dr. Mariah Britton (n.d.) made a similar connection when presenting a webinar titled *Human Sexuality and the Ministry*. Writing about the intentionality and commitment required of ministers who provide sexuality education, Britton said:

I feel strongly that just as a call to ministry has to be deeply felt, so too does a call to sexuality education and ministry. We bring our whole selves to this work—the good, the bad, the regrets, the hopes, moments of transformation we’ve experienced as well as the dark lonely periods of our lives. (Slide 10)

Like ministers, sexuality educators serve people in need—those who need sexuality knowledge; those who need their sexuality to be acknowledged;

those who seek to enhance their relationships and sexual experiences; and those who seek permission to explore their interests, identity and orientation.

My calling to the ministry of sexuality education comes not from a divine source but rather from the people I teach. Each person represents countless others who could benefit from sexuality education if only I or another educator could reach them. The calling gnaws at me because so much work needs to be done, and so many people might benefit from the knowledge and skills that we sexuality educators could help them gain.

Walters and Hayes (2007) posited that human sexuality is neither inherently controversial nor problematic, yet it is “inexplicably associated with concepts of risk, discomfort, heterogeneous values, and hidden precepts of sexual behavior” (p. 37), and controversial issues arise “when conflicts of interest-group affiliations, social and religious beliefs” come into play (p. 43). In other words, sexuality educators are working in a realm with the potential to be as challenging as the realm in which other ministers work.

My interest in sexuality education began in 1999 when the director of religious education for the Unitarian Universalist Congregation of Somerset Hills, my faith community, asked me to teach a new course called *Our Whole Lives Sexuality Education for Grades 7–9* (Wilson, 1999). My male co-facilitator and I attended a training retreat to learn about the curriculum and how to teach it. More importantly, we explored our sexual values, attitudes and beliefs, and we learned techniques to help us avoid dragging our personal baggage into our classrooms.

As directed by the curriculum, we held a parent orientation for the course, which is nicknamed OWL. We emphasized the importance of parents as sexuality educators, particularly where values are concerned. Yet, when our first year-long course was complete, several parents made comments such as: “Thank goodness you taught our kids about sex so we don’t have to.” To assuage these parents’ fear of talking with their children about sexuality, I created a workshop on parent-child communication. That event led to invitations to do similar workshops in nearby towns, and a wheel was set in motion. As I looked for more school and community groups to speak to, I realized how natural I felt as a sexuality educator.

Several years later, I attended a *Creating Sexually Healthy Faith Communities* (Haffner, 2002) retreat led by Debra Haffner, a Unitarian Universalist minister and executive director of the Religious Institute on Sexual Morality, Justice and Healing. Early on in the three-day event, Haffner instructed the participants to stand face-to-face, in pairs. We were told to take turns free associating for three minutes about words she called out. Later, I described the experience in a sermon I delivered to my congregation:

For a talkative person like me, the task appeared easy . . . until Haffner called out the word *masturbation*. Ding! A bell rang, and the room filled with chatter. I don’t recall what I said, but I know I felt like a

blithering idiot, trying to speak intelligently without revealing anything too embarrassing. Three minutes felt like an eternity. Then, Ding! It was my partner's turn. A New Englander without a stitch of pretense, she spoke candidly about the importance of masturbation as an expression of self-appreciation and comfort. She spoke of the joy she experienced as a child upon discovering the gift of self-gratification. And she spoke about how important it is to her now, as a single woman in her fifties. Ding! The bell rang again, and the topic was sexual orientation. Inspired by the minister's honesty, I spoke from my heart about the laws of my own emotional and physical attraction. This time, the words flowed easily because I allowed myself to express my innermost thoughts about love and desire. This time, three minutes didn't seem long enough to communicate everything I had to say. (Davis, 2005, p. 1)

The activity was an important part of my evolution as a sexuality educator. I itched to leave my marketing communications practice so I could spend time learning more about sexuality. It seemed clear that the only solution was to scale back my communications work and enroll in Widener University's Graduate Program in Human Sexuality Education.

The margins of my course notes were quickly filled with ideas about how to turn my calling into a career. The traditional paths of nonprofits and schools did not suit my entrepreneurial nature, and I did not aspire to be the next Dr. Ruth Westheimer. I was writing a column on parent-child communication about sexuality and had written a workbook on the same topic, so it made sense to leverage my 25 years of marketing and journalism and start a publishing company to develop sexuality education resources.

A funny thing happened on the way to becoming a publisher, though: After I formed Honest Exchange LLC, I felt called to work face-to-face with people rather than spend my days pecking away at a computer keyboard. The more I learned about how to teach and how people learn, and the more programs I presented, the more I discerned the sense that sexuality education is a ministry and that, as an educator, I could touch people's lives in a significant way. Like a snake sloughing off skin that no longer fits, I became increasingly annoyed by requests for copywriting. I leapt at the chance to attend sexology programs and conferences, and my shelves started filling up with books on sexuality. Every interaction with my fellow graduate students, faculty, and professionals outside of Widener increased the sense of completion I felt as a member of a community of professionals committed to sexuality education, counseling, therapy, and research.

The week after I completed my master's degree at Widener, and while continuing my doctoral studies, I was hired to teach human sexuality for a small college in New York City. I was a last-minute replacement for an ailing professor and had only four days to design a syllabus and prepare to teach my first undergraduate course. Breathlessly, I began teaching, at times so focused on getting through each week as both professor and graduate

student that I lost any sense of mission or ministry. But then, a student would say or write something that reminded me why I was there. A gay student became emboldened to come out to his family. A highly privileged student interviewed a street prostitute she met through her family's maid. A student created a painting to illustrate her healing process after being raped. My teaching skills were nascent and flawed, but nevertheless my soul was fed by the knowledge that I had had even a small impact on those 50 students.

The next semester, I started teaching at a private college in Pennsylvania where I continue to struggle to make the marriage and family course applicable to both straight and nonstraight students. My human sexuality class is far from effortless, due to its challenging content, but it is a source of joy, fulfillment, and, at times, wonderment. It is where I reconnect with my calling and core identity as a sexuality educator.

Traditional ministers' job responsibilities often include counseling, teaching, preaching, human resources development, and business administration. My sexuality education ministry has many facets as well. I consult with individuals and train professionals, and I am on the board of the Sexuality and Aging Consortium at Widener University. In that capacity, I am part of an organization devoted to enhancing and advancing the sexual health, rights, and education of older adults and the professionals who serve them. My heart breaks when I think about individuals and couples denied their right to sexual expression by a society that desexualizes older adults. This is compelling, much needed work.

I have also returned to my roots as an OWL facilitator, having co-facilitated both the adult and junior high courses this year. In addition, I began a part-time job as the OWL program associate for the Unitarian Universalist Association, tasked with overseeing revisions to the lifespan curricula that started my sexuality education journey.

I have worked hard to earn a place at the sexuality education table because it is not enough to feel called to the work: We owe it to our learners to be highly qualified and to approach our work, our ministry, with integrity.

In a religious setting, I was once asked illustrate the ultimate guiding principal or force in my life. I drew a heart with arms reaching out to enfold as many people as possible. I was not making a connection to my work at that time, but the image does reflect my feelings about being called to the ministry of sexuality education. I strive to work from my heart. I strive to break down my limiting beliefs and attitudes and help others break down theirs. I strive to accept and honor my sexual self and help others do the same. And I am not unique in this regard.

Martha Roper teaches health at Parkway South High School in Manchester, Missouri, where she purposely adds a spiritual element to her work as a sexuality educator. She routinely explains what world religions teach about sexuality and health. She recently used a news story to illustrate one example of how religion and sexuality intersect.

The most recent example was the story about an Iranian woman condemned to be stoned to death because she was accused of adultery. Brazil, a mostly Catholic country, told Iran that the death penalty was too harsh for the “crime” of adultery. I used that opportunity to explain that when Jesus was confronted by men who wanted to test his commitment to the local law of stoning, he said, “Those of you among us who are without sin, cast the first stone.” All of the men dropped their stones and left the woman with Jesus, who turned to her and quietly, without blame, said, “Go and sin no more.” Whether she committed adultery or prostitution, I do not know, but I have never told that story in class without leaving a quiet hush among my students (M. Roper, personal communication, Aug. 28, 2010).

Roper explains to her students that she is a Protestant Methodist Christian, which colors her interpretation of religious writings about sexual health, and she invites students from other faith traditions to share their interpretations. She also advises them to ask their parents and clergy about the topics that are discussed in class.

Roper’s experience as a sexuality educator is very different from mine; indeed, every educator has a unique story about entering or working in field. No doubt, many educators do not see themselves as ministers. We are not, as a rule, ordained ministers; nevertheless, I believe that the work we do is a spiritual act when we approach it with integrity and compassion and are driven by our heart and soul.

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